

# Vaulting into History

One of the most memorable moments of the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta – before the Centennial Park bombing, before the bowed heads and the silent moments, before the Olympic flag billowing at half-mast – was the heroic story of Kerri Strug.

People who watched in the stands and on television were stunned when a 4-foot-8-inch, 18-year-old woman charged down a runway, vaulted through the air and landed on a leg so badly sprained that it could hold her upright for only a second. But it was just long enough to ensure the first gold medal ever won by a United States women's gymnastics team.

A few minutes later, while a crowd of 32,000 screamed and pounded each other on the back, six small, red-white-and-blue Olympians marched out for their medals, trailed by their wounded teammate, Kerri Strug, who was carried in the arms of her coach.

For Mark Starr, a writer for *Newsweek*, it was an athletic feat inscribed for the ages. It had been a closely fought match all afternoon, with the Americans surging ahead on the uneven bars, then maintaining their lead along the perilous balance beam, and through their spectacular floor routines. All they needed were solid performances on the vault, and they would win.

The first four women flipped safely. The fifth tried twice and both times failed. Strug was the last. On her first try, she sprawled ingloriously on the mat.

The rabid, pro-USA crowd quieted down. Few noticed that Strug, who had rolled over on her ankle and felt a snap, had stood up staring at her leg in dismay. "Shake it off," urged her teammates as she hobbled back down the runway.

"I don't think they understood there was something wrong," she said afterward. "I felt the gold medal was slipping away." When her coach, Bela Karolyi, leaned over the boards to bellow instructions, Strug cried out that she was in pain. Then she asked him, "Do I have to do the second vault?"

Karolyi, uncertain that the United States was safely ahead, shrugged. "I encouraged her," he said later, "but she was the one who had to answer that."

Strug went back onto the runway. She whispered a little prayer, asking "God to help me out somehow." And then she vaulted into history.



(more)

It is that kind of story that makes your heart beat a little faster when you see someone take on a challenge against great odds and be successful. It helps us believe that there is always hope, even in the darkest hour.

That, of course, is the story of Jesus. All of the might of the Roman Empire was arrayed against Him. Nails were driven into His hands and feet. A sword pierced His side. He was buried in a borrowed grave. But just when His foes thought they had triumphed over His kingdom of love and compassion, a stone mysteriously moved in front of a grave and Jesus arose from the dead.

It is a story that encourages us to go on when life is cruel and adversaries are numerous. It is a story that reminds us that love is stronger than hate, life is stronger than death, right is stronger than wrong.

*And calling the crowd to Him with His disciples, He said to them, "If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it (Mark 8:34-35 ESV).*

– Beecher Hunter