

WORKING MOTHER

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Get your child to tell the truth

Love your Life

Surefire ways to stress less, laugh more!

6

SIMPLE STEPS TO SEXY

How to outsmart bossy in-laws

NO-FAIL GUIDE
You CAN get him to help around the house

(REAL MOM)
Kristi Yamaguchi
The Olympic champion opens up about life off the ice



CELEBRITY MOMS - Kristi Yamaguchi

The Olympic skater opens up about life off the ice.



By: Suzanne Riss, Photo: Jim Wright

Gold medal winner Kristi Yamaguchi finds life off the ice exhilarating, thanks to her daughters and projects that range from contestant on *Dancing with the Stars* to special correspondent for *Today* during the Winter Olympic Games.

What do you remember about winning the 1992 Olympic figure skating championship?

I remember watching the skaters, wondering what was going to happen. And then there was this incredible feeling of excitement and relief. Winning in women's singles felt surreal. I felt that everything I had done—the hard work, the tough times—was all worth it.

How did you handle the pressure of competing?

The day and night before competitions, I would visualize my performance. I would run it through in my mind and watch the routine on the floor. I'd tell myself I'd trained and I was ready. Still, every single time, I'd be nervous, no matter what competition it was. Sometimes I didn't want to go out there. I'd try to channel my nervous energy in a positive way into strength and endurance. It didn't always work.

How did your parents nurture your talent without pushing?

Skating was something I really wanted to do; my parents knew nothing about it. They said they'd support me as long as I was trying my hardest and enjoying it. When I was slacking, they'd say, "Hey, this is taking a lot of time and energy for us. If you're not going to try your best, maybe you don't have to do this anymore." That's all I needed to hear. They let me and my coach develop a relationship. I felt like it was my activity and I was the one driving it.

What inspired you to want to skate?

I was born with clubfeet, and I had plaster casts on my legs from when I was a couple of months old until age 1. When the casts came off, I wore corrective shoes connected by a brace to turn my feet until I was about 2. The braces hurt my legs a lot, and I remember trying to walk with a bar in between my feet—I had to shuffle.

I was lucky they corrected it when I was so young. Skating wasn't assigned to me, but when I wanted to skate, the doctors said it would help. I expressed an interest when I was about 4 or 5. I'd seen the Ice Follies, the Ice Capades. I remember seeing Peggy Fleming and Dorothy Hamill and wanting to capture the magic of those shows.

Were they your idols growing up?

Dorothy Hamill was my big idol as a kid. She'd won the Olympics in 1976. She was America's sweetheart with her personality, her talent, her haircut. I gravitated toward her. Not knowing what the Olympics entailed, I wanted to be like her.

So what did preparing for the Olympics entail? What was your regimen?

I can't believe what my mom went through—she was so generous. From sixth grade on, at 4:00 a.m. she'd take me to the rink. I'd practice from 5:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m., while my mom sat there. And sometimes after school I'd practice again. Sundays were my day off. She'd travel with me to competitions a couple of times a month.

At what point did you realize how much you loved to skate?

By junior high I knew my life was going to be a little different. Socially I felt I didn't fit in. But on ice I felt I belonged and I connected with people around me. I had to keep my grades up to continue skating, but I didn't mind missing the social things. My life was skating. I had such a focus and a plan. It meant going to bed early—not going to every school football game. I had lots of friends in the skating world, and I was getting to travel and experience life. I felt the trade-off was worth it.

What was high school like?

As a teenager especially, I just wanted to do my thing and not be noticed. But even at 6 years old, the ice became a place for me to express myself. Because I was so shy off the ice, it became my safe haven, with music and freedom and

self-expression. That was my emotional outlet. I look back now and can't believe I found such passion for skating at such a young age.

What attracted you the most?

The sense of accomplishment and the reward I felt when I learned a new move and mastered it. The artistic side was also something I loved. I could express myself and become someone else on the ice depending on what the music called for. As a competitor, the artistic side was important to me. I enjoyed experimenting with pop music, not just classical. You can portray any personality you want on the ice.

Did your parents realize you were destined for the Olympics?

I don't think they knew what to expect. They saw that I loved skating, and they watched me gain in competitive status nationally and internationally. They were along for the ride. It was a learn-on-the-job thing for them.

You had the same coach since you were 9 years old. What's the best advice Christy Ness gave you?

She would say, "There's no secret to success; it's plain, simple hard work." She was right. She'd also say, "If you don't put in the time on the ice, it will show on the ice." I never wanted to feel I hadn't worked hard enough. She was an amazing coach and an amazing judge of drive. She saw enough times that the person with the most talent wasn't necessarily the most successful. It was the person willing to go the extra mile, to put in the work, time and effort.

What life lessons did you learn on the ice?

I learned to put 100 percent into what you're doing. I learned about setting goals for yourself, knowing where you want to be and taking small steps toward those goals. I learned about adversity and how to get past it.

How did you handle the challenges?

The pressures from organizations and judges, skepticism from outside sources—they have an impact. They cause doubts. A turning point for me was going back to simple questions: Why am I doing this? Am I doing this for them? I reminded myself that I had a goal. I took the sport back to me. I wanted to enjoy it again. I didn't want to skate for someone else or for certain marks. There was a period in 1990 into 1991 when I contemplated not skating anymore. It had been a tough, frustrating year. But when I actually thought to myself, What if I didn't skate? I realized that as frustrated as I was, I couldn't imagine not skating. I refocused and kept going—and then things turned around for me.

Did your heritage have an impact?

I think the values my parents passed down to me helped in my success. As the first Asian American to win the gold in figure skating, I received a tremendous amount of support from the Asian community. They were so proud. I have a lot of gratitude for earlier generations.

How did you meet your husband, Bret Hedican?

We met at the opening ceremonies at the 1992 Winter Olympics. He plays ice hockey, and I met the whole hockey team. We met again a few years later when he was playing in Vancouver. When he was in San Jose, I went to watch him play. I thought he was a really nice guy, polite, worth getting to know some more. We met up for ice cream—our first date. Our courtship meant seeing each other maybe once a month for a couple of hours. We understood each other's lifestyle and dedication and training. We got married in 2000.

How have Keara and Emma changed your life?

I want to be there for my kids. My priorities have changed drastically, and I'm lucky I was ready for that. I'd done everything I ever wanted to do in skating. I'd toured with Stars on Ice for ten years. I was ready to hang up the skates, unpack my suitcase and not pack it for a very long time.

Tell me about your daughters.

After the first one is born, you think the second one will be the same—but she's not. Keara is very social, outgoing and adaptable. I see a lot of myself in Emma. She's Mommy's girl, like I was. She's a little shy in social situations until she gets comfortable. Keara is more artistic. She loves imaginary play. Emma has really good athletic ability. She's physically tough. It will be interesting to see what they choose to do.

Do you have help with the kids?

We have a part-time nanny 25 hours a week. But when you travel, you need more than that. My husband recently retired from the National Hockey League, and he picks up the slack when I have to leave town. We also rely on family who live close by.

You not only won *Dancing with the Stars*, you also received perfect scores for your final three dances. What was all that like?

It was pretty crazy. It was a huge commitment. But I had an amazing partner in Mark Ballas, and I loved learning another craft and having a peek into that world. It was a blast, a lot of fun, challenging and exhausting.

How did you prepare?

It was a grueling competition, even to someone used to that. There was a time crunch with live TV every week. You have four or five days to prepare and learn something completely new. The hours are long. You're repeating certain moves. Certain muscles are overused and stressed. But before I decided to do the show, I had to make sure family was available to take care of my kids.

You've also acted, written books and been involved in many charities. Do you have a typical daily routine?

It depends on the season or the week. If nothing is going on, I get the kids ready for school. We're trying to be a normal family. We all have dinner together as much as possible.

Who makes dinner most days?

Bret and I share the responsibility of meals. If we're grilling meat, he does it. I'm not a fancy cook—I'll make a pork loin or Japanese breaded chicken, chicken stir-fry, spaghetti.

What made you launch the Always Dream Foundation in 1996?

My eyes were opened from the work I did with the Make-A-Wish Foundation after the Olympics. I loved what we were doing. My own foundation picks and chooses causes to support. Having achieved my own dreams, I want to give to kids who are less fortunate, who struggle with everyday obstacles. I want to give them something positive in their lives: support.

Do you ever feel it's hard to continue to fulfill yourself professionally and be fully engaged with your children?

I still have an itch. In my twenties I never thought I'd still be working this hard in my thirties. I do feel lucky that I did a lot of my skating, which would have been hard on me as a mom, early on—all that touring and living on the road. I'm happy I'm still busy—off the ice. I still juggle. Sometimes I think I overextend myself because I'm traveling too much and am away from the kids. It's a fine line to find that balance. These days I make business decisions based on whether something is worth my time away from my kids.

What has been the biggest surprise in becoming a mother?

I've realized how precious life is. When I was younger, I was more adventurous. I felt invincible. I was game for everything. As a mom, I don't want to get injured because then I can't take care of my kids. Even getting on an airplane, I'm more conscious of...Like they say, once you have a child, your heart is forever outside your body. I totally understand that now.