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LONDON 2012: THE SUMMER OLYMPICS

## Emotional journey to the stand

*Kayla Harrison overcomes early sexual abuse to capture U.S. judo's first Olympic gold.*

August 03, 2012 | Kevin Baxter

LONDON — Kayla Harrison promised herself she wouldn't cry if she were lucky enough to make it to the top step of the Olympic medal stand Thursday.

It's a promise she kept all the way until the second note of "The Star-Spangled Banner," when she broke down in tears.

"I was reflecting back on my life and everything that it's taken to get here. And everything that I've gone through," Harrison said after becoming the first Olympic champion in U.S. judo history by winning the women's 78-kilogram event.

And given everything she has gone through, there was a lot of reflecting to squeeze into a verse that's only 80 words long.

Harrison was introduced to judo as a second-grader, and by the time she was 15 she had won two national championships. By then she had also been sexually abused by her coach, a trusted family friend 16 years her senior.

Racked with guilt and shame, she contemplated giving up the sport. Then she thought about running away from home. Finally, she considered suicide.

Instead, she left small-town Ohio for the Boston suburbs and the elite judo finishing school run by two-time Olympic medalist Jimmy Pedro and his father, Big Jim, who enrolled her in therapy, rebuilt her confidence and restored her love for the sport.

And, Harrison says, saved her life. "As corny as it sounds, as melodramatic as it sounds, it's true," she said.

How could you not cry thinking about that? Especially when you're wearing a gold medal around your neck.

Asked if there was a message in that, Harrison didn't have to think long for an answer.

"Never give up on your dreams. If I can do it, anybody can do it," she said. "Things have happened. [But] I didn't give up. And if you don't give up, look what happens. I'm Olympic champion."

And with the way she fought Thursday, there was little doubt she deserved it. Harrison, 22, had four bouts in less than five hours and she won the first three by ippon, the judo equivalent of a knockout in boxing.

"This is my day, this is my purpose," she said after her quarterfinal victory over Abigel Joo of Hungary. "No one's taking this away from me today."

In the semifinals she met Brazil's Mayra Aguiar, the top-ranked woman in the world at 78 kilograms -- and she brushed her aside. By the time she stepped on the mat for the final against hometown favorite Gemma Gibbons of Britain, who went to college just a five-minute drive from the Olympic judo arena, it wasn't a question of who would win but how. And the answer came quickly, with Harrison scoring a pair of yukos -- throws worth a point each -- one in the second minute, the other with 59 seconds to go.

Which leads to another question: What will Harrison do with her newfound fame?

She already has some plans.

"I can't wait to get started helping others. And helping others realize their dream and realize there's more to life than what they're living in," she said. "I want to help kids overcome being victims. I want to help change the sport and change people's lives."

That may or may not have to wait until she gets married, though. Her fiance, Aaron Handy, agreed to put off a wedding date until after the Olympics. So he was the first person Harrison greeted after her win in the final.

"I'd get married right now," she said, beaming.

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(BEGIN TEXT OF INFOBOX)

Judo

Men's 100kg

\*--\* G Tagir Khaibulaev Russia Def. Naidan, 100-0 S Tuvshinbayar Naidan Mongolia Lost to Khaibulaev B Dimitri Peters Germany Def. Sayidov, 20-1 B Henk Grol Netherlands Def. Krpalek, 101-0 \*--\*

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Women's 78kg

\*--\* G Kayla Harrison United States Def. Gibbons, 2-0 S Gemma Gibbons Britain Lost to Harrison, 2-0 B Audrey Tcheumeo France Def. Joo, 100-1 B Mayra Aguiar Brazil Def. Verkerk, 100-1 \*--\*