

Coach Jim Hrbek and 2021 Judo Olympian Nina Cutro-Kelly

by Kathy Kendrick, RFSPE



Nina Cutro-Kelly at the 2021 Olympics Games

Traditionally, just a mention of the Olympic Games produces thoughts of amazing athletes and the inspirational background stories they bring to the great competition. While the 2021 Olympic Games held true to that tradition, ISPE had a reason to be especially inspired this year: Nina Cutro-Kelly, a judo student of Thousander Jim Hrbek, competed for the USA as an Olympian in the sport of women's judo. Details about Cutro-Kelly's incredible Olympic journey and the role that Coach Hrbek played can be found in the press release that follows, which was published before Cutro-Kelly's July 31, 2021, Olympic competition.

Nina Cutro-Kelly named to Olympic Team by Carrie Chandler (San Antonio, TX)

A lifelong dream turned into reality for Nina Cutro-Kelly as she was named to the 2021 Olympic Team. Cutro-Kelly makes history by becoming the oldest Olympian—at age 36—to ever compete for the USA in the sport of judo. Her story becomes an instant classic as

it is a true testament to anyone who has ever had a dream and never given up on it.

Judo is the second most-practiced sport in the world after soccer and was founded in Japan in 1882 by Dr. Jigoro Kano. Involving a series of elaborate throws, holds, arm bars, and chokes, the sport teaches athletes to use their opponents' weight and momentum against them.

Cutro-Kelly has been training with her longtime coach, Jim Hrbek, since 1999, when she was just 14 years old. "My dad took judo when he was a kid, and he wanted to get back into it," Cutro-Kelly recalled. "At that time, I had recently been kicked out of ballet, Little League, and art class, so my parents wanted me to do a more physical sport." Cutro-Kelly started attending a local judo club once a week and immediately fell in love with it. "I liked judo because I liked fighting and not getting in trouble for it."

A competitor in the women's heavyweight (+78 kg) division, just this past May, Cutro-Kelly won her 10th national title in Reno, Nevada, setting a new US record. At 12 years old, she was 5'9" tall and weighed 160 lbs. When she was 14 years old, she entered a local tournament and lost to a girl weighing just 110 lbs. That girl's coach? 1992 Head Women's Olympic Coach Jim Hrbek.

Cutro-Kelly reported, "After I lost to a much smaller girl, I learned more about Jim (affectionately referred to as 'Jim-Coach') and found out he was one of the best coaches in the country and had coached at the Olympic Games." Hrbek then took Cutro-Kelly under his wing and began laying the foundation that led to her being ranked #1 in the United States for over a decade.

A quirky fellow who is quick to smile and crack a joke, Hrbek also has a genius (160) IQ and was once famously turned down from being on *Jeopardy!* because he got all of the answers right during tryouts, and the lack of competitiveness between him and the other contestants didn't make for "good TV."

Perhaps judo, which some consider to be a game of "human chess," was the perfect sport for Hrbek's analytic mind. He became a stalwart for USA Judo and went on to run the Junior Development Program for almost 15 years.

During his tenure as head of Junior Development, Hrbek coordinated the entire judo program for the United States, which sent dozens of US teams to national and international competitions with contingents of more than 50 people. In the three Olympic Games prior to 2021, the US won five medals in the sport of judo, and each of the athletes who earned a medal came through Hrbek's Junior Development Program for USA Judo. In 2011, Hrbek won the title of United States Olympic Committee Developmental Coach of



Jim Hrbek and Nina Cutro-Kelly at the 2018 Panamerican Judo Championship when Cutro-Kelly won the Bronze Medal

the Year, an award for which the candidate pool includes coaches across *all* sports under the Olympic umbrella. Hrbek's award marked the first time a judo coach had won the honor.

When speaking about Cutro-Kelly becoming his latest Olympian, Hrbek stated, "Nina is a classic example of 'Constancy trumps the weaker sister, Consistency.' You always need to believe; you always need to try; you always need to work to stay on course to where you want to be; and you must never give up."

Under the guidance of Hrbek, Cutro-Kelly started cross-training in sambo to seek out more opportunities to fight the world's best women heavyweights, many of whom compete concurrently in judo. Cutro-Kelly became the United States' most decorated



Jim Hrbek, Nina Cutro-Kelly, and Xuebin Li (former People's Republic of China women's coach)

female sambo athlete of all time—winning three World bronze medals and two Pan American titles—and she was twice the winner of the prestigious A. Kharlampiev Memorial Super World Cup.

Making the Olympic team in judo consisted of a three-year qualifying process in which athletes must earn points by winning medals and matches on the International Judo Federation's World Tour. Cutro-Kelly initially thought she had fallen just shy of making the Olympic team, but that all changed on Friday, July 2nd (2021), when she and Hrbek were told they were needed for an urgent conference call from USA Judo. On the phone was Ed Liddie, USA Judo's Director of High Performance, explaining that the International Judo Federation had notified USA Judo that, after the reallocation process of Olympic slots, Cutro-Kelly had qualified for the Olympic team.

During that week, Nina Cutro-Kelly's world was turned upside down, and she started

making national headlines when NBC Sports put out a press release on July 5th about her becoming the oldest US Olympic Judo athlete in history.

Cutro-Kelly responded, "I am overwhelmed by the amount of support and nice messages I've gotten over the past 48 hours. Thank you so much to everyone who has helped me over the years. It truly takes a village to make an Olympic team, and I wouldn't be here today without all the support I've received from coaches, teammates, friends, family, and supporters."

Adding to the incredible feat of her rise to success, Cutro-Kelly is hearing-impaired in both ears by over 50%. She stated, "I am technically deaf enough for the Deaflympics, a multisport event for deaf and hearing-impaired athletes. A big part of Jim's coaching has been that he is loud as hell when I am out there—to the point it sometimes seems he is right beside me on the mat."

Jim Hrbek, who relocated to San Antonio from upstate NY, has owned and operated Universal Judo on Naco Perrin Boulevard with his wife, Barbara, since 2006. The accomplishment of Cutro-Kelly, a student of Hrbek, is a huge motivational boost to several of Universal Judo's young up-and-comers, including both 21-year-old Mariah Holguin, who is currently ranked #1 in the nation on USA Judo's national ranking roster in the 57 kg division, and 22-year-old Katie Bernier, who is ranked #3 in the nation in the 70 kg division.

Because judo is such a niche sport, Cutro-Kelly has had to self-fund her Olympic endeavors during most of her time on the national team. She has worked three jobs and put in 70-hour work weeks to fund her world-tour events. She also has a master's degree in teaching English as a foreign language and applied linguistics. In addition, Cutro-Kelly



Nina Cutro-Kelly's Olympic backpatch

was one of four judo athletes to be awarded a “Dick’s Sporting Goods Contender” job, which is a joint effort between the United States Olympic Committee and Dick’s Sporting Goods to provide a flexible work schedule for Olympic hopefuls, allowing them to travel and train while ensuring they still have a job waiting for them when they return home. Cutro-Kelly also bartends and teaches judo and sambo clinics around the country.

Nina Cutro-Kelly says one of the fun parts of being an older elite athlete is finding unique ways to challenge her fitness level, including taking up pole fitness classes. “Outside of Judo,” Cutro-Kelly said, “pole is literally the hardest workout I’ve ever done. As a women’s heavyweight, I never thought I would be able to climb a pole, much less hang upside-down, hang from one leg, and perform gymnastics maneuvers!”

Cutro-Kelly will be competing on July 30, 2021, in Tokyo and will have the support of Universal Judo Club and the entire nation on her side.

After the 2021 Olympic Games concluded, Thousander Jim Hrbek provided a follow-up report for our *Telicom* readers:

In the final analysis, it turned out that, at 36 years old, Nina Cutro-Kelly became the

oldest USA Judo athlete in Olympic history. She was one of only four Americans who qualified for the Olympics in the sport of judo this time around. While she did not progress past the first round of competition, the reality of a first-round Olympic loss is that 50% of athletes lose in the first round; and by the end of the second round, 75% are already eliminated. There is not much forgiveness at rarefied sporting levels, and the following post-Olympic Games statement shared by Nina reveals her inspiring and healthy perspective:

Today at the 2021 Olympics, I drew a 2016 Olympic medalist in the first round. I did video work, game-planned, and caught a nice foot-sweep. However, my opponent was prepared with some impressive mat-work skills and was able to set up a very fast armbar before we even hit the mat. I am disappointed in my result, but my long career as both an athlete and a teacher has taught me that it’s best to take lessons from losses/mistakes rather than to beat oneself up. Therefore, I can only say, “Well done,” to my opponent and focus on the future. First, thank you to everyone who has supported me: coaches, teammates, family, friends, training partners, and even people I’ve never met before! Your support helped me to go into this fight aggressively and without being intimidated. Moving forward, I definitely see a future for myself in coaching and am still reflecting on my future as an athlete in judo and sambo. Special thanks to everyone at my home club, Universal Judo (Hrbek Judo), as well as Justin Flores for coaching me. Additional thanks to John Jayne and L. A. Smith for being helpful training partners—I hope to see both of you competing in Paris 2024!

Congratulations, Nina Cutro-Kelly, on your impressive and inspirational career in the sports of judo and sambo. And thank you, Thousander Jim Hrbek, for sharing this amazing story with *Telicom*. Ω