



Kerri Strug

You would have missed it if you blinked. Kerri's final vault in the 1996 Olympics was over in a split second, but the fanfare goes on and on. Some people marvel that Kerri became a star so fast, but the truth is that few dreams come true in the wink of an eye.

Kerri always called Tucson, Arizona home. The sun-baked city moves along at a slow pace, but life was always hectic at the Strug house.

Growing up with an older brother and sister meant there was always something happening. All three of them were active in sports, and Kerri's mom was kept busy carting everyone back and forth to practices and games.

The first to fall in love with gymnastics was Lisa, the oldest. She started competing when she was 8 years old, before Kerri was even born. A few years later, Kerri declared that she wanted to be just like her older sister, and she was soon enrolled in a "Mom and Tot's" gymnastics class.

When she was 8, Kerri competed in her first meet. She worked hard and quickly reached higher and higher levels. Looking back, Kerri says her move up the gymnastics ladder was something that just seemed to happen naturally.

Then came a day when Kerri had to decide just how much she loved gymnastics. When she was 12, the Olympics no longer seemed like an impossible dream, but she knew she wouldn't make it without a good coach. That coach was Bela Karolyi, and Kerri couldn't train with him unless she left Tucson.

"I wanted to really go somewhere in gymnastics, so I figured I would have to leave home," she said. "And if you're going to leave home, you might as well come to the best."

Kerri headed for Bela's Houston-based gym in January 1991. She was 13 years old.

Karolyi lived up to his reputation for being tough. Kerri worked out 6 to 7 days a week, 8 hours a day. When she and the other girls were training, Bela demanded complete obedience, both in and out of the gym. Bela and his wife, Martha, watched everything from what they ate to when they slept.

While Kerri was training, she lived with a series of host families. To ease the transition, the families usually had at least one child involved in gymnastics. Although Kerri was still very young, she was basically living on her own. Her parents were hundreds of miles away.



"It was very hard at times," she says. "When you got down or had a bad day, you got to a phone and talked to your parents a lot."

Luckily, Kerri was not entirely alone in Houston. Her aunt and uncle live there. When Kerri got a precious day off, she always spent it at their house. The minute she got there, she would kick off her shoes and head for the refrigerator, but even when she wasn't under Karolyi's watchful eye, she had to be careful about what she ate. While training, she liked to munch on frozen strawberries and vanilla yogurt. The highlight of the weekend came when she was allowed to stay up to watch *Saturday Night Live*.

Such run of the mill treats may not seem like a big deal, but back then Kerri had very little time to herself. In some ways, she traded her childhood for gymnastics.

"A gymnast's career is pretty short. Most of them will peak at 15 or 16," she said when she was 14 years old. "When I get through with this, I have the rest of my life to do all those other things. This means too much to me."

As the Barcelona Olympics loomed closer, all of the work and sacrifices Kerri made seemed worth it. The last day of the Olympic Trials was held in Baltimore, Maryland on June 13, 1992.

The final rotation of the optional competition was the floor exercise, one of Kerri's best events. Sitting in the stadium, we felt confident she would make the team, but then disaster struck. Kerri fell.

Because gymnasts are taught not to keep track of the scores during competition, Kerri had little idea how she was doing when she fell. For a while, she was certain she didn't make the cut, but when all was said and done, she landed the fourth slot on a six person team. Kerri Strug became the youngest U.S. athlete at the 1992 Olympics.

Kerri's time in Barcelona was both exciting and disappointing. The women's team won a bronze medal, and all of Kerri's performances were solid. It was difficult, however, when she got edged out of the All-Around competition by Kim Zmeskal. Later, when Bela Karolyi announced he was leaving gymnastics, Kerri was left without a coach.

Life became very uncertain after the Olympics in 1992. She didn't think she would compete long enough to make the 1996 team, and she was looking forward to a life that didn't revolve around gymnastics. Nevertheless, Kerri couldn't seem to get the sport out of her system, and soon after the Olympics, she set out to find a new coach.

99 Canal Center Plaza, Suite 250, Alexandria, VA 22314



She spent 3 years bouncing from one gym to another. Kerri wasn't sure what she was looking for, but nothing felt right. No one could push her to her limits the way Bela had, and she didn't feel comfortable with any coaching style. In 3 years, Kerri trained with 3 coaches. Each new coach meant a move across the country, a new host family, and a new school.

The last straw came at a meet in Europe. Kerri badly tore a stomach muscle which took 6 months to heal. The injury played a part in Kerri's decision to go home where she could recuperate and finish high school.

School became Kerri's focus when she moved back to Tucson. She had always done well in her classes, and her parents encouraged her to strive for good grades. They always told their children that education was the key to success. In fact, throughout elementary school, Kerri was enrolled in special accelerated classes. By the time she got to high school, she was two years ahead of others her age.

While Kerri was away from home, however, she had devote so much time to working out that she had to make special arrangements for school. For years she had an abbreviated schedule. She attended classes three hours a day and trained in the morning and afternoon. She squeezed homework in before bed and on weekends.

When Kerri returned home, life slowly got back to normal. She went to school like a normal teenager, and she spent time with her family and friends. She continued to work out, but her training schedule wasn't nearly as strict as it once was.

Kerri was just beginning to compete again when another blow rocked her gymnastics career. She entered a small meet in California in August 1994. There were no important medals or titles at stake. It was just meant to be an exercise to keep Kerri in competition form.

She was on the uneven bars when her grip slipped and she swung backwards off the bar. When Kerri hit the mat, her legs bounced over her head, severely pulling her back muscles. It was a very painful injury, but it could have been much worse. It took Kerri another 6 months to fully recover.

Dealing with injuries and setbacks is something all athletes face. Sometimes it was hard to keep going, but Kerri always managed to plow past the problems.



"A lot of times I thought about all the work I put into it, and I didn't want to blow it after I had gotten so close." More than once this philosophy pushed Kerri to try one more time when things went wrong.

In 1995, Kerri graduated from her hometown high school and realized that the Olympics were just over the horizon. Three years earlier she had missed her chance to compete in the All-Around competition by .001, and she had something to prove to herself. She wanted a second chance to make her dreams come true.

Kerri had been accepted at UCLA, but she knew she couldn't give both college and gymnastics her full attention. She worked hard to graduate high school a year ahead of schedule, and this gave her the cushion she needed to put college off a year. Once Kerri made this decision, she knew it was time to return to Karolyi's gym.

In 1994, Bela had come out of retirement to coach 1992 Olympian Kim Zmeskal and a new prodigy, Dominique Moceanu. Returning to Karolyi wouldn't be the easiest path, but Kerri hoped he would be able to get her back on track.

An America's Cup title in March 1996 told the world that Kerri Strug was once again in the ranks of elite gymnasts. For years Kerri had consistently earned silver or bronze, missing out on gold by a fraction of a point. The America's Cup gold medal was her first in an important competition, and her confidence soared.

Kerri rode the wave of good fortune all the way to the Olympic Trials in Boston. On June 30 she earned her spot on the 1996 Olympic team with strong performances in all rotations. In fact, Kerri took the highest scores on two events: vault and floor exercise. Overall, she landed in second place at the meet.

How did Kerri celebrate this huge accomplishment? Bela gave her one night off and she spent it with her family, sneaking a few bites of pizza. Even with so much to be happy about, Kerri remembered to pick the cheese off the pizza so it wouldn't be quite so sinful.

In the three weeks before the Olympics, Kerri learned that an unexpected twist in strategy would give her a real shot at the Olympic All-Around competition, her ultimate goal.



During each rotation in a gymnastics meet, the scores start low and go up. For instance, if there are six girls competing on the vault, and the first girl and the last girl each do very good routines, it is likely that the last girl will get a higher score than the first girl. Judges do this to ensure they have room to maneuver in case someone does a spectacular routine.

Usually coaches want to save their best athletes for the last positions, but they want solid performances in the beginning as well. Historically, coaches placed Kerri, who was always considered to be a very reliable performer, in one of the earlier slots of a rotation.

At the Atlanta Olympics, however, head coach Martha Karolyi and assistant coach Mary Lee Tracy decided to take a new approach. Rather than keeping the same old seating chart, they decided it would be more equitable to base order solely on performance at the Olympic Trials. This meant Kerri took the enviable anchor position on both floor exercise and vault!

To quote a cliché, the rest is history. It's true the story didn't turn out exactly as Kerri wanted. She spent years working toward an individual medal, believing it was the only thing that could prove her ability and dedication.

Well, Kerri Strug did make the All-Around competition in the 1996 Olympics. Who knows what might have happened had she not been injured?

It took a while for Kerri to realize that her last vault said more than any medal could. It declared that not only is Kerri among the best gymnasts in the world, but she is also strong-willed and brave. Gymnastics is a fleeting ambition, but the qualities Kerri displayed on July, 23, 1996, will stick with her the rest of her life.

"When you do well, you think it's worth it," she says now. "When you sacrifice so much and you finally do well, it feels really good."