

Kayla's battle for gold nothing compared to years of torment at hands of coach

August 2, 2012

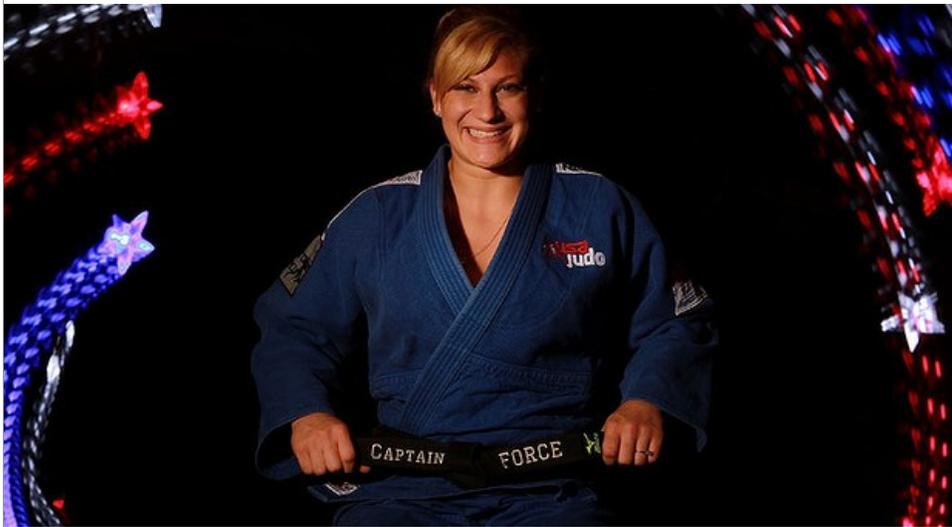
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Going for gold ... Kayla Harrison.

Kayla Harrison is being asked to look back to the girl she once was and to relive the torment that once poisoned her.

"I feel incredibly sad for that little girl. I can still see her, I can still see her crying her eyes out and not knowing how to escape. But I'm happy for her because I know she had the courage to say, 'I won't be that victim of sexual abuse. Now she's got engaged, lives in a beautiful beach town and is going for glory at the Olympics.'"

And as she mentions the magic word 'Olympics', the smile materialises again. It is typical of this most remarkable athlete, for whom the battle to become America's first ever judo gold medallist is nothing compared to the suffering she experienced at the hands of her coach as a teenager.



Kayla Harrison ... rebuilt her life. Photo: Getty Images

Harrison, now 22, suffered in silence for three painful years because she abandoned her thoughts of suicide and summoned the bravery to first expose him and then confront him in court. Daniel Doyle admitted his guilt and was sentenced to 10 years in jail but Harrison's sentence was more insidious; she had to rebuild a life destroyed, to fight off the 'taboo' of being a victim.

That Harrison is here in London ready to battle for gold in the half-heavyweight division (78kg) is a life-affirming triumph, not just for her but the Pedros, the father-and-son coaching team who she swears saved her life.

"I have absolutely no doubt in my mind that I'm the toughest athlete in my weight class and one of the mentally toughest competitors in judo. I have no fear," she says.



Mentor ... Kayla Harrison trains with coach Jimmy Pedro. Photo: AP

That is no exaggeration. Four months ago, she was returning home on a plane from Japan, her knee the size of a balloon after partially tearing a medial collateral ligament. She wondered if it was the end of her Olympic dream but her mental strength enabled her to blank the anxiety.

"Would I wish what happened to me on my worst enemy? No. But it's made me a stronger, more confident athlete and I know that there can be nothing in my life that is going to be harder than that."

The Ohio girl had started judo at six, introduced to the sport by her mother, a black belt. Within a couple of years, she had joined the academy in Centerville where she first met Doyle, who was then 24.

"Daniel was one of my mum's friends, he babysat me and my brother and sister, he came over for family barbecues," she says, recalling how Doyle coached her to two national titles before her 15th birthday while using their coach-athlete relationship to abuse the trust of the youngster and her family.

"It was devastating. When I was young, he would say, 'We have to keep this between us or we will get into trouble and, honestly, as I got older, I was pretty brainwashed. I knew it was wrong but I thought I loved him. And I thought he loved me.

"I was young, terrified but really didn't understand. Even at an early age, I was putting a lot of pressure on myself to please people. My world revolved around Daniel. He was my sun. All I wanted to do was please him. Unfortunately, he took advantage of that.

"During those years I was an emotional wreck, severely depressed, suicidal. I hated my life. Finally, it got to the point where I couldn't take it any more."

She told her friend, judo player Aaron Handy. He told Harrison's mother, who informed the police.

A month after her revelation, she was taking a step into the unknown, reinventing herself and her career 1350km from home in Boston in the judo centre run by Jimmy Pedro and his father 'Big Jim', two no-nonsense coaches among the most respected in the US.

"I was numb at that time but, luckily for me, they were great people. I had to trust them, I didn't really have a choice but I had therapy and they took care of me. Big Jim pretty much took the 'tough love' approach.

One day, he said, 'You know kid, it happened to you - but it doesn't define you and some day you're eventually going to have to get over it'. Once I realised that, it was a lot easier to do."

The greatest ordeal came two years ago when Harrison had to come face-to-face with Doyle, having admitted his guilt, at the sentencing hearing. It was, she said, both the hardest day of her life but also its turning point.

"Having the chance to confront my demons and to say my piece, I was so scared," she recalls. Did it help that Doyle apologised in public? "Yes, I forgive him. I almost pity him. I said my piece, told the judge the truth and then it's closure."

Through all the trauma, the Olympics kept her going. "For me, having 2012 to strive for allowed me to say, 'You did it, you got through it, despite everything'. I was able to reflect that nothing can stop me."

Life is good. Aaron, the lad she turned to in her hour of need, is now her fiance and if the London gold follows the world title she annexed in Paris last year, she can tick off her two lifetime's ambitions and look to a new career to test that notable courage - her training as a firefighter back in Ohio.

The Telegraph, London

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»»

Claudia | Potts Point August 02, 2012, 3:23PM

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»Good story, thanks. These are the stories the Olympics are full of, and what sport can do for people. Not that you'd know that from the blinkered coverage we're getting of the big swim meet and the whinging from over-privileged, pampered superstars. Judo probably won't even make an appearance.«

»The very best of luck to her, but she's already a full-fledged champion, win, lose or draw.«

»»

Harvey K-Tel | August 02, 2012, 3:31PM

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»Harvey K-Tel - you took the words out of my mouth... whether or not she gets the gold - she's already a winner in my book.«

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»«

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“»«

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