

GUEST: CLARISSA CHUN

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Gearing up for that match, you would have thought I was crazy, 'cause I was hitting myself, pulling my hair. I was like, no one's gonna beat me up but myself. So, I just gotta go out there and compete and have fun doing it. I'm not gonna let her beat me up.

Wrestling is traditionally a man's sport, but a woman from Hawaii is breaking down barriers with international success in the sport of female wrestling. Olympic bronze medalist Clarissa Chun, next, on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

From a young age, Clarissa dreamed about competing in the Olympics, but not as a wrestler. Growing up on Oahu, Chun was a five - time national judo champion, and competed on her high school swim team. As fate would have it, women's wrestling became a sanctioned sport in Hawaii high school athletics in 1998. Drawing on her judo background, Clarissa tried out for the wrestling team at Roosevelt High School in Honolulu. It was a move that would alter the course of her life.

Really, it was my sophomore year, after swimming State tournament. I don't know; I always thought that I could do more in swimming. But at four - eleven, I was just, ah, okay, not getting to where --

You didn't have Michael Phelps sized feet or anything like that?

No, I didn't have his --

Flippers.

Yeah. So, I was like, oh, I love my swimming team. It was really hard for me to be -- I don't know, 'cause I'm competitive. I want to be better, I want to do more. And I had friends who did judo, and a lot of them were wrestlers, and come out for wrestling. And I was like, I'll try it. And it was a nice transition, judo to --

Judo helped you a lot, I imagine.

Yeah; it helped me a lot. I remember not really learning -- I learned takedowns and stuff, but never really used it. [CHUCKLE] 'Cause I would just throw people. Then when I started, it was against guys. It was the first --

There wasn't a girls wrestling team?

That was the first year they had girls wrestling, but it was just me and another girl, so we didn't make a full lineup. And they allowed females to wrestle guys during dual meets.

What was it like joining the boys wrestling team?

It was all right. It was nothing to me, really, 'cause I grew up doing judo.

It might have been new to the boys who wrestled.

Yeah; to the boys. To the boys, it was.

'Cause either way, I can see a certain mindset where they'd say, one, I don't want to beat a girl.

Yeah.

And two, I don't want to be beaten by a girl.

Yeah. So, at first, I think there was hesitation for some of the guys on the team. But I mean, we trained every day together; they get over it real fast. [CHUCKLE]

Is that right?

Yeah. Then it's like --

There wasn't some lingering, Oh, why does it have to be around her?

Yeah. No, it was like, I had a great team, so I can't complain. I can't say that I had much struggle there.

No resistance?

Yeah. My team would get a kick out of it if I'd win. [CHUCKLE] 'Cause it's like, yeah! [CHUCKLE] Poor guy and whatnot. And even still, I'll see some of my old teammates, and they're like, Oh, I bet those guys feel different now, like oh, it's not so bad losing to a Olympian now. [CHUCKLE]

Well, when you would face off with each other, did you do any psychological stuff?

No.

No? No trash talking?

No; I'm not good at stuff like that. I'm not.

It's all straight - on competition?

Yeah. I don't know if it comes from my judo background, or just my culture in general that it's just, I've always respected my opponents. I never trash talk.

Throughout her long journey from Oahu to Beijing and to London, Clarissa Chun's family has always been a huge influence in her life. She says that sibling rivalry with her older brother Shaun helped push her to compete in athletics at a young age.

Your mom and your dad have been so supportive of you. Do you get your competitive fire from them?

No; I don't know where I get it from. [CHUCKLE] They're so easygoing. I mean, yeah, my dad's super laid back, kinda softs - spoken kinda guy. And my mom's complete opposite, very talkative. Maybe I get it from her. I don't know. I

probably get it from both in some way or another. But yeah, she's the one that always goes and goes. She would be the one that would drop us off, pick us up and run all over the place.

Sort of a whatever it takes mindset, which is what an athlete has too.

Right; right.

You've mentioned your brother; three years older than you, Shaun.

M - hm.

What part has he played in your sports career? Because I believe athletically he did encourage you.

Oh, yeah. It didn't just start and stop at judo. Even growing up, when we were doing judo, he was bigger than me, he would always pick on me. We'd fight a lot.

Physically?

Physically and just play tricks on me. I don't know, just be the big prankster brother that he was. [CHUCKLE] But yeah, and still to this day. Well, before I made the decision, when I went off to college, he was like, Why not take the scholarship and try wrestling? 'Cause I was kind of at a crossroads. I'm like, Missouri? I don't know. And he said, If you don't like it, you can always come back and go judo or whatever route you want. And so he kinda helped guide me to that decision.

I heard somebody describe wrestling once. I think it was a collegiate level wrestler saying, It's the tactical manipulation of your opponent to take control, normally through pain.

[CHUCKLE]

Would you agree?

Yeah. When you're on the mat competing, it may sound dirty to say that you want to cause pain to your opponent. But at that level, I feel like ... I mean at that level, there's so many different styles of wrestlers. You can be the tactical and strategic and fluid, you can be the brute and abrasive. I remember, I think, one time I was in Russia, and I felt like I got punched in the eye during my match. And I'm like, Whoa, where did that come from? Like, how? And I was just thrown off for a second. And it just got me off focus like that. And any time you can -- not saying that I've ever punched anyone in the eye or anything during a match, but whatever her strategy was, it worked. In the wrestling world against females, it gets pretty intense sometimes.

You mean, when females oppose females?

Yeah. It almost seems worse, 'cause it becomes kind like, claws come out, hair gets pulled. Which is why I chop my hair off. And I even got bit my first round at the Olympics.

What do people know you as, do you think? I mean, everyone has ways of pigeonholing or just have some kind of short description.

Yeah.

What's yours?

Well, I've heard people say that I'm quick, I move fast. There's a move that they like.

What's it called?

I don't even know what it's called. Actually, I learned it off watching video from the Russians. The men Russian video. Yeah; so just playing around with that with a friend in practice.

What do you do?

I just attack with my legs, rather than my arms. 'Cause it's a little bit of judo in a sense, but it's not really a judo technique. Most takedowns, people would expect that I would shoot with my arms, not with my legs.

So where are you kicking them?

Behind their leg, and I'm wrapping around them, and then bringing my arm behind to secure it in a sense. So, yeah, it's a little funky, people would say.

So, you just mentioned the word funky. So, I've just got to ask you; it's probably really trivial and unimportant. But I know I've met women who've said they would never consider going into the man's sport of wrestling at the time.

Uh - huh.

Because of the stinky factor.

Yeah; it can get gross. [CHUCKLE] The mats; yeah, it gets funky. And the smell, in each country or region, they have a certain funk to themselves too. But I don't know, I guess it's just one of those -- it may bother us for a split second, like, Oh, gosh, that's horrible.

[CHUCKLE]

You know.

That's another of those gruesome things.

Yeah. One of those gruesome things.

Clarissa Chun attended Missouri Valley College on a wrestling scholarship. In 2002, women's wrestling became an official Olympic sport, and Chun set her sights on Olympic competition. In 2008, she qualified for Team USA and competed in the Olympic Games in Beijing.

I think a lot of folks in Hawaii know what it's like when you have to go from JV to Varsity in high school, and then you decide if you're gonna go collegiate, and a lot of people -- No, I'm out of there, I'm not gonna perform at that level. And then, of course, you went beyond that.

Yeah.

What's different about the Olympic level?

Oh ...

The highest level of the sport.

Oh, man. I think ... and in every aspect, there's discipline. In high school, you had to be disciplined about schoolwork along with practice. Being at practice and giving it your all in practice. And it carried over into college. And then at

the Olympic level, it was even more focused. This is what I do every day; I wake up, I train. Gotta make sure I eat right to fuel my body for practices, to recover from practices. And making sure I do all the right things, meaning sleeping at a decent time. When I was in high school, I was a terrible eater. I would eat all kinds of junk food; li hing mui, everything and anything. And I wasn't really the greatest at sleeping. I'd get home late and sleep late, and wake up early 'cause I live so far. I don't know; at the Olympic level, especially the year before, it just seems the energy becomes more intense 'cause everyone wants it. Everyone wants that spot. And for women's wrestling, there's only four.

Okay; you walked away from the 2008 Olympics empty - handed. You came in fifth.

I know; it was terrible.

But next time, you won the Bronze. Did you notice anything that allowed you intensify or do something different?

Differently; yeah. Well, in 2008, it was my first Olympics. But at the same time, when I lost in the semis, I couldn't get over it. That match was done but I still kept thinking about that match. I was emotionally ... I was on an emotional rollercoaster.

But you had lost before and gotten over losses.

Yeah.

But this was different?

'Cause it was the Olympics. In 2008, I was like, I should be going for Gold. I could have done -- I regretted not giving even a little bit more in my semifinals match. Then my coach told me, That's in the past, fight for third. You're still fighting for a medal. And so, I'd be upset that I wasn't in the Gold Medal match, I'd be sad for myself that I wasn't in the Gold match. I'd be angry and like, I'm gonna beat up the next person I gotta wrestle. So I was on a rollercoaster ride.

After her fifth - place finish in the 2008 Olympic Games, Clarissa Chun refocused her training beyond the physical aspects of wrestling. In 2012, she qualified again for Team USA and returned to the Olympic Games, this time in London.

And I remember before the 2012 Olympics, I sought out a sports psychologist consistently. I've worked with sports psychologists before in the past, but it was sporadic. It was more that I had to find my weaknesses, and then work on them. On and off the mat.

How do you do mental training? I want to learn some of that.

[CHUCKLE]

How do you do that?

Breathing techniques or concentration drills, or ... let's see, meditation.

And that's all about controlling your thoughts.

Yeah.

So that they're positive in terms of what you need to do.

M - hm; yup. Yup. So, it's just like visualization. A lot of that.

What do you visualize?

Getting my hand raised.

[CHUCKLE]

Hearing the National Anthem.

So, it's not this --

No. **[CHUCKLE]**

-- boom, takedown.

Well, sometimes.

It's more like, Hello, everyone.

Yeah. No, no, no.

Gold star winner.

No, no. **[CHUCKLE]** They just raise their hand.

[CHUCKLE]

Like brute style, right? Gladiator. **[CHUCKLE]** But sometimes it is technique.

Feeling the mat, your surroundings, hearing he cheers and the crowd. It's very detailed.

But you have to be able to do that when you need to.

Yeah. It's kinda like zoning in, being in the moment. In 2012, when I lost, I felt that well, I gotta keep winning to ... basically fight for my medal. My emotions were more focused. I contained emotions, as far as I didn't go on a rollercoaster ride.

How could you do it the next Olympics, when you hadn't done it the first one?

What did you learn in between?

Just ... letting it go, I guess. Letting that match go. I couldn't let go of it in 2008; and '12, I could. I just focused on the match in front of me. And preparing for my Bronze medal match, that one was tough, because it was the female that beat me in 2008 for the Bronze. So I was like, Oh ... I had to be mentally tough, and physically tough.

I thought I read something about how at some point during that match or the series of matches, you looked at the podium and you remembered you didn't get to go up there the last time.

Oh, yeah. It was my match against Poland, the girl who bit me. They were setting up the podium behind her. And I had to beat her in order to go into the medal round.

I see.

So, her back was towards the podium, and I was facing it. So, I kinda passed her. I already had lost the first period to her, and before the second period I kinda glimpsed past her and I was like don't let this slip through kinda thing. I want to get on there, and I'm so close. And that's when I did my painful front headlock throw on her, **[CHUCKLE]** and then pinned her. And I was like, Yay! Okay; next. **[CHUCKLE]**

I understand you had quite a crowd from Hawaii cheering for you.

Yeah.

How many people came?

I think thirty - eight. Yeah.

Who were they?

My family. My mom, dad, brother, my judo family. So, my old judo sensei and my judo teammates, my high school friends. Even some of my swimming friends that I swam with at Roosevelt came. My high school wrestling coach and his brother and his family came out. So, I was just very blessed to have such a good solid cheering crowd.

Absolutely.

M - hm; yeah.

Clarissa Chun has competed in a host of other national and international wrestling competitions beyond the Olympics. In 2012, she also won a gold medal at the Pan Am Games. Over the years, the sport has taken a physical toll on her, but don't expect this champion to tap out any time soon.

We sent a little questionnaire to you, just asking you for basic information before you came. And I was so amused by what you said about wrestling. You said it's a fun, if gruesome sport.

Yeah.

Gruesome?

Yeah. [CHUCKLE]

Are you talking about injuries?

Everything. Just training and injuries. I feel you're lucky if you can walk away injury - free. Meaning, just come out with no injuries at all. Luckier if you can walk away without any surgery to be done. And I know some friends who've walked away from the sport without having to get surgeries, but injuries are --

So, you've had at least three surgeries. Four?

Three on my shoulder, two on my knee.

Two on your knees.

One on my elbow. [CHUCKLE]

Were those breaks? What kind of injuries?

Two of them were cleanups, and the rest were tears.

Cleanup from what?

So, my elbow had bone spurs floating around. So, just go in, take those out. Knee was ACL, and then the cleanup was, just shaving of -- it would get frayed and get locked up, and they would just clean the bone up.

Same shoulder?

Yeah. Well, three shoulder surgeries. So, there's two on one side, and one on the other. And those were all tearing. Yeah.

You must be very good at handling pain.

[CHUCKLE]

Have you always had a high threshold for pain?

I think so. Yeah, I think so. That's the only time my family gets concerned. Each time I get a surgery, they're like, How much longer are you gonna do this? Are you sure you want to continue?

Athletes generally have short competitive careers. Now in her thirties, Clarissa Chun knows that the 2016 Olympic Games could be her last run at Olympic Gold.

And the third time around in the Olympics for you --

[CHUCKLE]

I wonder if that means you'll have further increase in control and awareness.

I hope so.

And ability to focus on just that.

Oh, yeah. I can't wait for that moment to click. It's like an everyday thing when I'm in training. Sports psychology is ... mental training is just as crucial as physical training. It's something that I practiced and trained every week.

Have you thought about what, after that?

Oh ... I have. I'm just not sure. I even thought about that prior to making this journey to 2016. 'Cause it was like, Oh, should I go into coaching? There's this program in New York called Beat the Streets for inner city New York kids. Teach them wrestling. And there's a wrestling club in New Jersey was well. I thought about that. I've had people come up to me and ask me if I want to be a coach or an assistant coach at a college program. I wish we had no expiration date on an athletic career.

[CHUCKLE]

I wish I could go 'til the end of time. But it's just one of those -- I'm at my career in my life where I am like, the older age of competing.

In your early thirties.

Yeah. And I've even known some who competed in their late thirties.

You mentioned mixed martial arts a bit ago.

M - hm.

Which is pretty much anything goes.

Yeah.

Would you ever feel comfortable doing something like that?

I don't know. I get offers, and I get asked a lot. 'Cause a lot of my friends who were wrestlers are doing it now. A lot of the top guys who compete in MMA were top level wrestlers, and they try to get me to go to that side. [CHUCKLE] I call it the dark side. No, I'm just joking. [CHUCKLE]

But it has some appeal to you?

Yeah.

Because you like to compete.

Yeah.

And that's anything goes.

Yeah.

You can bring out your whole arsenal.

Yeah. It's funny, 'cause when I talked to my mom and dad about it, and even my brother, but more my mom and dad, and the look on their face; they're like, Ooh. 'Cause that's a whole kind of different beast to them. 'Cause wrestling, there's still rules.

Exactly.

In MMA, there's rules, but a lot less rules. You're getting kicked in the face, hit in the face, punched, whatever. You're getting choked out, someone's trying to rip your arms off, or break your knees, your ankles, whatever. And I mean, when I think about it that way, I'm like, Whoo! [CHUCKLE]

Especially when you see them making big body, tan - ta - ra before.

Yeah.

And they say, I'm gonna kill that guy.

Yeah.

You think, Wow, you know, actually, they could.

Yeah. [CHUCKLE] They're beasts, right?

Is there anything you regret giving up or sacrificing for this Olympic dream?

No. I enjoy every moment of the Olympics, from making the team to even after making the team. Or even after the Olympics is done. After my first Olympic experience, I was like, What winter sport can I do? [CHUCKLE] Because I want to go to every single Olympics, and I absolutely love the spirit of it. I love how each country can come together. I love how each sport can come together within each country. I don't know, I just love everything about it.

Women's freestyle wrestling Olympic Bronze Medalist Clarissa Chun recently signed with a new coach in the hopes of expanding her wrestling repertoire. When we talked with her, she was preparing to return to the U.S. mainland to begin another round of training. Expect to see Clarissa Chun go for the Gold in the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Mahalo to Clarissa Chun for sharing her story with us, and mahalo to you for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou.

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I'm looking forward to the six o'clock morning practices sometimes. It's just I'm ready for that routine, I'm ready to get back in shape and start doing what I love. I mean, I'm enjoying my time at home, but it's just each day goes by, I think, How can I better myself for 2016?

