

Mary Lou Retton

The onetime Olympic golden girl-turned-mother of four passes the torch to Carly Patterson

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By Anne Lang



Mary Lou Retton and Carly Patterson

Before Carly Patterson, there was Mary Lou Retton – the previous American to win the all-around title in women's Olympic gymnastics at the 1984 Games in Los Angeles. The gold medalist, 36, is now the mother of four daughters, ages 2 to 9 (who are all immersed in gymnastics at varying levels) and the wife of financial analyst Shannon Kelley, to whom she's been married for nearly 14 years. Retton talked to PEOPLE about passing the torch to Patterson and giving advice to the 16-year-old Olympic golden girl.

What were your feelings when you learned that Carly Patterson was the new Olympic all-around champion?

As you know, the events are tape-delayed, so the actual competition was at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon. I was glued to my computer, and a friend of mine who's high up in the USA Gymnastics Federation text-messaged me from the arena in Athens. After the fourth rotation, which was floor exercise, his message said: "Rotation Four ... Patterson ... gold!!" I just screamed! I was so, so excited for Carly. I was going "Woooooo!" because I'm a big "woo"-er. (Laughs)

You called Carly shortly after she won. What did you say to her?

I could hear that it was pure frenzy in the background. I told Carly that I was so proud of her, that I knew she could do it, and that I'd always believed in her. I also told her to have fun and to enjoy every minute of this. Then I suggested that she keep my phone numbers handy because there's only one other person in the whole world who knows what she's feeling and what she's going through right now – and that's me. I said I'd be there for her, to lend some advice if she needed it.

And what did Carly say to you?

Well, the cutest thing that I remember – and something that reminded me that she is, after all, a 16-year-old – is after I said: "Carly, I've had this crown shined and polished, ready to hand to another American, for 20 years! And now that crown is yours, Carly, because you're the Olympic champion." Carly kind of paused for a second, and then she said: "I get a crown too?" I laughed and said: "No, Carly, that's just a metaphor."

What qualities, do you feel, make Carly stand out from other gymnasts?

I think she's got the whole package. She's a tough gymnast, and she really has no weak event. She did have a little bit of a shaky start in those first two days of competition, but the format allows you to start clean each day, and I knew she was due. She's the type of gymnast similar to me in that when you make a mistake, it doesn't bring you down, it just motivates you not to do it again. Carly's just a good kid. She comes from a good family, and dreams happen when you work hard and make sacrifices.

Next up for Carly is the media whirlwind. Any advice for her?

She should surround herself with a good team – meaning coaches, managers, agents and so forth. She probably already has that team in place, as many promising Olympians do before they even get to the Games. But the most important thing is to stay grounded and to not have a bunch of "yes" people around you. It can be completely frightening, elating and overwhelming, all at the same time. But being just 16, as I was, makes it more of a fun time than anything. Being young works to your advantage because I was on cloud nine for years afterward. Carly's still pretty secluded over there in Athens, but when she comes back home to the States, it's really going to hit her.