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How former NRL coaches earn a quid



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Skater Katia Alexandrovskaya and (inset) with skating partner Harley Windsor.



SPECIAL INVESTIGATION

Booze, blackouts, burnout

At 15, Russian skater Katia Alexandrovskaya was recruited to help Australia win Olympic gold. Last month she was found dead. This is the confronting story of a world system that treats athletes as "disposable".

JESS HALLORAN and JULIAN LINDEN
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EXCLUSIVE: Deputy Premier seeks help after tough year

BUSTING MY DEMONS

MIRANDA WOOD

HE'S known for speaking his mind, but NSW Deputy Premier John Barilaro has opened up about his own personal battle. After a tough year which included the death of his dad, Bara has revealed he has sought help to confront his "demons".
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BONUS RARE LITTLE TREEHOUSE BOOK WITH TODAY'S PAPER

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SATURDAY, AUGUST 22, 2020

AUSTRALIA'S BEST WEEKEND READ

Saturday **Xtra**



Picture: Credit

FALL INTO DESPAIR

THE SHORT LIFE & HEARTBREAKING DEATH OF WINTER OLYMPIAN **KATIA ALEXANDROVSKAYA**



JOHN BARILARO

Year I faced my demons
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Aid workers call on Australia
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TRAGIC TOLL OF

Katia Alexandrovskaya was just 16 when she came to Australia as an Olympic ice skating star of the future. By 20 she was dead. **Jessica Halloran** and **Julian Linden** trace her heartbreaking fall into despair

Katia Alexandrovskaya barely uttered a word to Harley Windsor on the day they met at an icerink in Moscow. She didn't speak English and he didn't speak Russian, but that wasn't the reason.

Her head was still aching from drinking herself into a blackout with vodka the day before; a day she would later confide to a friend was the "worst day of her life". The vodka was meant to be a gift for her figure skating coach but, as Katia would explain years later, grief-stricken, she drank most of it to mark the first anniversary of her father's death.

She was 15, and at the start of what should have been an adventure: she was about to move, without her mother, to Australia to become an Olympic athlete, the partner of the first Indigenous Australian winter Olympian. She was fast-tracked for citizenship under a special program designed to help Australia recruit sportspeople to boost our medal hopes.

Last month, Katia was found dead on a Moscow pavement outside the apartment building where she lived with her mother on the sixth floor. She was 20. The note she left inside the flat read simply: "I love".

Family, friends and colleagues interviewed for this joint investigation by The Australian and The Saturday and Sunday Telegraphs say her death has exposed serious weaknesses of accountability, funding and welfare in sport, including the management of concussion in the harshest and most decorative of pursuits: figure skating.

EVERYONE COULD HAVE DONE MORE

KATIA'S short life raises questions over the practice of trading athletes — often in their early teens — between countries; a system world athletics boss Sebastian Coe says in an interview (next page) is "human trafficking".

Friends also reveal she was sometimes bruised by criticism from her sharp-tongued former coach, Russian-born Sydney insider Andrei Pachin. A friend says Katia told her she sometimes avoided Pachin when his old-school hard style of coaching became too much for her.

Skating insiders describe Andre Pachin and wife Galina as classic Russian coaches: tough and blunt but passionate about helping skaters succeed.

After a sudden funding cut from the Olympic Winter Institute (OWI) on May 22, 2019, Katia barely had a cent to feed herself, was sleeping on couches, unable to afford rent in Sydney, and developing a serious drinking problem.

More than a month after she perished, there has still not been an official investigation into her death.

Katia's skating mentor Belinda Noonan, a former Australian figure-

skating champion and a mentor to the Russian teen, who describes herself as the young woman's "Australian mum", says: "We must do better for our young people. We have to care about the people more than we care about the result."

Australian skating champion Greg Merriman, another mentor and close friend who raised \$12,500 via GoFundMe for Katia's Russian funeral, says: "Everybody could have done more. It starts at the top." He says team officials "should have given more of a shit about the person, than what they were trying to get out of her."

"It's the culture of silence in sport. People sit silently, because if you do something you might stop that person from achieving something."

In early 2017 Katia suffered the first of what appear to be several seizures. It was a Monday afternoon at Macquarie Centre in northern Sydney.

A stranger who saw her faint called an ambulance but Katia brushed away the paramedics, saying she was OK.

Coach Galina Pachin, wife of Andrei Pachin, was not with Katia on this occasion and says in an interview she was concerned but accepted Katia's reassurances.

Also in early 2017, she crashed to the ice during training and was concussed, not for the first time, but Katia resisted any fuss.

That, say friends and family, was Katia's pattern: a dramatic fall, literal or figurative, a reassurance she was OK, and no official action being taken.

Katia's second apparent seizure, in 2017, occurred at a shopping centre in Castle Hill, after a long day of training.

"My head is spinning," Katia said, softly, to Galina Pachin. She blacked out and fell into Galina's arms.

"She had another seizure, that time I said, look we have to go to hospital," Galina said.

The doctors suspected it was dehydration and low potassium. Galina worried it was more than that. Katia had been found sleepwalking in their home. Something wasn't right.

It was Galina who called Katia's mother back in Russia and said her daughter needed a "good check up".

"There is something wrong with her, what if she collapses on the ice?"

THE BEST AND WORST DAYS OF HER LIFE

ICE had been Katia's playground since she was three years old. A natural athlete, her mother encouraged her into the sport.

Katia Alexandrovskaya and partner Harley Windsor clicked on the ice, eventually finishing 18th at the 2018 Winter Olympics (right). Pictures: Getty



“She was not only a baby, she was a broken baby”
FRIEND GREG MERRIMAN

Friends say she didn't always love skating but appeared to thrive as a pre-teen and young adolescent, even under the hard-driving Russian training methods.

She was a member of one of the best pairs skating squads in Russia in December 2015, when she was asked to audition before coaches Galina and Andrei Pachin and their young star Harley Windsor, in Moscow on a scouting trip.

"Katia says (the day before), that was the worst day of my life, not only did she drink this stuff — like kids go and do — but she didn't honour her coach," Noonan says. "But she also said 'And the next day, I met Harley and it was the best day of my life.'"

The pair bonded immediately. "It was like a lucky ticket," Galina Pachin says.

Merriman says Katia was too young and too vulnerable for the move.

"She was not only a baby," he says. "She was a broken baby."

LABOURING UNDER THE WEIGHT OF EXPECTATION

KATIA moved in January 2016, just after her 16th birthday, and lived with the Pachins in Sydney.

Galina Pachin says she and her husband Andrei Pachin warmly welcomed the quiet teen into their home. It was a spacious house, with a pool. There were barbecues and parties with their Russian friends

and "skating mums". "Of course she became like a part of our family," Galina says.

"We tried to make her comfortable, we tried to take her everywhere we go, like part of our family."

"She was not easy going person, she was very stubborn sometimes, but she was quite respectful, sometimes bubbly, she would go and swim in the pool and help me cook something, trying to be part of what we were doing. With us, she was OK. She was quite friendly, sometimes she would miss her home, but you know, you would never, ever see it in Katia, she would never whinge, never say, 'I miss my mum'. She would never say that. She tried to adjust to the condition and life where she was."

A MEDAL DREAM



A JOB AND FRIENDS BUT THE DRINKING GOT WORSE

KATIA could barely afford rent so was sleeping on lounges and at AirBnBs. She worked at the Canterbury Ice Rink, helping with children's parties and in the canteen.

"She loved that job," Noonan says. "She was so happy and was making so many friends for the first time."

Noonan says whenever Katia came to the city for training she would take the girl to a supermarket and buy her food.

"It's all very well and good to have funding that would cover competitions and coaches but you have to be able to afford to eat. You have to be able to afford to eat."

At Canterbury Ice Rink, the owners let the pair practise for free with loaned boots and blades on top of Katia's part-time job in the shop.

"In a minority sport, you are doing it on your own," Merriman says.

"When we heard from when she first arrived here, that her father had died, the mum wasn't in a great financial position, Harley wasn't in a great financial position ... is that situation ever actually going to work?"

"For their early coaching team, it was a focus on achievement. It was a million miles an hour trying to get there."

Katia's drinking got heavier. It is understood there were times when she was so inebriated, Windsor had to help her get on planes.

Merriman agreed to help them with their skating program, as a mentor, but he was worried about their wellbeing.

"It sort of scares me to say it, I had a tip-off from someone outside the ice rink, that she was potentially drinking a lot," Merriman says.

"We came to discover she was showing up to training, not in a great state. Trying to monitor that and then making sure she gets X, Y, Z done on the ice, but I just blocked her."

"There were days I would just report back (to their Russian coach Andrei Khekalov) they were getting the stuff done, but not getting her to do it because she wasn't in the right space to do it."

"There had been stories for a couple of years about her outside habits. Most people hadn't taken it seriously. Belinda stepped right in."

Noonan says she took Katia to a clinical psychologist who specialised in alcohol dependency — but then came another blow.

"Their funding was yanked in May 2019," Noonan says.

"That changed the ball game, Harley's sister Sharon (Windsor) was doing everything she could, I was doing everything I could, every time we could save money, get money ... it's just heartbreaking."

Windsor says: "If we wanted to see a physio, we couldn't. If we need a sauna to recover in, we didn't have the funding to do it. We were on a shoestring budget. We were surviving day to day."

No one foresaw what happened next. In late 2019, when the pair were training in Moscow, Katia called Windsor to say she couldn't come to the rink because she was feeling unwell.

Mentor Belinda Noonan (above) stepped in to help as Katia's drinking got worse. Picture: Sue Graham

Katia and Windsor with coach Andrei Pachin at the Winter Olympics and (right) the pair relax away from the rink. Pictures: Instagram

Within a year it was clear she had an uneasy professional relationship with Galina's husband Andrei, an old school Russian-born coach who, Merriman says, had a typically Russian firm style of speaking to skaters.

"The weight of expectation on the athletes was ridiculous really."

Galina says they were brought up in the firm, frank Russian style of coaching. "Katia from day one was brought up in the Russian style, the Russian system and because both of us, Andrei and myself are from the Russian system, coached by Russian coaches."

After winning the world junior title in Taipei in September 2016, Windsor and Katia suddenly had to take everything up a notch, training harder and doing

more complex routines. "We were learning new throws, and taking a lot of falls, she started to get a really bad haematoma on the side of her hip and she tore part of her hip," Windsor says.

"We were trying new lifts at the beginning of the season and she fell from one of the top of the lifts. It wasn't a very serious concussion. I did catch her on the way down."

A doctor ordered a few days of rest. It wasn't long after that Katia started taking tumbles away from the rink.

Galina Pachin says she spoke to a doctor at the AIS for advice but Katia's only interest was getting to the Olympics.

"I spoke to a sports doctor at the

AIS, we tried to work it out what is wrong with her," she says.

Galina was still concerned about Katia's health.

"I speak to the doctor again and they said; did they check her head? Maybe something is wrong there?" she says.

"When I was talking to the specialist and doctors, they were telling me that looks like symptoms of epilepsy."

In October 2017, Katia and Windsor qualified for the Olympics. Katia's Australian citizenship was rushed through and in February 2018 they were on the Olympic ice at PyeongChang, South Korea.

"It was like breathing," Windsor says. "We both knew what we had to do. There was not a doubt in our

mind. As soon as we switched, we were on autopilot."

They finished 18th and set their sights on 2022 before things started to unravel.

They split from the Pachins and Katia never spoke with them again. Noonan says Katia confided in her that she was afraid of Andrei's harsh words.

"I know from personal experience that Andrei shouts, he started calling me and shouting at me, I couldn't take it."

Katia and Windsor briefly relocated to Canada before returning for the national championships in December 2018 at the Macquarie Ice Rink, when Noonan noticed she had missed a series of calls.

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Katia Alexandrovskaya and skating partner Harley Windsor kept in touch by text after he returned to Australia. Picture: Instagram

TRAGIC TOLL OF KATIA'S MEDAL DREAM

From previous page

According to Windsor, Khekalo and Galina Pachin, Katia was admitted to a Moscow hospital in January and spent two weeks under observation and was diagnosed with epilepsy.

The doctors told her she couldn't skate again because it was too dangerous. "I don't want to stop skating," she protested. "I want to keep skating. It's not that bad."

Their new coach Andrei Khekalo, a Russian, thought she could continue, saying in an interview for this investigation: "I have repeatedly tried to convince them (that by stopping skating) that they made the wrong decision, but without results."

Windsor was not so sure after listening to the doctors so told Katia it was over and returned to Australia. He says he had planned to go straight back to Moscow but was prevented when COVID-19 struck.

"Of course she was upset, it's not something you give up easily," Windsor says. "I was stuck in Australia. Things started getting a bit worse with Katia."

The last time the pair spoke was around May 2020, "a month or so before everything happened".

"Everyone was struggling being in quarantine, it was a big struggle for everyone to go from being normal and then stuck at home doing nothing — especially athletes," Windsor says.

"We had been conditioned to doing so much for so many years and then the whole world has to stop?"

To try to lift her spirits, Noonan and Windsor's sisters sent flowers, which she placed near her world junior championships gold medal.

"Every four or five weeks I would send her a (WhatsApp) message with a 'Hi, how are you doing? Noonan says. "She would always write back with a 'good, how are you', every time ... I really should have picked up the phone and not done short texts, that's what I think."

On July 17, Katia was found dead

on the pavement outside the apartment building where she and her mother lived on the sixth floor. Police said they found a note, in Russian, which translated to "I love".

"At the absolute bottom of my soul, do I think she purposely went out that window? No, I don't and I still don't," Noonan says.

"Do I think there could have been an episode? I think that could have been because she was diagnosed with epilepsy in January. I have those Russian medical reports."

Windsor found out about Katia's death through a text message, sent by her uncle Fedor Boichenko.

"It's not real, it must be a mistake," he said to himself.

"He tried calling Katia's phone. "There was no answer," he says.

"Then it started to hit me, I was like 'holy shit, I don't even know what to think right now'. I was trying to call people to find out more information but no one knew any more information."

"She was willing to do anything, she was 15 when she decided to go to another country and skate for another country, determined, hardworking, a lot of people loved her."

Windsor, now training in France, is still searching for a pairs partner.

A SPORT IN MOURNING

PETER Lynch, president of Ice Skating Australia, says Katia's death has devastated the sport.

"They were literally the stars of figure skating in Australia and it's a terrible, terrible loss the whole sport has suffered," he says.

Merriman's assessment of Katia's legacy is blunt.

"A lot of people are like, 'Katia achieved a lot in her time'. I am like, 'yeah but she also threw herself out a window'." Merriman says.

"You know what would have been better than a junior gold medal and going to an Olympics? Living past 20 and being happy."

SPORT'S 'TRAFFIC' PROBLEM

The system which enabled Russian skater Katia Alexandrovskaya to move to Australia at 16 amounts to 'human trafficking' says fierce critic Sebastian Coe.

Jessica Halloran and Julian Linden report

An international athlete-trading scheme that enabled 15-year-old Russian ice skater Katia Alexandrovskaya to switch allegiances to Australia is effectively "human trafficking", says world athletics boss Sebastian Coe.

The young woman's death at 20 — apparently by suicide — has sparked international blame over who had responsibility for her welfare, and that of other young athletes who move countries under "transfer of allegiance" sporting protocols.

Katia began training under Australian coaches at 15 and was brought to Australia in January 2016, just after her 16th birthday, and fast-tracked for citizenship to assist the dream of Sydney skater Harley Windsor to become the first Indigenous winter Olympian.

At the time of her death in July, Katia was living in Russia, having been told by doctors she had epilepsy and should never skate again. Her partnership with Windsor was over as both battled health problems.

Australian Olympic Committee president John Coates says Katia's tragic death raised uncomfortable questions about who was ultimately responsible for her wellbeing when she returned to Russia, though no one can agree on who that was.

Ice Skating Australia president Peter Lynch says the Russian health authorities who diagnosed Katia's epilepsy left her "without a future" when they released her from hospital and told her to quit the sport.

"Perhaps if that had been treated in Australia it might not have been a door closed for her and we could have come up with other ways for her to still compete and manage the situation," Lynch says in an interview for this joint investigation between The Australian and the Saturday and Sunday Telegraphs.

"Unfortunately, they closed the door on her and then she could no longer compete, and that alone is the most heartbreaking thing."

Serious ethical issues have also emerged about the regulations that allowed Katia to leave her mother — her father having recently died — and move to



Katia and skating partner Harley Windsor on their way to the 2018 Winter Olympics. Picture: John Feder

the other side of the world.

Still mourning her father's sudden death, she was approached in 2015 with an offer to change countries after Australian and Russian coaches auditioned her as a pairs partner for Windsor, following a fruitless effort to find him a partner at home.

Katia initially thought she was moving to Austria and came to Australia with no English, to live with coaches Galina and Andrei Pachin in suburban Sydney.

She was one of hundreds of child athletes moving around the world, as "transfers of allegiance" becomes an

increasingly controversial topic in world sport. In 2018 Coe, the president of World Athletics, banned the transfer of all track and field competitors under the age of 20.

HANDSHAKES BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

IN an interview for this investigation, Coe says he was alarmed at the notion of children moving countries, often without parental support.

"It's not an easy thing for me to say but I was finding it quite hard to see a difference between what was emerging and human trafficking," Coe says.

"(Something is wrong) when you have a system where two federations could effectively shake hands behind closed doors and an athlete, with very little guarantee on either side of the protocol around that transfer, could suddenly end up competing for a completely different country."

"(Athletics) Federation presidents were often waking up to an email from an agent or from another federation saying 'by the way we know you're looking for an 800m runner, well, we can help you here'."

"And worse than that, some of

World Athletics president Sebastian Coe banned the transfer of all track and field competitors under the age of 20 in 2018.





Sydney Olympics poster girl Tatiana Grigorieva was one transfer success story; (inset) speed skater Tatiana Borodulina returned home after two years.

“Some of them were barely older than anything that would in any country constitute adulthood”

World athletics boss Sebastian Coe

them were barely older than anything that would in any country constitute adulthood and in some occasions barely at the age of consent, and that's when I looked at this and thought we also have a responsibility here in the safeguarding space.”

Coates, Lynch and International Skating Union president Jan Dijkema all reject the characterisation of “human trafficking”.

“Every person is entitled to their own opinion and the age that Katia came to Australia was, off the top of my head I think she was 16, and it's my view that at 16, yes, of course you're not technically an adult, but your ability to make an informed decision rests very much with the athlete,” Lynch says.

“I think to call it human trafficking is obviously a very strong view on it and he's entitled to his view but it's certainly not our view.”

The International Skating Union doesn't have age limits for transfers of allegiance, and Dijkema says the practice was bound by national immigration laws. “A sports federation has limited powers to intervene in this area,” he says.

“Furthermore, often, the change of residence of a young skater is connected to the moving of the parents and not focused on the skating career of a child. Finally, the change of residence and related change of ISU membership



Australian Olympic Committee president John Coates.

is also often facilitated by a dual citizenship of a skater, which is something out of the ISU's control. It is therefore difficult to distinguish cases of ‘trading’ skaters and legitimate changes of residence.”

Coe's efforts to end the contentious practice are not universally supported.

Ukrainian synchronised swimmer Evgenia Tetelbaum was approached by Israel when she was just 17 and represented her adopted country at the 2016 Rio Olympics.

She says in an interview she never had any regrets, even writing an 18,000-word thesis about the benefits and ethics of athletes transferring

countries. “This is a win-win situation in most of the cases because usually the athletes in Olympic sports are looking for opportunities,” she says.

“I didn't have any hesitation whether I had to move or not. Even though I didn't have any knowledge about this country, I was very confident that I can make it.”

Australia has long been an active player in recruiting foreign athletes, mostly from former Soviet states following the collapse of communism, with mixed success.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF TATIANA GRIGORIEVA

ONE of the pioneers, Tatiana Grigorieva, remains the poster girl for Russian athletes transferring to Australia after she won a silver medal in the women's pole vault at the 2000 Sydney Olympics, then went on to feature in Gladiators and Dancing With The Stars.

Dozens followed, including speed skater Tatiana Borodulina, who joined the Australian Army Reserve. The federal Government even amended the Citizenship Act so her passport application could be fast-tracked in time for her to represent Australia at the 2010 Vancouver Olympics.

But within two years, she returned to Russia and competed for her birth country at the 2014 Sochi Winter

Olympics. Borodulina's backflip prompted the AOC to exercise more caution when asking the government to accelerate citizenships for other foreign athletes but Alexandrovskaya's case was put in the express lane.

Without her, Windsor would not have become the first Indigenous Australian to compete at the Winter Olympics so Alexandrovskaya got her citizenship fast-tracked when she was 17, just in time to compete at PyeongChang in 2018.

Coates says in an interview he was assured Alexandrovskaya had been offered a coaching job in Australia after she retired as well as full healthcare, but she chose to return to Russia.

“When we put our name to someone changing nationality to compete for us, we've got to think about what happens afterwards,” Coates says. “We shouldn't think ‘here's a chance for us to qualify a figure skating pair and get a good result’. We've got to look at what if it doesn't work out and if they go back home, are they going to be looked after?”

Australian sports psychologists have long known about the serious risk of depression in high-performance athletes and the Australian Institute of Sport runs a number of mental health and suicide prevention programs.

As an Olympian, Katia was entitled to lifetime access to independent

psychologists, psychiatrists and eating disorder experts.

Matti Clements, the director of Athlete Wellbeing and Engagement at the AIS, says the services were free, confidential and made available to athletes regardless of where they were based, but are now likely to be reviewed. “Whether they're training overseas or living overseas, the services can be delivered face-to-face, online or the phone,” Clements says. “Whenever there is a traumatic or critical incident that occurs in sport, there is always an important part, as there should be in any industry, to reflect.”

Because of privacy laws, officials won't disclose if Katia took up the services available to her when she returned to Moscow at the start of the year and was diagnosed with epilepsy. Lynch says Australian skating officials had no idea she was suffering mental health issues but would have helped her had they known.

“When she wanted to go home to look at some other things we didn't sort of think a lot of it, and none of it was actually shared with us as far as what her health issues were,” he says.

“We've obviously since become aware of what they are but at the time she went back to Russia we were not aware of what issues she was dealing with or having investigated.

“The fact she chose to have it looked at or investigated at home obviously wasn't with someone with a sports point of view that was talking to her.

“We think that this contributed a lot to her state of mind on where they left her, they appeared to leave her without a future and that was the really sad thing about it.

“We could offer assistance but ultimately if the person says ‘I want to deal with this myself’, then we have no way of interfering.”