

KRISTI YAMAGUCHI

Going for the Gold on Ice

Kristi Yamaguchi was born in 1971 with one foot turned severely inward. As a small child, she had to wear a special brace at night that was often painful. The brace, along with corrective shoes and physical therapy, helped her learn to walk properly, but no one expected she would ever be able to excel in any kind of athletics.

In 1976 she watched the Winter Olympics on television, entranced by Dorothy Hamill. The child dreamed of being able to skate as beautifully. Kristi's fascination with ice skating grew as she watched ice shows and TV programs featuring Dorothy Hamill and other spectacular skaters. She dreamed that some day she might win a gold medal of her own. When Kristi was six years old, her mother let her start learning to ice skate, thinking that it might help strengthen her leg and foot muscles. She began taking group lessons, learning to be especially careful to warm up her muscles before trying anything strenuous. When she skated, it seemed that something blossomed inside. Before long she mastered the basics and begged for more challenge.

Kristi's parents were impressed with her commitment. They arranged for private lessons with a coach named Christy Kjarsgaard. The new coach was impressed with Kristi's natural ability. She could hardly keep up with Kristi's eagerness to learn new techniques. Kristi was only seven when she entered her first competition.

Her father and mother wanted Kristi to have a normal childhood. She went to school with her friends. She did chores at home. The Yamaguchis provided a stable home for Kristi while they encouraged her to follow her dream.

Meanwhile Kristi kept practicing and joined the U.S. Figure Skating Association, which organized competitions at several levels. She was determined to work through the levels so some day she could qualify for the Olympics. When she was nine, she won fifth place in her first USFSA event.

When she was eleven, Kristi met a 13-year-old boy named Rudi Galindo. He was looking for a partner for pairs figure skating. Kristi was an ideal partner, small for her age but brilliantly well coordinated. They began to work with a coach.

By 1985, when Kristi was fourteen, she and Rudi competed in the regional novice division and qualified for the National Championships in Kansas City. She and Rudi also competed as a pair in the junior division. Kristi just missed a bronze medal in the pairs event. By then, Kristi's parents were willing to let her compete with a tutor so she could practice and go to competitions. She and Rudi were invited to the World Junior Championships in Yugoslavia, where they again placed fifth.

In 1986, Kristi and Rudi became the junior pairs champions at the National Championships in New York. By 1987 they were competing in the senior division—the Olympic qualifying level.

Kristi began to feel isolated from her friends and started going to regular school again. She would get up at 4:00 A.M. and be at the skating rink by 5:00, practicing her singles routines first and pairs routines with Rudi later. At 10:00 she would change and go to school. After school she would go home, do her homework, eat dinner, and go to bed at 7:30.

In the 1989 Nationals, Kristi and Rudi took the gold medal. They were on their way to the World Championships as a pair. The next day, with a spectacular routine, Kristi won a silver medal in women's singles, qualifying her for the World Championships. Their elation was mixed with deep sadness when their pairs coach, Jim Hulick, told them that he had been diagnosed with cancer. Jim's condition didn't keep him from traveling with them to their first World Championships, though. Kristi and Rudi placed fifth in the pairs competition and Kristi placed sixth in singles.

In 1989, Kristi moved to Canada to live with Christy and her husband. She continued her training. The death of pairs coach Jim Hulick and the stress of trying to compete in both pairs and single events convinced Kristi that she needed to concentrate on her singles technique. She and Rudi announced their retirement as a team, and Rudi went on to compete in men's singles.

It was the right decision. Kristi won the 1991 World Championship in Munich. In the 1991 Nationals, Kristi took first again. She would represent the United States in the 1992 Winter Olympics.

Kristi thought about the long journey she had traveled from the leg brace and the corrective shoes. All those 4:00 mornings had paid off. Her parents' time, effort, and support had made her success possible. She remembered her grandfather, a fourth-generation Japanese American, who had been so proud of her representing the United States. Her parents and their families, along with thousands of other Japanese Americans, had been held in American prison camps during World War II. Kristi's parents hadn't let that injustice make them feel bitter. They had worked and studied hard, and made a good life for themselves and their family. And they had made it possible for Kristi to go for the gold, to use her inborn talent for the pride of all Americans!

Kristi was the first to perform on that crucial night. Just before she went on, Dorothy Hamill came to see her backstage, gave her a hug, and wished her good luck. Kristi began her performance on the ice in front of more than 10,000 people. She was taken aback when she fell out of a triple jump. But she quickly recovered, smiling, she finished with the crowd roaring their approval. With butterflies in her stomach, Kristi watched the other contestants. At the end, she could hardly believe her eyes as she looked at the scoreboard. She had won!

After the Olympics, Kristi became a professional skater with the "Stars on Ice" show. She has also served as the official spokesperson for the American Lung Association. Having lost her grandfather to lung cancer, she wants to encourage young people to take care of their health and stay away from tobacco. Her advice to young people in general is, "If you have a dream like I had, put the work into it. Dedicate yourself to achieving your goal."

© Marilyn Nikimaa Patterson 1996

CHARLES DARWIN

Naturalist by Nature

Young Charles Darwin hated school, but he loved rocks, bugs, birds and animals. In the early 1800's, schools in England taught Latin, Greek, ancient history, and mathematics, but no science. Charles was poor at everything. His teachers and his father thought he was below average in intelligence.

Charles assumed that they were right. He was modest and easygoing, the younger son of a wealthy physician. His mother had died when he was only eight years old. As a youngster, Charles had no great ambition to prove his worth or to make a difference in the world. He had no idea that his passion for learning about nature would make him world famous and revolutionize nineteenth-century science.

From the time he was a small boy, Charles loved to take long walks and to collect insects, shells, rocks, plants, butterflies, and birds' eggs. He would label each specimen carefully and mount it in a display case. In dealing with nature, the scientific habits of neatness and accuracy came naturally to him.

When Charles was 16, his father sent him away to study medicine along with his older brother at Edinburgh University. Charles hated the dull lectures and was nauseated when he had to watch a child undergo surgery without any anesthetic. He was happy, though, to find that there were scientific societies in Edinburgh where he could listen to reports on the latest findings from all over the world. Charles found a taxidermist to teach him how to stuff birds. He also made friends with nearby oyster fishermen who taught him to cast fishing nets so he could collect specimens of sea life.

After two years in Edinburgh, Charles's father decided that medicine was not the field for him. He sent Charles to Cambridge University to study theology but Charles was more interested in collecting beetles. He thought he was just enjoying an interesting hobby, but events were drawing him toward his destiny.

A botany professor called John Stevens Henslow tried hard to persuade Charles to become a serious scientist. Charles could not imagine becoming serious about anything until he was suddenly hooked by the lure of adventure. He read a book by the great scientific explorer Alexander von Humboldt, about his explorations in the Canary Islands and the Americas, and his discoveries of unknown plants and animals. Charles began to study Spanish and to look for a way to travel to the tropical Canary Islands. He began learning about geology, studying the earth's history by examining its rocks and surfaces.