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Fighting for gold

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Middletown's Kayla Harrison overcomes years of torment to reach the Olympic Games.

Posted: 8:09 a.m. Sunday, July 22, 2012

BY TOM ARCHDEACON - STAFF WRITER

WAKEFIELD, Mass. – Although the start of the London Olympics is still five days away, Kayla Harrison already has had a gold-medal performance.

A little over four years ago, the then 17-year-old Middletown girl was in the hallway of the Federal Building in downtown Dayton trying to fight off a physical and emotional meltdown that left her sobbing uncontrollably, barely able to stand or breathe or even think.

She was about to go into the U.S. District courtroom of Judge Thomas M. Rose and face 33-year-old Daniel Doyle, her longtime Centerville judo instructor and the supposed family friend who had admitted to sexually abusing her from the time she was 13 to 16.

Getting to this moment was not easy for Kayla, who continued to grapple with her own misguided feelings of guilt, love and loyalty:

“In my mind back then I still felt it was my fault. I felt I had done something wrong and if he was going to jail, I should be in trouble, too. That it took two to tango. I thought it had been a real relationship – that he loved me and I loved him. I thought I was going to marry him.”

A month after Kayla's mother, Jeannie Yazell, found out about the long, abusive relationship, she over-ruled other family members and relocated her daughter to Massachusetts so she could continue with her sport under the tutelage of Jimmy Pedro, the fabled U.S. judo Olympian and his well-respected father, Big Jim Pedro.

Although Doyle was still out on bail at the time, he had been instructed not to contact Kayla. But Jeannie said he was using disposable phones – and had convinced her daughter to do the same – so he could continue communicating.

“She was also getting phone calls from (other) people telling her not to



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Kayla Harrison, Middletown native and Olympic Judo qualifier, stands with her coach, Jimmy Pedro, at his training facility in Wakefield, MA, Thursday, July 19, 2012. Staff photo by Nick Daggy

go to court,” Jimmy Pedro said. “They were telling her, ‘This is all nonsense. It’s all made up in your head.’ ”

Before the Pedros could help Kayla with her judo skills, they realized they had to help her, as Jimmy says, “put her life at peace.”

That meant therapy, getting her back into high school, working a part-time job ... and holding Doyle accountable.

“She had to face this person in court, put him behind bars and move on with her life,” Jimmy said. “We told her, ‘What you are doing is 100 percent correct and we stand behind you.’ ... And the moment she showed up willing to testify, he pleaded out so he didn’t have to go away for life.”

After Doyle pleaded guilty to one count of engaging in illicit sexual conduct in a foreign place, Kayla had to face him at the sentencing and she said that’s when she began to crumble:

“I was sobbing hysterically and that’s when I called Jimmy and he told me to take a deep breath. He walked me through it. He said, ‘You are going to do this girl.’ He said I was going to treat it just like one of my matches: No steps backward. I should look at the judge the whole time, tell the truth and get out of there.

“I was crying the whole time, but I told the judge how my passion had become my prison – how I had to move 800 miles away to keep doing what I loved.

“And when he was sentenced to 120 months and they put him in handcuffs, Daniel turned around, looked at me, said ‘I love you,’ then walked out the door. I freaked out. I couldn’t even walk out of the court room. In my 17-year-old mind, I felt I had ruined his life instead of the other way around.

“It was the hardest day of my life.”

Jimmy Pedro said it was “the biggest moment of her life. It gave her closure. She could put it behind her and move on to what she really could become.”

And that’s why when she does go for gold on Aug. 2 – even though she will have to fight her way through four or five matches against the best women in the world in the 78-kilo (172 pound) weight class – she chuckles about it and says, “It will be a breeze.”

She truly believes: “I’m mentally tougher than all the girls I’ll fight. I know there is nothing I’m going to face that is going to be harder than what I’ve faced in the past.”

She’s not being over-confident or cocky. There’s a warm, friendly effervescence about her and there’s that big smile and they make you feel good about her. And then when you see her on the mat that feeling is magnified.



Kayla Harrison, Middletown native and Olympic Judo hopeful, tosses a training partner at coach Jimmy Pedro’s training facility in Wakefield, MA, Thursday, July 19, 2012. Staff photo by Nick Daggy



Kayla Harrison (right), Middletown native and Olympic Judo hopeful, works out at coach Jimmy Pedro’s training facility in Wakefield, MA, Thursday, July 19, 2012. Staff photo by Nick Daggy



A sign with photos of Kayla Harrison stands at the entrance to the Akers Packaging office Friday, July 20, 2012 in Middletown. Harrison’s grandmother, Ginger Sneed, is an employee at Akers Packaging. Harrison will be representing the United States Olympic team in Judo. Staff photo by Nick Graham

Ranked No. 2 in the world, she has beaten all 13 of the direct qualifiers in her Olympic division in previous competitions and is favored to win gold.

Should that happen she would make Olympic history – no U.S. judo player, male or female, has ever won gold – and become one of the biggest American stars of the London Games.

“The American media loves the sensational story,” Jimmy said. “It loves the kid who came from nowhere, the rags-to-riches tale. Kayla unfortunately came from a very dark and low place, but she has reached the pinnacle. That dichotomy creates the story that makes it so dramatic.

“From the USOC standpoint, she’s one of the top five females to watch at the Games and if she wins, she will be one of the all-time beloved Olympic heroes – just like a Rulon Gardner, a Dara Torres and a Kerri Strug.”

Middletown’s own

Kayla had just finished her rigorous morning workout at the Pedro’s dojo – a second-floor walkup in a warehouse behind a cement plant in Wakefield, a town just north of Boston. She was headed to lunch at a downtown deli and then on to a grueling session with strength and conditioning coach Paul Soucy at his fitness center in nearby North Andover.

Once she slid in behind the wheel of her old, bright blue Saturn Vue – and had Roxane Taeymans, her training partner from Belgium, and Michael Remilien, a judoka from France, pile into the back – she immediately tuned the radio to a country station.

“Can you believe I can get only one country station here? It’s awful,” she said. “But when I was just over in the Czech Republic training, I got an e-mail from Kix Brooks of Brooks & Dunn. He said, ‘I’m so proud of you. I’ll be cheering for you’ and he asked me to be on his American Country Countdown show. I almost had a heart attack. I jumped up on down on the bed and my teammate – she’s from California – goes ‘Who’s that?’

“They all call me a hick up here, they think I’m some kind of redneck,” she said with a laugh. “I tell them you have no idea. There are some people a whole lot more country than I am in the town I come from.”

She grew up in Middletown, where her family – before it heads to London early next week – is hosting an Opening Ceremonies party on Friday afternoon at Fricker’s. They have also been selling “Team Kayla London 2012” T-shirts and caps at the Wednesday night Broad Street Bash street fairs in Middletown and online (email kaylajudoshirts@gmail.com) to help raise funds for their trip.

Around town, various store windows are sporting “Kayla – Go For Gold” signs and out in Massachusetts the other day you saw that hope getting plenty of sweat equity.

During the morning judo session, Kayla took on a variety of combatants and that prompted Jimmy to needle one male opponent from Morocco: “C’mon, she’s a girl. A blond for Pete’s sake!”

The winded guy glanced at Pedro and mumbled, “Yeah, a tough girl ... A real tough girl.”

Before another workout that evening came the fast-paced “death circuit” – her words – with Soucy, who also trained Pedro for three of his four Olympic efforts.

Soon Kayla was running in a heavy-resistance harness, flipping cumbersome 150-pound bags over her shoulders, lifting weights, climbing ropes, so expending herself that her gray shirt was quickly soaked in sweat and her tanned, muscled shoulders – sculpted like those of a light-heavyweight boxer or a linebacker – heaved up and down as she tried to pull in any breath she could.

“I call this Paul’s Palace of Pain,” she whispered with a weak smile.

Soucy nodded: “I’m trying to get her body to perform and feel as though she is going with the second best woman in the

world for eight minutes straight. This program will get her so well-conditioned, so used to being completely exhausted that she can handle anything.

“And I’ll tell you she gives you everything she has. She’s pure grit, grind, determination. Most of all she has a tremendous amount of heart. She has as much heart as any great athlete I have ever seen.”

Early start in Judo

It was that trait that first surfaced when Kayla began the sport as a 6-year-old back in Middletown.

Jeannie had taken a judo class at Sinclair Community College and loved it, so when her daughter showed an interest, she was all for it.

Kayla smiled at those memories: “I was awful at first. I didn’t win a match for three years, but I loved running around the mat and going to hotels for competitions and swimming at the pool and hanging out with my teammates. I felt special.”

As she got better her mother took her to the Renshuden Judo Academy in Centerville. It was run by the Doyles, who are from Spring Valley, and Daniel became her coach.

“Since I was little, one of my big fears was disappointing people,” Kayla said. “Tell me to do something and I’ll try my damndest to do it. That made me very coachable, but also very vulnerable.”

Jeannie shook her head as she thought about how Doyle used that: “He started grooming her when she was 8, but we didn’t see it. We thought he was our friend. He had judo camps at his place and they were fun. He had big bonfires and everything and we didn’t think anything of it because there were tons of kids there – and he was like a big kid.

“Kids spent the night up there and after a while he babysat our kids and spent the night here at our place and even went with us on vacations that centered around judo tournaments.”

As Jeannie sat in her Middletown home and recounted those times, she looked at Kayla’s 17-year-old sister Aura and 13-year-old brother Jake and said: “I forgot about this until now. Remember when he wanted Kayla to move to his house so she could train more? She was being home-schooled so he said it would be easy. We said ‘No.’

“But it’s haunted me that I didn’t see what was really happening. Truthfully, though, we thought he was gay because he never had a girlfriend. ... Little did we know.

“The thing is (Doyle) was completely controlling her mind. Guys like that get your child’s confidence and make them feel loved. Then it starts to go farther: ‘I’m the only one who will ever love you,’ and then it’s ‘You can’t trust anyone else.’ And pretty soon it’s ‘You’re not gonna listen to your parents. I know better.’

“He convinced us they needed to go to all these tournaments, not just across the country, but around the world. My husband Mike and I butted heads over it. He would say, ‘We can’t afford it,’ but I said, ‘Kayla has a gift. We’ll find a way.’ We mortgaged our house a couple of times and nearly went bankrupt.”

In middle school – where kids called Kayla “Judo Chop” – she found supporters as well. The teachers at Vail donated \$1,000 to send her with Doyle to a tournament in Estonia.

By then the sexual abuse had begun and Kayla now admits the whole secretive process took a terrible toll:

“For a long time my life was a lie. I woke up every morning pretending I was a happy-go-lucky kid with nothing but the future in front of her – and yes there were some moments I was happy – but mostly on the inside I was depressed. At the end of the day when I fell asleep I was an unhappy child. I was suicidal. I hated my life. I hated lying to my mom, my friends. I hated looking at myself in the mirror.”

‘He touched me’

The abuse finally came to light following a 2007 tournament in Puerto Rico where, Jeannie said, Doyle drank and got “very violent” with Kayla and some other athletes and was convinced to fly back home.

“She called me and said she didn’t want Daniel coaching her at the next tournament in Miami,” Jeannie said. “At that point we had a love-hate relationship with him. I hated the way he spoke to her and treated her at times. I definitely hated the way he treated us. He was very disrespectful.”

Daniel didn’t show up at that event, but Jeannie, a volunteer at national tournaments, did and she remembers Kayla breaking down in tears on the mat:

“I helped her off and I said ‘What’s going on?’ And finally it came out. She said, ‘He touched me.’ I was like ‘WHAT!!!’

“She was driving home with her friend that day and I was flying. I wanted to go with her, but she wouldn’t let me. But they kept texting me, revealing a little more each time and it just got worse and worse and worse.

“I got off the plane in Cincinnati, got my baseball bat and went to his house to kill him. Once I got there, I didn’t hit him because I didn’t want to go to prison, so instead I took out all his windows in his house and his car. ... And then I went to the police.”

When authorities couldn’t get Doyle to confess, Jeannie finally managed to get his admissions on tape.

“I lied,” she said quietly. “It was bad, but I told him Kayla was very ill. I said we had taken her to the hospital and that she wouldn’t eat until she could talk to him. I told him I’d let him see her if he just told me what he had done. And why? ... And ... and ... he did.”

While others in the family said Kayla should have nothing more to do with judo, Jeannie felt otherwise. She thought her daughter – who had won two national tournaments by the time she was 15 – needed to stick with the sport that was so close to her heart and today Kayla agrees:

“If I had quit judo I probably would have committed suicide.”

Prior to the revelations Jeannie already had thought her talented daughter was outgrowing the Centerville club and had contacted the Pedros, who have a sterling reputation and a stable of elite international talent.

A Brown University grad and a married father of four, Jimmy – a four-time Olympian who won bronze medals at the 1996 and 2004 Games and a world championship in 1998 – remains America’s most-decorated judo athlete. His dad, Big Jim, himself a great judo athlete once, is the no-nonsense patriarch of a program that has produced nearly 100 national champions and a dozen Olympians.

But they never had a challenge like Harrison.

“Back when it was happening I didn’t want to go there,” Kayla said. “I didn’t want to be the strong girl anymore. I didn’t want to overcome anything. I wanted to quit and be normal and forget about everything that had happened to me.

“I was a handful when I got here. I cried every practice. I just wanted to run away.”

And at times she did. “We’d get calls – they couldn’t find Kayla,” Jimmy said. “Other times she was on top of the (athletes’) house and they were afraid she was gonna jump.

“When she came to us my father and I tried to tap into the resources we had at the school. One of our students was a top adolescent psychologist and he got her with some of his colleagues. And after Kayla’s evaluation, he said this really was one of the worst cases of mental abuse he’d ever seen.”

While they worked at getting Kayla back whole again, the situation gnawed at Jimmy, who has two daughters of his own:

“It’s appalling what this guy did. If it was my daughter – at least this is what you’d want to do – you’d have a ski mask on outside of his house and one day when he came out, you’d never see him again.”

Big Jim took a different approach: “I wouldn’t let her feel sorry for herself. That didn’t serve a purpose. I treated her like everybody else. I said, ‘It’s not your fault, we all know that, but you’ve got to suck it up. You can’t go back, you can only go forward.’”

Eventually they got her to understand she had to confront Doyle.

“We told her ‘Listen, you were 13 and 14 and 15 years old and he was in his 30s. If he truly loved you, he would have waited until you were older and mature enough mentally to make these decisions,’” Jimmy said. “You don’t understand what love is and for him to take advantage of that is plain wrong ... period. That’s why there are laws that say just that.”

Once they Pedros hammered that point home, they moved her toward a healthier teenage life.

She took classes at Wakefield High, took a variety of jobs to help pay for her stay – everything from working at a local hardware store and teaching youngsters at the dojo to dog walking in downtown Boston – and in the process she began to immerse herself into a new life.

“To the core, the Pedros are just good people,” Kayla said. “They didn’t just change my life, they saved it. They made it OK for me to be a kid again.”

‘A true fighter’

On the mat, the Pedros developed the skills that Kayla was lacking – especially her ne waza or ground attack – and coupled that with her innate ability to fight.

“You can make her stronger, improve her grappling technique, her standing judo, her mind training, but you can’t make someone a true fighter,” Jimmy said. “You are either a fighter or you are not and she was. She’s just unrelenting. She’s going to dig deep and win at any cost.”

A take-notice moment came in 2010 when she won the World Judo Championship in Tokyo, the first U.S. woman to do so since 1984.

But soon after that she received a letter from Doyle’s father, who’s also a judo instructor.

“He congratulated me on winning the worlds,” Kayla said. “The only thing I really remember from it is that he said ‘I’m sorry. ... I don’t know how to unscramble scrambled eggs.’”

The letter infuriated Jeannie, but not Kayla.

“Actually, I felt bad for him,” Kayla said. “It’s his son and of course he loves him. I know my family feels differently – and I wouldn’t want what happened to me to happen to my worst enemy – but I’ve gotten beyond that now. I’ve actually forgiven his son. Why should I spend my time hating him? It’s negative energy and right now I have too much good going in in my life. I have too many good people and positive things. I’m not going to let him take over these moments, too.”

Big Jim has seen the transformation: “Look, she’s not 100 percent, there’ll always be scars. But she’s a lot stronger than she was. She’s gotten a life back.”

She’s engaged now to Aaron Handy, her longtime friend and confidante from Middletown who went with her to Wakefield and now works as a firefighter in neighboring Marblehead. Kayla has trained to be a firefighter, too, and hopes to pursue that after the Games.

Since she came to Wakefield – thanks to the Pedro’s connections – she’s been sponsored by the New York Athletic Club. That backing – along with support from the USOC and USA Judo – has enabled her to travel the world competing.

"I spend half the year on the road," she said rattling off two dozen countries she has competed in. "Since I've been here I've filled three passport (books.)"

Along the way she has faced – and beaten – the very best in the sport.

If she lived in France – where there are more than one million judo players compared to 15,000 in the U.S. – she said she'd be a millionaire:

"And the girl from Brazil I beat for the world title (Mayra Aguiar) – they bought her a house and she gets \$15,000 a month to do judo."

Although Kayla is not that well known here yet, that will change when she competes in London.

Actually, it's just over the past few months that she's finally been willing to share her story.

"Originally, she was afraid about anybody finding out what had happened," Jimmy said. "It digs up a past she's not proud of and would like to forget. But that's part of what defines her and part of what makes her so strong."

Her change of heart came last November when she watched Penn State students take to the streets to protest the firing of football coach Joe Paterno because of his part in the cover-up of the Jerry Sandusky sex abuse scandal.

"That really ticked me off," she said. "I couldn't believe kids my age were rioting over a coach leaving. It was Joe Paterno's job to step in, he's supposed to be a leader. Dozens of kids' lives had been changed – some of them ruined – because they had been abused. Those victims needed a voice, someone to speak out for them."

And that's when she decided her story needed to be told.

"In the beginning, I cried every time I told it," she said. "And to be honest, if this whole thing could just be about my success and not about my past, that would be great. But people want to know what you've been through and I've been through a lot."

"So I'll tell my story and if it helps motivate someone's life – if somebody hears it and decides 'I'm not gonna be a victim anymore' – well, that's awesome whether I win a gold medal or not."

"I've already had more people reach out to me than you'd think. I've had older people say something similar happened to them when they were younger. They said they wish they had said something because it changed their life. I just feel so sad for them because when you look in their eyes you see the emptiness. And right then I feel like I'm doing the right thing. It just solidifies my purpose."

When Jeannie hears that kind of talk she smiles: "She's in a place now where she doesn't let it define her. I know she still has her moments, but the bottom line is that she's not a victim anymore."

She soon may be a gold medal champion though and should that happen she has a place for her Olympic hardware.

"My apartment is small – just one bedroom – but it does have a fireplace," she said, smiling. "One of my good friends had a big frame made for my gold medal from worlds and that sits on one side of the mantle. But the other side is empty, so there's a spot just ready and waiting."

The way Jeannie sees it, that empty spot has already been filled: "If she wins a medal, that's amazing. But when you've overcome the worst demons there can possibly be and then go on to the heights she has now, well, in my book, you already have won."

Jimmy agreed: "When anybody in America hears her story, they're going to want her to succeed all the more. She instantly has a fan base, not just because of what she's overcome, but because of the way she's done it – the way she stood up for herself and the way she now stands up for others."

“People are going to see the kind of young woman she’s become and they are going to fall in love with her.”

And finally, Kayla Harrison will realize what true love is all about.

KAYLA HARRISON FILE

Weight Category: 78kg

Height: 5-8

Hometown: Middletown

Current Residence: Wakefield, Mass.

Club Name: NYAC/USA Judo National Team FORCE

Coach: Jimmy Pedro

Current Ranking: No. 1 in the United States; No. 2 in the world

Source: United States Olympic Committee

International Judo Federation World Rankings

Women’s 78kg

1. Mayra Aguiar, Brazil*

2. Kayla Harrison, USA

3. Audrey Tcheumeo, France

4. Akari Ogata, Japan

5. Lkhamdesd Purevsargal, Mongolia

6. Xiuli Yang, China^

7. Abigel Joo, Hungary

8. Heidi Wollert, Germany

9. Amy Cotton, Canada

10. Marhinde Verkerk, Netherlands

* Reigning world champion

^ 2008 Olympic champion

Source: IJF

Road to Gold

What: Women’s 78 kg

When: Aug. 2

Where: ExCel London

Schedule

4:30 a.m. – Round of 32 eliminations; Round of 16 eliminations; Quarterfinals

9 a.m. – Semifinals

11:10 a.m. – Gold Medal match

NOTE: Time is EST

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