

Peter Vidmar

AN INTERVIEW WITH
PETER VIDMAR

BY KAREN OWOC

Double Gold Medalist from the 1984 Olympic Games shares his unique winning gymnastics training regime

How were you introduced to gymnastics?

I was first introduced to gymnastics by my father. He was part of the 'Muscle Beach' era where the beach had a sand box set up with gymnastic, rope climbing, and acrobatic bars. As the youngest of six boys, I used to watch gymnastics with my dad. I started the sport when I was 11 years old when my parents read Makoto Sakamoto's ad in the local newspaper about an experimental gymnastics program. Makoto had competed for USC and was USA's best gymnast for many years in the 1960's and '70's. Makoto had just finished the '72 Olympics in Munich and retired from competition at the time I started gymnastics with him.

Were you a high school gymnast?

I trained in a private Los Angeles club under Makoto. In fact, I seldom competed – only once or twice a year. Limited exposure to competition as a junior was a part of the program. This training regime focused more on skill development as opposed to routines. Mako's focus was on doing well in international competition. The 1979 World Championships was only the 11th competition in my life. The year before at the '78 U.S. Nationals, very few people knew who I was when I made the national team and I was a junior in high school at the time.

Who was your mentor and why?

Mako – he is a second father to me. He is very close to my family and dad (who is now 86) and we continue to see each other from time to time. I always admired Mako because he never compromised, trained hard, and believed in always doing what you say you're going to do.

Sometimes training days are very difficult and competition can be disappointing. What advice would you give a young gymnast today?

It's important to always keep a vision of what you want down the road, such as, the Olympic Games. When I was in training, I used to think about what behavior will help me or hurt me – and usually ended up staying at practice. In other words, "Let your conscience be your guide." My wife knew that my workout was



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over when it was over. Sometimes though, the better choice is to go home when you're tired and hurt.

The key to getting through the tough spots is to have a plan and to stick to it. I kept a detailed training journal. It mapped out an organized schedule that included periodization (progressive cycling of various parts of my training over a specific period of time), so I could peak perfectly for each competition. On some days, I felt really good and wanted to train hard, but training hard was not in the plan as that day was scheduled to be a light day. By having a plan, I knew what skills I needed to do well as much as how and when to train to reach my goals.



Unlike tennis or golf, gymnastics is not a sport you can continue to compete in throughout your lifetime or even participate in recreationally. How difficult was it to leave the sport knowing you would never compete in it again and then transition from being a high-profile Olympic gymnast?

I didn't think I could improve at the same rate as my other international competitors and decided to end on a high note. I stopped gymnastics after the 1984 Olympics. I had wanted a life and married before the Olympic Games. My family took over and life moved on. It was difficult to watch gymnastics at first as I'd sit and say, "I can do that." But, I transitioned from that point to motivational speaking.

Actually, gymnasts have a much longer life in the sport than when I was in it. It's not uncommon to see gymnasts at the international level in their mid- to late-20's. I was in gymnastics for 12 years – from when I was 11 until I was 23. And by the way, the only roommate I ever had throughout my gymnastics career until I got married was Tim [Daggett]! I told him I decided to move on to someone much better looking but in fact, I named my first son after Tim.

What made you decide to attend UCLA?

Makoto was my personal coach and he was hired as the Assistant Coach at UCLA in 1976.

What was your major in college?

I majored in economics. I wanted to become an investment banker working one day on Wall Street. However, speaking took over which was going to help put me through graduate school. Now I speak so I'll be able to put my own kids through graduate school!

As a member of the 1980 Olympic Team, what was that experience like during the U.S. boycott of the Olympic Games?

In 1979, the U.S. men won their first team medal in history at a World Championships competition, so we were Olympic hopefuls. I was tremendously disappointed, however, I was only a freshman in college then, and I knew I was going to continue in the sport. The boycott wasn't nearly as devastating for me as it was for those who knew that 1980 was their only shot at the Olympic Games. I feel badly for people like Ron Galimore, who was probably the best vaulter in the world in 1980 and was denied a chance at significant Olympic glory.

What gives you those "thrill of victory" moments now?

My children's successes! For example, my son, Stephen, is a wrestler and trained so hard last year. He ended up being one of 500 wrestlers who qualified to the CIF Wrestling Championships where the winner moves on and the loser goes home. Winning was critical. My son and his opponent were tied and in the last eight seconds, Stephen scored a take down and won the match! I was out of my mind! That was as good as an Olympic moment!

To go back to the '84 Olympics, winning the individual medals is an honor, but nothing comes close to the winning the Olympic team gold by far! I was able to train and compete with five extraordinary individuals and to win together as a team was an incredible moment.

PETER VIDMAR, as captain of the 1984 United States Olympic men's gymnastics team, led his teammates to a stunning upset victory over the defending World Champions, the People's Republic of China. The U.S. won America's first team gold medal and Peter went on to win the silver medal in the individual All-Around competition, and was the first American male gymnast to win an Olympic All-Around medal. He also captured the gold medal on the pommel horse with a perfect score of 10.0. Peter Vidmar has been inducted into the International Gymnastics Hall of Fame and the UCLA Athletic Hall of Fame.

