

Tonya Harding (1970-)

By Michael Orr

Tonya Harding was a United States champion figure skater who competed in the 1992 and 1994 Winter Olympics. She was the first American woman to land a triple axel—a spinning jump with three-and-a-half rotations—in competition. That accomplishment led to Harding's first-place finish at the 1991 U.S. Nationals and thrust her into the national spotlight with contemporaries Kristi Yamaguchi and Nancy Kerrigan.

Harding, who was born in Portland in 1970, grew up in both Multnomah and Clackamas Counties. She learned to skate at Lloyd Center Mall and later trained at Clackamas Town Center Mall. She dropped out of high school at fifteen to focus on figure skating. By 1986, she had finished sixth at the U.S. Nationals and was a rising star in the world of figure skating. After competing at a high level in national and world championships throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, Harding finished fourth in the 1992 Winter Olympics in Albertville, France.

In competitions ahead of the 1994 Winter Olympics in Lillehammer, Norway, Harding developed a rivalry with Kerrigan, an Olympic bronze medalist and the 1993 U.S. national champion. Harding's husband, Jeff Gillooly (now known as Jeff Stone), hired friends Shawn Eckhardt, Shane Stant, and Derrick Smith, all from the Portland area, to attack Kerrigan. At the U.S. Nationals in Detroit in January 1994, Stant approached Kerrigan and clubbed her in the right knee, injuring her enough to prevent her from competing. Harding and her husband had not yet been connected to the attack by the end of the competition, and both skaters made the U.S. Olympic team.

At the Olympic games in Lillehammer, Harding finished eighth in the figure skating competition after the lace of her skate broke and she performed poorly. She returned home to face prosecution charges, based on investigations initiated by federal authorities and the U.S. Olympic Committee before the games, which identified Harding and Gillooly as possible conspirators. Although Harding was never convicted for her alleged role in the attack, she did plead guilty to conspiring to hinder prosecution. She was banned from competition and stripped of her 1994 national title. The four men involved in the attack were all found guilty and imprisoned.

After 1994, a series of public events kept her name in the news, including an unsuccessful rock concert in 1995 and several arrests in the early 2000s. Harding was a professional boxer in 2003-2004 after first appearing in a televised celebrity match against Paula Jones in 2002.

In 2014, an ESPN documentary *The Price of Gold* chronicled Harding's life with a focus specifically on the events surrounding the 1994 attack on Kerrigan. The movie *I, Tonya*, released in 2017, also tells a story of her life. Harding divorced Gillooly in 1993, married her second husband in 1995-1996, and is currently living in Vancouver, Washington, with her third husband and their son.

Sources

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