



Credit: AP

Kayla Harrison celebrates after winning her women's bantamweight bout against Julianna Peña at the UFC 316 mixed martial arts event Saturday in Newark, N.J.

By Rick McCrabb – Contributing Writer, June 10, 2025

Now that Kayla Harrison has accomplished an athletic quintuple — two Olympic gold medals, two \$1 million Professional Fighters League championships and, most recently, a UFC title — she's closer to reaching her ultimate goal: being called the greatest female fighter of all time.

On Saturday night, Harrison, a Middletown native, dominated 135-pound champion Julianna Peña and forced her to quit late in the second round to win the championship at the Prudential Center in only her third UFC fight.

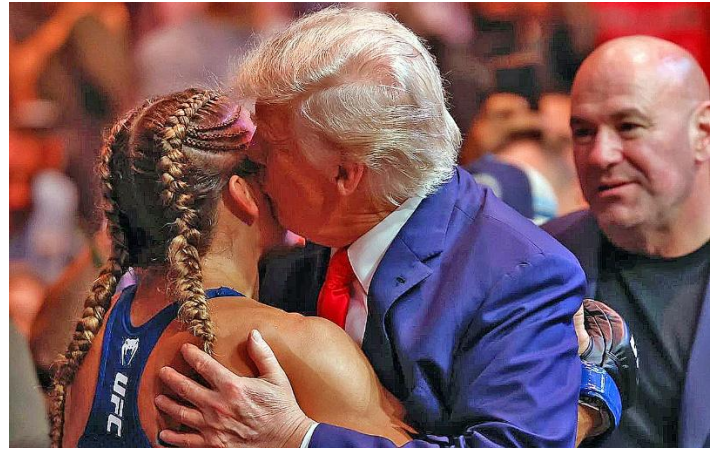
The little girl from Middletown, who has grown into one of the most feared fighters in a cage, shines brightest on the biggest stages.

Now that she wears the bantamweight belt, Harrison, 34, probably will be challenged by former champion and 2025 UFC Hall of Fame inductee Amanda Nunes.

Nunes, who attended Harrison's fight Saturday and joined her in the cage after the bout, plans to come out of retirement to face Harrison, 19-1, for what should be a major payday for both fighters.

Harrison's mother, Jeannie Yazell, who attended Saturday's fight, said she believes Harrison may step into the cage two more times before retiring.

Regardless when her professional career ends, Harrison has made an impact on the mixed martial arts world and in her hometown.



She “continues to strive for and achieve greatness in all that she does, all while singing the praises of her hometown,” said Clayton Castle, the city’s communications manager. He added Harrison “embodies everything great about Middletown: undisputed grit, hard work, and determination leading to high-level success.”

Middletown High School Principal Carmela Cotter, set to retire this month after a 40-year career, said Harrison has been “a champion through and through. She dreams big and accomplishes big. “Harrison attended Middletown City Schools, then moved out of the state to continue her judo training that led to gold medals in the 2012 and 2016 Olympics.

Cotter said while most people see all of the success Harrison is enjoying, what they don’t witness are the countless hours training in the gym. “The path to success is hard and it starts when no one is looking,” Cotter said. “She’s a walking, talking example that dreams come true.”

Her father, Kenny Harrison, who lives in Middletown, said regardless of the outcome of his daughter’s next fight, he considers her the greatest of all time.

“She has to prove nothing else,” he told the Journal-News. “I’m just so proud of her and I love her.” Yazell said she constantly gets messages about her daughter, and most of them are from Middletown residents. Harrison appreciates the support, her mother said.



Kayla Harrison served as grand marshal for the Santa Parade kicking off Middletown Holiday Whopla events Saturday, Nov. 27, 2021 in downtown Middletown.

“She gives all the glory to God,” her mother said. “She just wants to be a good role model.”

Gary Goltz for *Black Belt Magazine*, June 2017

Kayla is the only American to win a gold medal at the Olympics in judo. She did this in 2012 at the London Games. In 2016 when she repeated her victory, winning a gold medal at the Rio Games. Her second victory came about a month after I had accepted the position of Chair of the US Judo Association's, National Promotion Board following my tenure as their President. Our promotion board was revamped with the additions of four former Olympians including Lynn Roethke, as Vice Chair who took a silver medal in 1988 and Jason Morris who took a silver medal in 1992. Knowing Kayla for more than a decade, I immediately thought that if she were Japanese, they would make her a godan (5th degree black belt for winning one gold medal). Since she won two, I suggested to our promotion board that we do something unprecedented and batsugun her (jump promotion) directly rokudan (6th degree black belt) a rank which the practitioner has an option to wear red and white paneled belt to signify they are the equivalent of Ph.D. in Judo. The promotion board voted in favor of my idea which was ratified unanimously by the USJA's Board of Directors where another former Olympian serves as Vice President. So, I contacted Jimmy Pedro her longtime coach with the good news. He was elated and asked for us to send it to him for presentation which he did at a rally with Nancy Kerrigan in the Boston area where they both reside.

Kayla is indeed a living example of Jigoro Kano's principals in terms of thriving to be a fine person of excellent character. She's a positive role model for all judokas as well as the embodiment of the Zen proverb, fall down 7 times and get up 8!

August 31, 2016

The USJA announced today the promotion of Kayla Harrison to 6th Degree Black Belt



UNITED STATES JUDO ASSOCIATION

2005 Merrick Rd. # 313 Merrick NY 11566
Telephone: (516) 366-3311 Fax (888) 276-3432

USJA Senior Rank Promotion System DAN Requirements
ALL SUBMITTALS MUST BE TYPED TO BE ACCEPTED

Kayla Harrison	07/02/1990	Rokudan	08/31/2016
Name:	DOB	Rank	Date

This has been approved by the USJA Promotion Board and President

Steve Cohen, Member	Jason Morris, Member
Andrew Connelly, Member	Lynn Roethke, Vice Chair
Robert Donaldson, Secretary	Hal Sharp, Emeritus Member
Jesse Goldstein, Member	Ernie Smith, Emeritus Member
Celita Schutz, Vice President	John Paccione, President

Gary Goltz, Chair

[Video on Kayla Harrison's Judo Experience](#)



United States Judo Association

CERTIFICATE OF BLACK BELT JUDO RANK

Be it known that

Kayla Harrison


PRESIDENT

Has met all requirements established and set forth by the
United States Judo Association for promotion to the rank of:

Rokudan - 6th Degree


PROMOTION CHAIRMAN

and is hereby certified at that rank by the USJA National Promotion Board.
You are now considered to be a highly skilled Sensei, or expert teacher of Judo.
As a national leader of Judo, we know that you will continue to improve your knowledge,
character and Judo skills. We also expect you to be eager to teach Judo at all times. Your
leadership of Judo affairs at the state and national level is of great importance. All
members of the United States Judo Association expect you to exemplify the ideals,
philosophy, and the true spirit of Judo in every aspect of your life.

08-31-2016

DATE



Two-time Olympic judo champion Harrison feted at Market Street event

By Jean DePlacido Salem News Correspondent - September 21, 2016



DAVID LE/Staff photo. Olympians Nancy Kerrigan, Kayla Harrison, Travis Stevens and coach Jimmy Pedro pose for photos before a short ceremony held at Market Street in Lynnfield on Wednesday evening. 9/21/16.

'Meet the Medalists' took place Wednesday night at Market Street in Lynnfield and was a big hit. Two of judo's finest athletes — Danvers native Kayla Harrison, the aforementioned gold medal winner at the 2012 Summer Games in London and the recent 2016 Games in Rio — and silver medalist Travis Stevens were present along with their coach, Jimmy Pedro, met fans while former U.S Olympic ice skating medalist Nancy Kerrigan served as moderator.

Four local Olympians is something few places can brag about. Both Harrison (who is originally from Ohio) and Stevens moved to Massachusetts to train at Pedro's Judo Center in Wakefield under the former two-time bronze medal winner.

"Rio was the most amazing experience I could've ever asked for," said Pedro, a former St. John's Prep standout wrestler and current USA Olympic judo team coach who gives seminars throughout the country. "Kayla and Travis provided the proudest moments of my coaching career. I've given my life to judo, and it was truly something special.

"Kayla has done what no other man or woman has ever done in (American) judo history, winning gold. She is one of only seven US athletes to repeat, and one of nine in the history of judo to win double gold. It will never be done again; I can say that with confidence." Harrison, who lived in Marblehead before moving to Danvers, works with both Pedro and his father, Jim Pedro Sr. (a 1976 Olympian). "The Pedros are amazing people who not only changed my life but saved it," said Harrison, a survivor of sexual assault. "They made me not only a champion on the mat but off it, too. What I've been able to accomplish because of them is a dream come true."

Harrison and Stevens took questions from the crowd at Market Street and were asked if they wanted to go to the 2020 Olympics. Neither felt that's in their future, although it's too soon after the Rio Games to have a definite answer. Still, the prospect of four years of physically and mentally challenging training is a huge commitment, they admitted. "I don't want to be too greedy; I'm satisfied with my two golds," said Harrison. "London will always be special because that was my first, and the first-ever (gold medal) for this country in judo. But Rio was a lot harder. It's always harder to stay on top in my opinion, so that gold holds a special place."

Harrison has established the Fearless Foundation to educate people about sexual abuse. She was abused by her first coach and decided to speak out about it, hoping to help others become survivors like herself. "I want to shine a light on what sexual abuse is," she said. "One in four girls and one in six boys is a victim of sexual abuse by the age of 18. The first step is education, and that's what I've been doing."

Stevens moved from Washington state 12 years ago to work with Pedro. He was ninth at the 2008 Games and fifth in 2012 before capturing silver in Rio. Pedro said he had to overcome health issues and injuries in order to go to the 2016 Games. "I want to set up gyms across the country where kids can work with high level instructors at low costs," Stevens said. "The first one will be right down the street in partnership with Jimmy and others."

When asked about Rio de Janeiro, Stevens said it was a beautiful city. He recalled how he got out of the gym one day to spend time at a beach, even going for a swim. Many young judo students were on hand to see their heroes. Kim Minot of Lynnfield took pictures of the medal winners; her two young children, 7-year-old Victoria and 5-year-old Connor, both go to Pedro's Judo Center. "We watched Kayla and Travis at the studio," said Minot. "It is so cool to be at the Jimmy's where Olympians train. They're awesome, and my daughter loves judo more than anything."

Pedro, who is a seventh degree black belt, managed to surprise Harrison at the end of the program by promoting her to sixth degree black belt along with a certificate from US Judo Association. He wrapped the red and white belt around her blazer.

"I'm super excited and completely surprised," said Harrison. "I had no idea Jimmy was going to do that; only teachers wear that belt. "I'm ready to go out and teach others, give back to what judo has done for me."

Kayla Harrison makes judo history with another gold

Dan Wolken, USA TODAY Sports - Thursday 4:36 p.m. August 11, 2016



RIO DE JANEIRO — American Kayla Harrison has another gold medal. Call it one more for the road. Expected to retire following these Olympics and become the next female star in professional mixed martial arts, Harrison defeated France's Audrey Tcheumeo to win a second judo gold medal in the 78-kilogram weight class in front of a disappointed Brazilian crowd that was hoping to watch Harrison take on Mayra Aguiar.

Harrison, 26, had predicted a matchup with Aguiar more than a year ago as the two have been longtime rivals and had split their first 14 meetings. It would have recalled echoes of 2012, when she beat Britain's Gemma Gibbons in London in the gold medal match. Instead, she faced Tcheumeo and did not seem to be getting the best of the action until the final seconds when she finally got Tcheumeo on the ground for a decisive win by ippon. Harrison rolled into the semifinals, defeating Anamari Velensek of Slovenia in 1 minute, 43 seconds with an armbar move that immediately ended the match. Her earlier matches weren't any longer, confirming her dominance in this tournament.

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KAYLA HARRISON

WOMAN OF THE YEAR

Although she's been well-known in the judo world for years, Kayla Harrison rose to fame in the greater martial arts community when she struck gold at the 2012 London Games and thus became the first American *judoka* — female or male — to stand atop an Olympic podium. She reveled in the glory of the moment, then got right back to work in the *dojo* to prepare for the 2016 Games. And guess what? She grabbed another gold in Rio!

"I knew it was going to be a tough road, but I also knew I had prepared as best I could," Harrison said. "I went to tournaments and training camps all over the world looking for the right preparation.

I trained as if I wasn't an Olympic champion, and that is why I won."

As much as the double gold speaks volumes about Harrison's skill, athleticism and work ethic, she's quick to credit her coaches, *Black Belt* Hall of Famers Jimmy Pedro Jr. and his father James Pedro Sr. "They are the best coaches in the world," Harrison said. "I can honestly say I wouldn't be where I am — both personally and professionally — if it weren't for them."

Not long ago, Harrison joined forces with Fuji Sports to launch a product line called Fearless. It includes judo uniforms, compression tights and tops, sports bras and headbands, all aimed



at empowering female athletes. "My sponsor approached me to help design a line of women's clothing," she said. "I tested all the products myself, had firsthand input on design, weight, materials used, etc. I really wanted to create a line made by a female martial artist for female martial artists."

An even more positive side effect of Harrison's Olympic success lives under a similar title. "The Fearless Foundation was created to help survivors of child sexual abuse," she said. For those who don't know, when Harrison was 13, she was abused by a judo instructor. What better way to bounce back from such a traumatic experience than to help others cope with the aftermath of similar crimes.

"Right now, I am in the middle of writing a book that will come out next spring with the goal of educating our society on child sexual abuse and all the signs and symptoms," she said. "It will inspire and empower survivors to not only live and survive but to thrive!"

"Kayla is a living example of Jigoro Kano's principles," said Gary Goltz, former president of the U.S. Judo Association. "She's a positive role model for all judoka, as well as the embodiment of the Zen proverb 'Fall down seven times and get up eight.'"

After Harrison's second Olympic victory, Goltz

spearheaded an effort to get her a *batsugun*, or jump promotion. "I figured that if she were Japanese, judo authorities would make her a *godan* (fifth degree) for winning one gold medal, but she had won two," he said. "I suggested to the board that we do something unprecedented and give her a *rokudan* (sixth degree). The board [of the USJA] voted in favor of my idea."

Harrison is about to embark on the next phase of her career: the transition to mixed martial arts. Her plans call for her to do commentary for World Series of Fighting events until the end of 2017, after which she will make her debut in the cage. In the meantime, she's been bolstering her skill set with Brazilian *jiu-jitsu*, *muay Thai*, *no-gi* grappling, boxing, and strength and conditioning.

"I feel as if I have done everything I want to do in judo, but I don't feel as if my time as an athlete is over," Harrison said. "MMA is a great opportunity and outlet for that athleticism. It's a whole new challenge, and every day I get to show up and be a white belt all over again."

Kayla Harrison's first induction into the *Black Belt Hall of Fame* was in 2012 when she received a Special Achievement Award. With this induction as our 2017 Woman of the Year, she joins the elite club of two-time judo winners, which was previously occupied by just five people: Jimmy Pedro Jr., Hayward Nishioka, Pat Burris, Allen Coage and Mike Swain.

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— KAYLA HARRISON



Kayla Harrison Thank you all! I had no idea! What an honor to continue to be an ambassador for our great sport. Thank you all for believing in me. It has been my greatest privilege to share my journey with you all. ❤️

U.S. strikes gold in Women's Judo at London Olympics

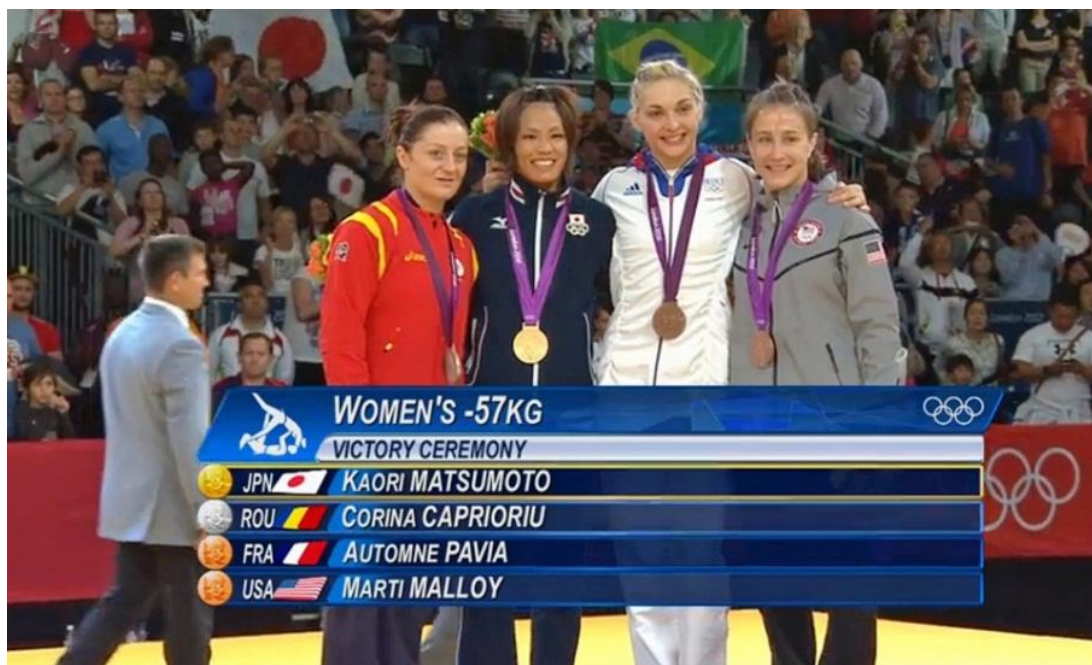
by Gary Goltz, U.S. Judo Association President, August 2012



For the first time ever, the United States has won a gold medal in judo at the Olympics. Kayla Harrison (78-kilogram division) beat every one of her opponents, including two by submission via arm lock, on her way to the top. In the final match against Gemma Gibbons of Great Britain - the crowd favorite Harrison, dominated the action.

Spectators included British Prime Minister David Cameron and Russian President Vladimir Putin, an accomplished judoka himself who holds an eight-degree black belt.

The reigning world champion, Harrison is a product of the Wakefield, Massachusetts, judo dojo run by Black Belt Hall of Fame member Jimmy Pedro and his father, Jim who was also a stellar competitor in his heyday. Together they have built a virtual judo factory capable of turning out world class players.





Several days earlier, Marti Malloy (57-kilogram division), who trains at San Jose State University, won a bronze medal in judo. That makes 2012 the first time the United States has received two medals at the same Olympics. Two other members of the U.S. team came close to taking the bronze with very respectable showings, a clear indication of the rising skill level of U.S. judo players.

My Perspective: Gary Goltz



I first met Kayla Harrison at my dojo back in 2007 at one of the Winter Nationals my club hosted. She was there with her training partner Ronda Rousey to compete and both took 1st places. They fought against some regular grassroots players without any pomp or ceremony then did a clinic for everyone with Jim Pedro their main coach (Jimmy's dad). Both back then were humble, shy, a bit insecure about their judo prowess, and just a couple of nice kids.

As Kayla continued to develop, like Ronda she became a world caliber judo player who could hold her own against the Japanese, Chinese, Koreans, French, Brazilians, and Cubans. Today's judo requires a high degree of athleticism in addition to stellar judo skills both standing and on the ground. The ultimate goal of judo according to Jigoro Kano our founder is perfection of one's character.

To this end Kayla and Marti are both fine people in the truest sense of judo in terms of their willingness to give back to society in order to improve the overall human condition. One thing for sure is our team has done quite well considering we had only 5 players that qualified coming from a pool of less than 30,000 registered judokas in our country.