

HARDING'S MUCH ADO ABOUT LITTLE SKATER DEFERS MANY QUESTIONS DURING NEWS CONFERENCE

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LILLEHAMMER, Norway – Her credibility was challenged from the opening question, and by the end of Tonya Harding's first Olympic news conference, the national figure skating association was disputing her on yet another point.

Diane Rawlinson, Harding's coach, said Friday that Harding was asked not to come to the opening ceremony of the Lillehammer Games because of the controversy surrounding her since she was implicated in the attack on rival Nancy Kerrigan.

But officials of the U.S. Figure Skating Association said that was not the case and that Harding could have participated in the ceremony, as she said she wanted to do, after winning the national championship last month.

It was Harding's first news conference since winning the national championships, and the media had plenty of questions. The first to Harding in the 37-minute session was: "You lied to us this year about your smoking, your lawyers said you weren't truthful to the FBI in all your questions and you failed two of three polygraph tests. Why should we believe anything you say about being innocent in the Nancy Kerrigan incident?"

Rawlinson took the question and said, "I think we're here to talk about Tonya's skating."

Harding said, "I agree with my coach."

Harding admitted feeling embarrassed about being seen topless in recent days, thanks to a home video shown on "A Current Affair" and photos taken from the tape and published in the London daily tabloid The Sun.

"I am very upset and ashamed," she said of her on-camera striptease. "I'm embarrassed. The one thing I have to say is, 'If everyone could put themselves in my position, how would you feel?' "

She said an ovarian cyst – which last fall she said could "explode" – isn't bothering her.

She also:

- Denied "profiting off a horrible situation," but confirmed signing an interview deal with "Inside Edition." Profits will go toward her legal fees and a fund for the Special Olympics, she said.
- Said her brief encounter with Kerrigan was "very positive. We said hello. It's kind of a private thing."
- Said God and the thousands of people who watched her practice at Clackamas Town Center Mall in Oregon have helped her withstand the pressure of being in the Olympic spotlight.
- "I'm thankful God has helped me take care of half of my problems," she said, "and he'll hold them until I'm done. And when everything's done, then I can sit down and cry."

The interview session – at which she declined to answer some questions, was pre-empted on others by Rawlinson and consulted at length with a figure- skating press aide on still others – followed an afternoon practice that Harding ended halfway through in disgust.

After missing several jumps and growing increasingly frustrated, she skated to Rawlinson and complained, as she pounded the rail with karate chops, "I can't do it. I can't do it."

"I wasn't skating as good as I'd like to," she said.

She said the sore right ankle that bothered her Thursday after a fall on a triple Axel in practice is a chronic, though not serious, problem.

The disagreement over Harding's participation in the opening ceremony arose when "we were asked not to come until we did," Rawlinson said.

"The team leader and I spoke about it," Rawlinson said, "and it was suggested that we not come until later because of all the controversy."

Skating association spokeswoman Kristin Matta said team officials had discussed whether Harding should attend the ceremony but "nothing was forced at all. It was a mutual agreement as to when she came, absolutely. All of our team members were asked when they would like to come – what dates they'd like to come – and they were accommodated."

Harding said she agreed to postpone her arrival because she wanted "what's best for my team. And if it means coming in a little bit later, then that's fine because I want what's best for my team and my teammates."

As it was, Harding's solo flight to Norway drew a substantial media escort that grew with her landing in Oslo, arrival in Hamar and practices with Kerrigan.

"We did what we needed to do," Harding said. "We did what we needed to do for the other athletes before the Olympics and (for them) to have time to do their training and to focus on what they needed to do, and we thought coming late would accomplish that."

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