

Maruša Štangar

OLY

My Journey Through Judo: From Childhood to
Elite Level and the Conclusion of a Professional Career

2026

CHAPTER 1

Just a Kid Having Fun Doing Judo

I started judo when I was five years old at Judo Club Olimpija, following my sister Anja. At first, it was all about having fun and training with friends, some of whom are still my closest friends. I was successful from a young age and diligent in training, but for a long time I did not even dream of becoming an elite athlete or an Olympian.



Anja, my first coach Jože, and I at a competition

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Ne-Waza has been my strength since a young age, national competition 2006



Nagaoka 2007 – competition organised by our club each year

CHAPTER 1



Girls of Judo Club Olimpija: Ema, Anja, Nina, me, Tisa



A national competition in 2009



National Championships U14

Ambitions in Judo at Elite Level

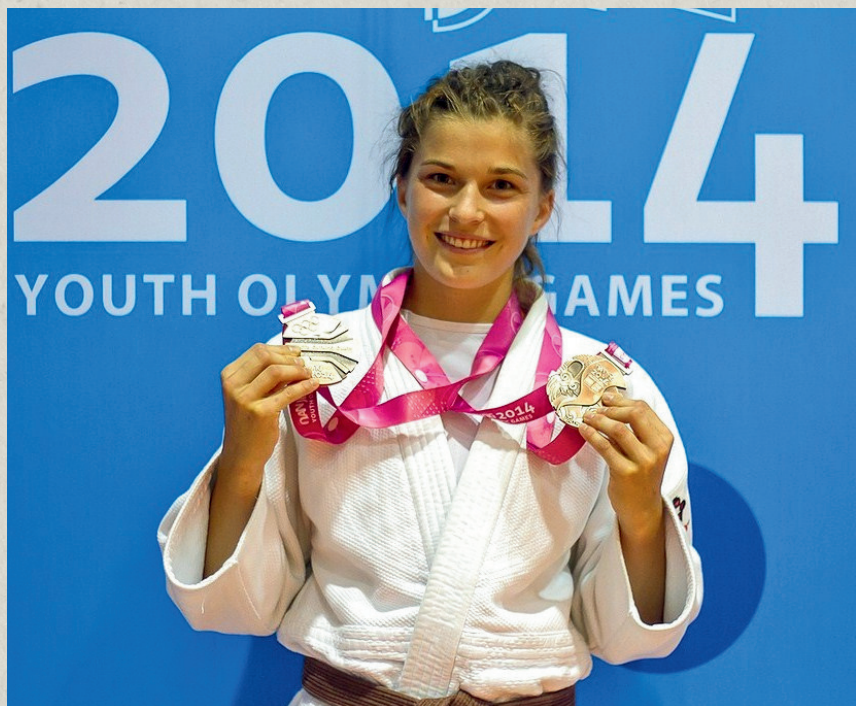
I cannot pinpoint the exact moment when the shift occurred, when I set the clear goal of reaching the top level in senior judo and aiming for the Olympics. It was not an “aha moment”, but happened spontaneously: good results, hard work paying off, enjoying the lifestyle, still having fun even with a professional approach, and seeing that it is possible.

As soon as I become cadet, I was taking medals from Cadet and Junior Championships. In 2014, I won a bronze medal at the Youth Olympic Games, which made my Olympic dream even stronger. The following year, I won the European Cadet Championships and took silver at the World Junior Championships.



Winning a bronze medal at the 2013 World Cadet Championships in Miami

CHAPTER 2



Individual and team bronze at the 2014 Youth Olympic Games in Nanjing



Victory moment: winning the Cadet European title in Sofia, 2015



Silver at the 2015 World Junior Championships in Abu Dhabi



Winning bronze at the 2017 World Junior Championships in Zagreb – comeback after ACL surgery in 2016, competing through a rib injury just a week before, which didn't allow me to expect such a good result.

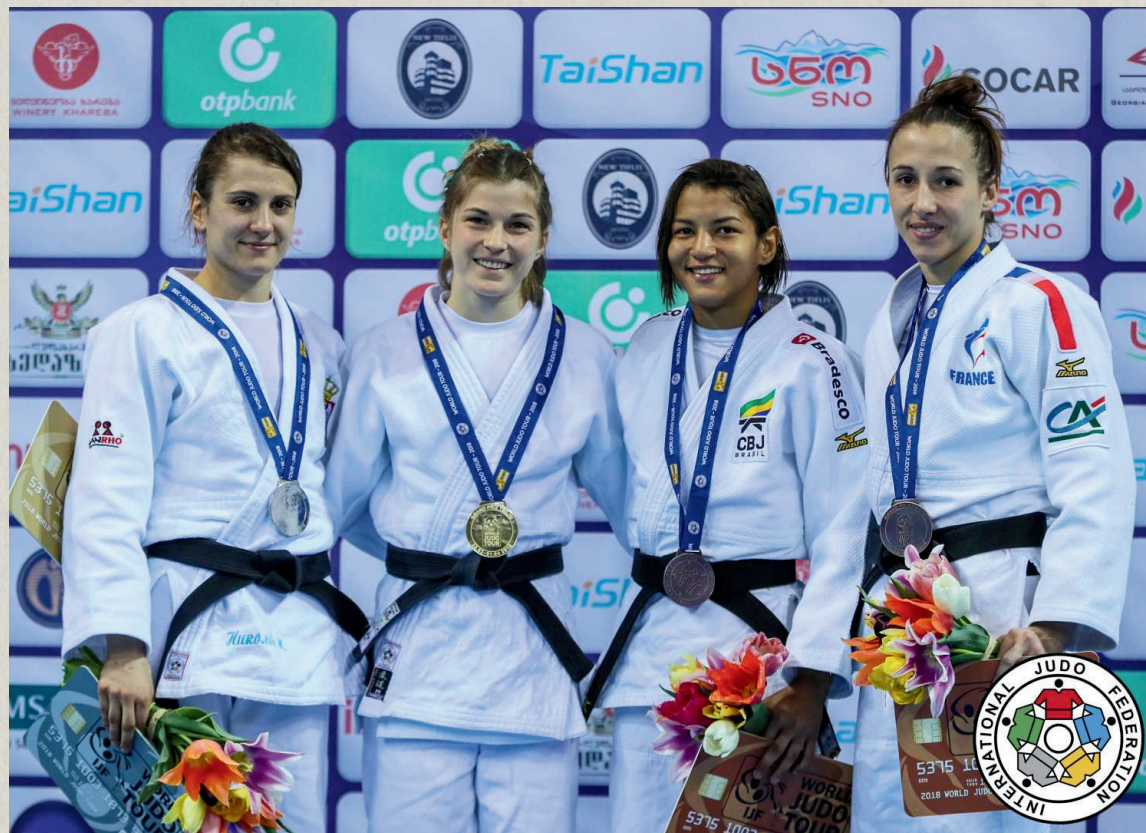


The transition to seniors went smoothly. I won my first World Judo Tour medal in 2018. In 2019, I took bronze at the European Championships and Masters, finishing the year in the top 10 of the senior World Ranking List. Another qualification year began, but then the coronavirus pandemic caused the Tokyo Olympic Games to be postponed by one year. During that time, my sister was fighting cancer, but she managed to recover and be my sparring partner in Tokyo. My first Olympic appearance ended with one win and a final 9th–16th place.

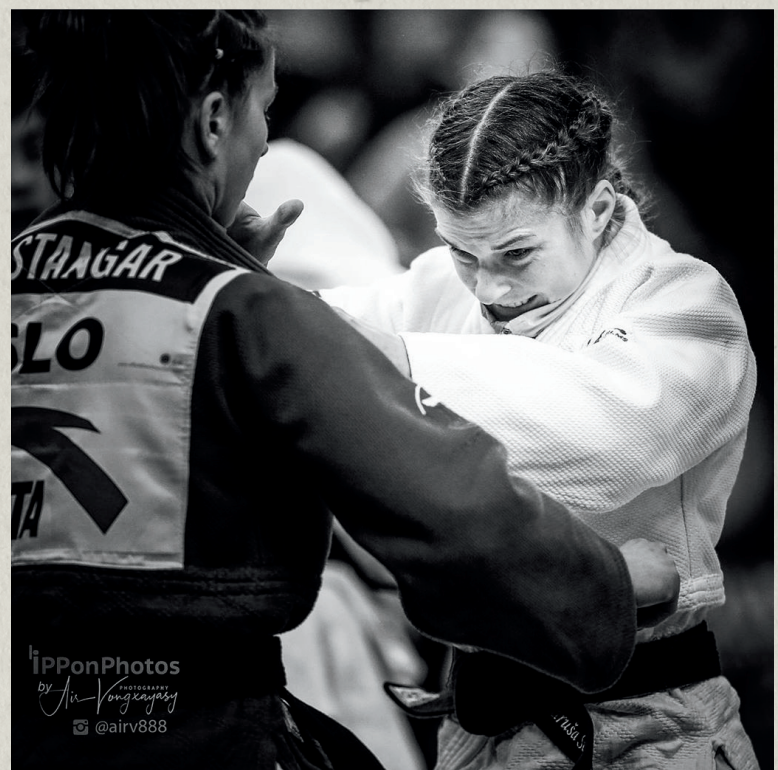
In the next Olympic cycle, I delivered top performances in 2023, winning two golds at Grand Prix events in succession. My expectations and goals for the Olympics grew, I would go for a medal. However, 2024 was the opposite – a year of poor performance, injuries, and infection – so in the end, I was happy to be “just” a part of the Paris Olympic Games.

CHAPTER 2

Along the way, there were ups and downs, injuries, successful comebacks, hard training sessions, fun moments, interesting travels, and unforgettable emotions both on and off the tatami!



Grand Prix Tbilisi 2018 – one of the competitions that stands out in my memory. I won my first Grand Prix gold, sooner than I had imagined, and both Anja and I stood on the podium, while our parents enjoyed a fantastic sport-tourism trip.



Warming up with Anja before a competition

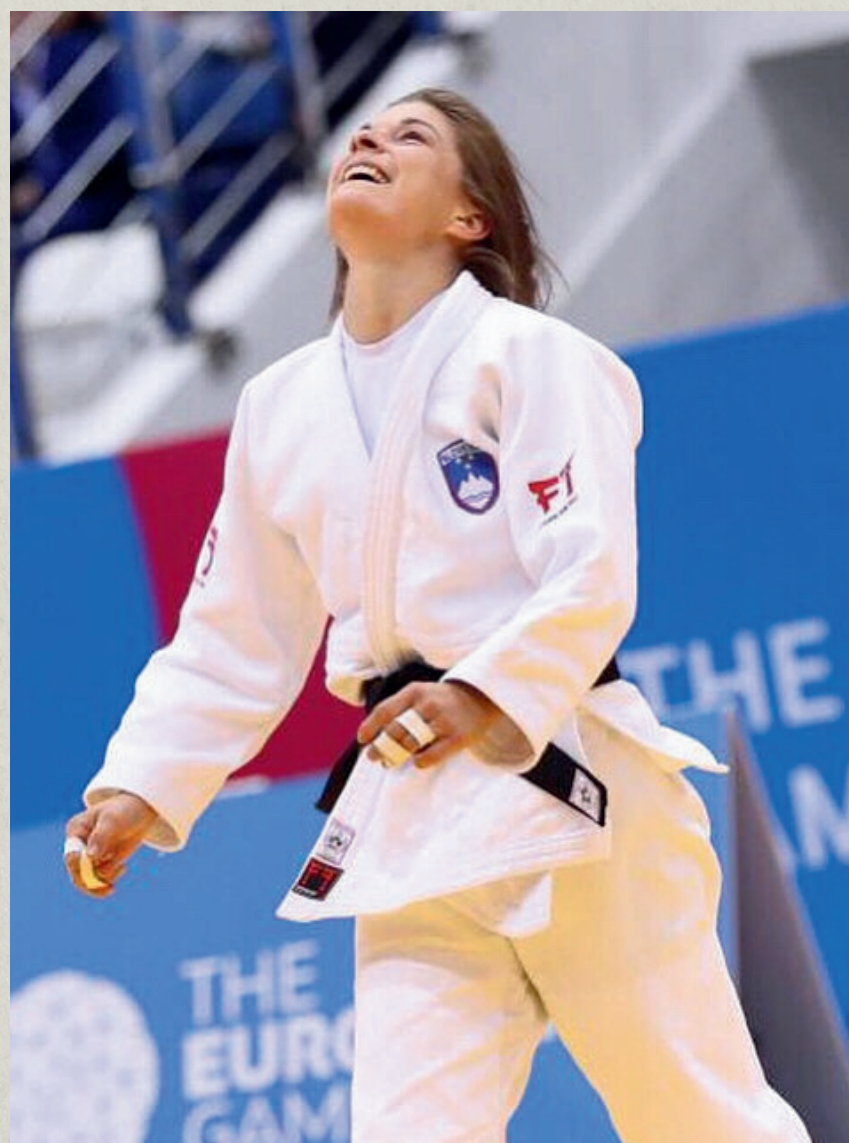
CHAPTER 2



2018 Masters, Guangzhou – the Masters brings together the top of the top, with only the 16 highest-ranked athletes in each weight category invited to compete. Winning bronze against such a field remains one of my biggest career results.



CHAPTER 2



Bronze at the Senior European Championships and European Games in Minsk 2019 – another of the biggest achievements of my career. With performances like this, the path to Tokyo 2020 was going great.



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Silver at the Abu Dhabi Grand Slam 2019



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Our gym and living room during the COVID-19 quarantine in 2020



Anja at the beginning of cancer treatment – full of courage, motivation, and belief, 2020

CHAPTER 2



The Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games were special, held under strict restrictions, with no spectators allowed, but it was still a magnificent event.

Olympic Village, Tokyo 2021 – me, Anja, and Olga with Miraitowa



The winning hold in the first contest at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games

CHAPTER 2



After the second knee surgery, 2021



After the first shoulder surgery, 2022



Normal protection during trainings in the last months before the Paris 2024 Olympic Games

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Walking to the tatami for the final at Dushanbe Grand Prix 2023 with my coach Olga.

Holding osae-komi with my favourite and most effective technique in the final of the Dushanbe Grand Prix 2023 ...



... and pure happiness after winning my second Grand Prix gold in two weeks.

CHAPTER 2



After winning the bronze medal contest at the Zagreb Grand Prix 2023



At the Olympic Village during the Paris 2024 Olympic Games – Anja, me, and Olga

CHAPTER 2



A close contest at the Paris 2024 Olympic Games ...



... but I lost.

CHAPTER 2



Support from friends – a surprise they prepared before the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games



Anja's priceless hug after my loss at the Paris 2024 Olympic Games – understanding it all



My parents in the stands at the Paris 2024 Olympic Games

Letting Other Things Take Priority

It is time for a new chapter. For many years, I was certain of one thing: judo would remain my top priority until the Paris Olympic Games. Beyond that,

I kept an open mind. Perhaps my next main focus would be starting a family or pursuing a second career. At the same time, if my body and mind still allowed me to compete at the highest level and there were still goals to achieve, I was open to continuing for another year, two, or even another Olympic cycle.

However, 2024 has been very tough. I have struggled with many injuries and negativity – searching for reasons behind poor performances instead of focusing on my remaining strengths. My body has started to tell me it is enough, and I have accepted this.

I did not achieve all the goals I set, and after a year of poor results, I was not very proud of myself. However, looking back and seeing the bigger picture,

I had a wonderful career, filled with great memories and important experiences. Through sport, I travelled all over the world, experienced different cultures, and met incredible people. I always gave my best, became a Masters and European medallist, and a two-time Olympian. I am grateful that I could be part of elite sport, which is a privilege – deserved, but not everyone has the opportunity to make it happen. I became more aware of this when Anja was forced to stop due to disease.

CHAPTER 3

I have never been afraid of my career ending, as I have many things to look forward to in this new chapter and a good education to help me find a job I enjoy. Although the transition is not as easy as I expected, I enjoy living a new lifestyle with place for different hobby sports, facing different challenges, creating a path for a second career, and spending relaxed time with my boyfriend, family, dog, and friends.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank You



Olga, Inna – coaches

Anja – sister, sparring, friend, support, motivation

Parents – support, love, taxi, cook, laundress

Judo Club Olimpija, its then-president Tomaž and my clubmates

Jože – my first coach

Slovenian Armed Forces – my employer as a professional athlete

Olympic Committee of Slovenia

Doctors (Sajovic, Pilih) and physiotherapists (Renata, Katka, Tomaž, David)

Eva – nutritional support

Sponsors – REAM, Fighting Films, KIMI, F'TP Bistro, Kmetija Pozaršak-Strle,

VO2 Sport, Suzuki Slovenija

Friends – celebration or consolation

Judo family – helping each other, training camps

Matija – boyfriend, making my move into this new chapter of life easier and more beautiful