

MOVE OVER SONJA, PEGGY, DOROTHY AND KATARINA . . . KRISTI'S TIME HAS FINALLY ARRIVED

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KRISTI YAMAGUCHI has played the game by the book.

She has been sweet.

She has been pure.

She has waited her turn in figure skating's agonizingly slow line of succession.

She has done what was asked of her in a sport that asks too much.

She is 20, the daughter of a Fremont dentist and a medical secretary, a skater since the age of 6.

She is a woman of flower-petal fragility and oaken strength, a skater of delicate form and mesmerizing fluidity on cold ice.

By rights she has inherited the Olympic mantle of Sonja Henie and Tenley Albright, of Carol Heiss and Peggy Fleming, of Dorothy Hamill and Katarina Witt.

But the book Yamaguchi played by has been rewritten.

Sweetness and purity are no longer the currency of skating success. Guts and gumption are where it's at.

Midori Ito, the great champion from Japan who won the crowd but not the medals at the '88 Calgary Games, can throw triple Axels at the judges faster than they can count the spins.

So can Tonya Harding, Yamaguchi's U.S. rival. Harding can, that is, when she's not out deer hunting or drag racing or changing coaches or filing-for-divorce-from/reconciling-with her husband.

Yamaguchi's image has been untarnished

Once, Yamaguchi's plain vanilla character would have been a press agent's dream – and that's what this Olympic figure skating competition is really all about. Her image would have been free for molding in whatever fashion the times and the sponsor demanded.

Now the story that sells is about overcoming obstacles that once shamed their victims: a broken family, poverty, discrimination.

Certainly the shame was cruelly unfair, but is it Yamaguchi's fault not to have been born cursed?

This change has emphasized the lack of a certain toughness in Yamaguchi, a character trait Scarlett O'Hara and her ilk hid behind chiffon and taffeta.

"Kristi's such a wuss," her mother, Carole, said before last month's U.S. championships. "I wish she could be more like Tonya. Tonya says if she skates well, nobody can beat her. I wish Kristi could say that."

But Kristi would say, as she has, that her dream has simply been to skate in the Olympics. It is not her way to covet so openly what is plainly there to be had: the gold medal, the royal adulation and the check.

Coach: 'They've been taught not to brag'

For Yamaguchi it has been enough to let her skating speak for her, to make her quiet case in a sport grown increasingly noisy.

"They've been taught not to brag," Yamaguchi's coach, Christy Kjarsgaard-Ness, said of her skater's family. "They've all been taught not to talk about themselves. They've been taught to always say nice things.

"And they do."

If it is difficult to know precisely who Kristi Yamaguchi is, perhaps it is because she has left us too free to draw our own conclusions.

From her appearance to her name, she is undeniably Japanese. In fact, a procession of Japanese television crews and writers have made the pilgrimage to her training rink to interview the skater who will challenge their own.

Like many in the United States coming to know Yamaguchi for the first time, they ventured into conversation on false assumptions.

"Wow, your English is very good," one Japanese journalist told her.

"I'm fourth generation U.S.," she said, too polite to add, "What did you expect?"

Yamaguchi may be the family name, but at home, it's father Jim, mother Carole, Lori, Brett and Kristi. How American can you get?

So American that she was tentative about enrolling in a university course in Japanese to satisfy her curiosity about that culture.

"I was afraid they'd expect me to already be good at it," she said.

No one in her house speaks it, and her knowledge of the language extends only so far as the words for "hello," "goodbye," "thank you," and "good morning."

Parents spent time in internment camp

Still undeniably Japanese, the daughter of parents who spent their early years in a World War II internment camp, victims of racial prejudice they could not escape.

That's the story an agent would seize upon, said Michael Rosenberg, who manages Harding among others.

"What a historic thing," he said. "I'd have to go with that because the rest of Kristi is kind of boring. Just an All-American girl."

Yamaguchi, who has stayed away from agents, has stayed away from that part of her heritage as well.

"My parents never talked about that too much," she said. "It was just a time of a lot of fear in the country."

When she was 18, she left home for Edmonton, Alberta, to follow Kjarsgaard-Ness, who married a Canadian.

It's a city as clean and sparkling and unremarkable as Yamaguchi herself, full of friendly, unremarkable people and buried deep within a nation too bland to stereotype.

There, far from hype, in a colony of international skaters including men's world champion Kurt Browning and at least four other Olympians, she trains under the pressure of the coming Games and the necessity to develop her own triple Axel.

The rink at the Royal Glenora Club has been outfitted with a special harness suspended from the ceiling to protect her when she falls.

She falls dozens of times every day.

'One jump doesn't make a program'

The triple Axel – 3½ spins – would not be added to her program merely because she could land it. A ragged Axel would not blend with her exquisite Salchows and Lutzes.

"One jump doesn't make a program, and it doesn't make a skater," her coach said. "At the world championship level, you don't put a jump in your program that is not 100 percent."

Peggy Fleming, who has seen Yamaguchi skate many times, believes Yamaguchi is the superior skater to the two jumpers even without the triple.

"The quality of (Yamaguchi's) program and just the quality of her general skating is very well developed," she said. "Tonya Harding is a little behind in the artistic and holding moves out, and the choreography is not as intricate as some of the other lady skaters."

That, perhaps, was the message sent to Harding by the judges of last month's national championship, where she finished third behind Yamaguchi and Nancy Kerrigan: Put some substance in your program for those nights when the triple Axel bombs.

Despite the lack of a triple Axel, Yamaguchi's long program is technically demanding, including a triple Lutz-triple toe loop opening combination that is the most difficult performed by any woman.

Her short program has never been beaten, a beautiful portrayal of a young woman's debut to Johann Strauss' "Blue Danube Waltz."

The two programs are a compelling combination, perhaps strong enough to show that Yamaguchi, the skater who did everything that was asked of her, is the best in the world.