

A 'Break' – The Bad Kind – Leads USA Judo's Kyle Vashkulat to Olympics

By Ernest Pund, USA Judo Communications

Kyle Vashkulat has a vivid memory of the pivotal moment that put him on a path to the Olympics ... and no wonder.

He was 14 and fighting at a regional tournament hosted by his club, Liberty Bell Judo near Philadelphia. His opponent went for a leg pick, and Vashkulat reached back to break his fall and block the score. He broke his arm instead, suffering a spiral fracture to the humerus, the heavy bone in the upper arm. "It was like you'd take a stick and start twisting until it breaks completely apart," Vashkulat recalled.

What he doesn't remember so well is the pain, perhaps because it was so intense. "I was in shock," said Vashkulat. Nothing but skin and muscle held the pieces of his arm together.

So began months of recovery, a long respite from judo and a series of conversations with his parents about whether he wanted to return to the mats.

"My parents and the doctors were saying, 'you know, it's probably not a good idea for him to go back. We don't know how strong his arm is going to be,'" Vashkulat said. Then his parents asked him how much he really wanted to do judo. "And I said, 'Yeah! I really want to keep doing it ... I might make an Olympic team one day.'"

During his recovery, Vashkulat decided to move his training to Jason Morris' club in upstate New York. On one level, that made perfect sense: Morris was an Olympic silver medalist and the Morris kids always cleaned up at local tourneys, said Vashkulat.

Not so logical was the travel time. Morris' club was a four-hour drive from home in Langhorne, PA, and Vashkulat, by then, was still only 15. His parents resisted, but the conversations continued, and Vashkulat persisted, suggesting to his mom that she wouldn't want to be the one to prevent her son from pursuing his Olympic dream.

"She didn't want to be responsible for maybe me never reaching that goal. So I moved up here, and now I'm on the Olympic Team." Vashkulat chuckled. "So I guess it worked out pretty well." Initially, Vashkulat moved in with the Morris family until he graduated from high school.

It was eight months before Vashkulat was well enough to step on the mats again. The break to his arm was nasty, but oddly clean for a spiral fracture so it healed well and may be stronger now than it was before.

The decision to join Jason's club and return to judo on a path for the Olympics was "a process," Vashkkulat said, that began with that fateful break. "It was that moment that set everything into motion," he said. "And now I'm on the Olympic Team."

In a just a few days, the U.S. Olympic Judo Team will board the plane for London. Vashkulat described himself as "very excited, a little bit anxious to get there," but not nervous, which would include a facet of 'worry' and Vashkulat said he is not worried. He is ready. The whole team, he said, is ready.

He views himself as a 'dark horse' who could easily medal, in part because he is not a favorite to top the podium -- the other fighters won't see him coming.

"I know I'm not the favorite for gold," Vashkulat said. But what Olympic Head Coach Jimmy Pedro has told him is that whether you're the 'favorite' heading to the Olympics doesn't matter. The important thing is that on that Olympic day, you fight your very best.

Vashkulat sees it as an advantage that his division, 100 KG, is not really dominated by one fighter. Rather, a number could climb the podium on one or another day.

And, finally, he points to a stalwart collection of supporters who have fueled his journey and optimism: his parents, Anna Smilan and Andrei Khimitch, his coach Jason Morris and Olympic Coach Pedro, and his teammates and training partners. For all of their work and support, Vashkulat said, he would like to bring home a medal, "a gift from me to them."