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Kayla Harrison earns first U.S. judo gold

By [Rick Maese](#), Published: August 2

LONDON — The most accomplished judo fighter the United States has ever produced closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. Once heavy with a lifetime worth of nightmares, [Kayla Harrison](#)'s broad shoulders rose slightly and then fell.

As Harrison's name was announced as the 78kg gold medalist, her life began flashing by, she said, a flipbook of memories that led her to this Olympic stage.

"I saw Jimmy kicking my butt in practice," she said of her coach, Jimmy Pedro. "I saw Big Jim [Pedro Sr.] yelling at me. I saw myself waking up at 4:30 in the morning to go to lifting. I saw myself pushing and pushing and pushing."

Harrison, 22 years old with golden hair, a strong frame and soft smile, saw only the good. There was so much else that didn't flash by. Her name had been called once before, less than five years ago, and Harrison had to step forward. Back then, it was a witness stand, not a medal podium, as she testified against a former coach who had sexually abused her.

"I've never done anything harder," Harrison said.

By comparison, making Olympic history Thursday in London — becoming the first American to ever win a gold medal in judo, beating a British judoka on her home turf — was a cinch.

"There's nothing on the Olympic mat that compares with what she's already beat," Pedro said.

Pedro remembers his phone in Wakefield, Mass., ringing six years ago. Harrison's mother was calling from Middletown, Ohio, after having discovered her daughter's judo coach, a trusted family friend, had carried on a sexual relationship with his prized pupil for three years, beginning when Harrison was 13.

According to Pedro, Harrison's mother explained that her daughter had run away. "We can't find her," Pedro recalled hearing. Harrison says she was distraught and suicidal at the time. Law enforcement was involved, but Jeannie Yazell wanted somewhere safe for her daughter to go, somewhere she could continue her judo training.



So Harrison left her home and family at 16, and arrived at Pedro's Judo Center in New England an emotional mess.

"She was not in a good state of mind," Pedro said. "She was someone with very low self-esteem who had no confidence in herself, who didn't believe in herself."

Said Harrison: "I hated judo. I did not want to be the strong girl. I didn't want to be a golden girl. I didn't want to be the girl who overcame everything."

Pedro, himself a four-time Olympian with two bronze medals to his credit, and his father, Jim Sr., made Harrison part of the family: coaching her, enrolling her in school, finding odd jobs for the talented judoka and seeking sponsorship money. Harrison underwent therapy and made the brave decision to return to Ohio to testify against her former coach.

Daniel Doyle pleaded guilty in 2007 to "engaging in illicit sexual conduct in a foreign place" and was given a 10-year federal prison sentence. While he was locked up, Harrison had to work on emerging from her shell.

Through the sport's required discipline and the demanding yet nurturing style of the Pedro men, Harrison began forging herself into a new person. She gained 30 pounds, began to embrace the sport and learned to trust. She rose through the international rankings, becoming one of the toughest forces in the judo world.

On the mat, her eyes burn, and every move is deliberate and bold. On Thursday, Harrison tore through her four opponents. The first, a Russian woman eight years Harrison's senior, was disposed of in less than a minute. The next was a Hungarian who hurt her leg and could barely walk off the mat by time Harrison was finished. In the semifinals, Harrison beat Brazil's [Mayra Aguiar](#), the world's top-ranked judoka, and knew gold was close.

"She's been the darling of our team for a while," said Eric Liddle, the director of athlete performance for USA Judo. "Her face has been the face of USA Judo."

Nothing could shake Harrison's focus in London. For years, she repeated the same mantra every night in bed — "This is my day, this is my purpose" — and visualized the Olympic gold medal match. On Thursday she didn't even notice that Russian President Vladimir Putin was in the stands, as was British Prime Minister David Cameron. All that existed was her foe, a 25-year old named Gemme Gibbons.

"I didn't come here for silver," Harrison said.

The American judoka dominated from the start, scoring a pair of yukos by tossing Gibbons twice late in the fight, earning a decisive 2-0 win. She ran off the mat and leaped into her coach's arms, as Pedro yelled, "Kayla Harrison! Olympic champion, baby! We did it!"

When it was all finished, Harrison said, "This just proves that you're only a victim if you allow yourself to be."

And that scared, hurt 16-year-old? "She's long gone," Harrison said.

Six years removed from the abuse, Harrison is engaged to be married and days away from taking a test to earn her EMT certification. The man who victimized her is in prison now, and she'll be taking a gold medal back to the United States.

“You know, I’m at peace,” Harrison said. “I’m an Olympic champion.”

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