

# A gold medalist in our midst



Maria Filatova runs Kour Magic Gymnastics with her husband, Alexander, and daughter, Alexandra. The two-time Olympic gold-medal winner now makes her home in Rochester.

## Many twists and turns landed Maria Filatova in Rochester.

STORY BY CYNTHIA KOLKO | PHOTO BY MATT WITTMAYER

**In 1980,** Soviet gymnast Maria Filatova competed at the U.S.-boycotted summer Olympics in Moscow and won a gold medal and a bronze. Meanwhile, here in a fortified building on Lincoln Avenue in Rochester, Kodak was manufacturing items for one of our government's most guarded cold war surveillance projects—aimed chiefly at the Soviet Union.

In a strange twist of history and happenstance, that building today is home to Filatova's gym, Kour Magic Gymnastics, where she teaches the sport to eager children. It's a family business, run with husband Alexander "Big Sasha" Kourbatov and daughter Alexandra "Little Sasha."

I first met Filatova five years ago when my eldest daughter began taking gymnastics lessons. The first thing I noticed was Filatova's tiny stature. I barely clear 5 feet myself, but if she were sitting in front of me at the movies, I'd actually be able to see the screen.

It's easy to forget that, in this sport, stature and status can be inversely related. I didn't realize at the time that Filatova, competing with huge bows in her pigtails, also won a gold medal on her 15th birthday at the 1976 Olympics. I didn't know she set a world record by winning the World Cup twice in a row. And I didn't know the "Siberian Sparrow," as she was nicknamed, was one of the first gymnasts to complete a double-back tuck in the floor event. (For all you judges at home, that's two somersaults in the air.)

Now, as a good teacher would, Filatova downplays the idea of choosing her proudest achievement. "Every one of them, getting a skill or winning an international competition, makes you proud," she says.

But sports history likes to keep score. My gymnast daughter recently took a gymnastics book out of the library. In the back, the most talented female gymnasts of the last

century are listed. The famed Olga Korbut is number 33. Filatova is number 32.

Why Filatova isn't better known here is likely a quirk of timing. International athletes who competed in those 1980 U.S.-boycotted games didn't become household names here because their images weren't broadcast into our households (or barely were). And the World Cup, as prestigious as it is, doesn't register on the collective American consciousness.

Additionally, gymnasts tend not to be gymnasts for all that long. Filatova retired in 1982 at the age of 21. Her next job? The Moscow Circus. Her job description? Being catapulted into the air by seesaw, flipping multiple times and landing atop a tower of men standing on each other's shoulders.

Her time in the circus spanned only a year, but it changed her life. It was there she met Big Sasha, a fellow performer and tumbling master. The two moved to Belarus to coach, but with the birth of Little Sasha, the young family needed more income. In the U.S.S.R., though athletes were celebrated on the news, there were no Wheaties boxes, eponymous sportswear lines or other lucrative side gigs.

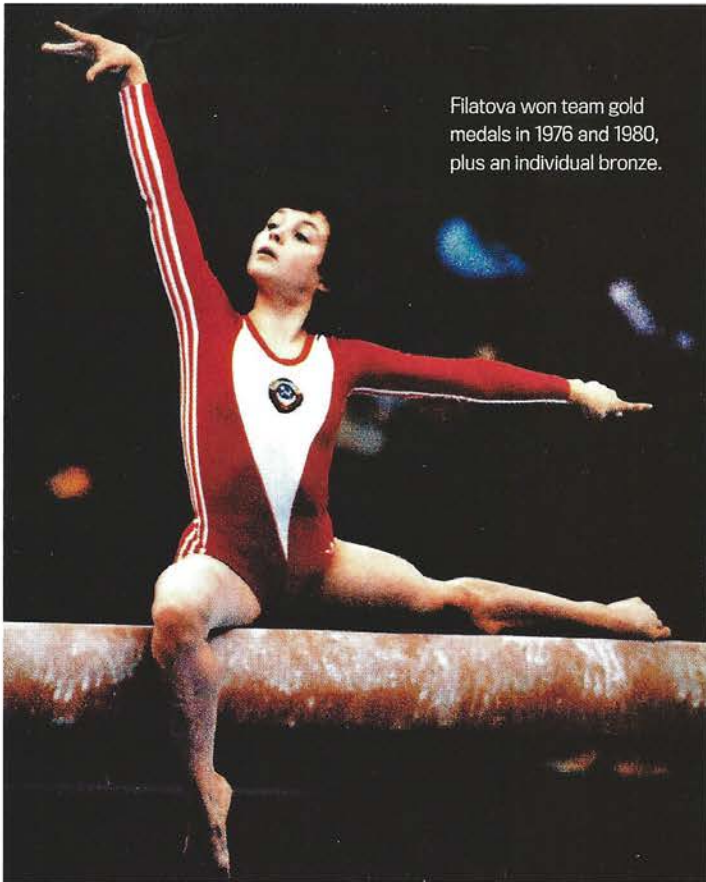
"It was impossible to live there," Filatova says of the economic climate around the time the Soviet Union dissolved.

The couple found coaching jobs in Germany and Ireland, then got an offer to teach in Ohio in 1996. Working at summer camps, they met gym owners from other cities, which is how they came to Rochester to coach at the Gymnastics Training Center in Penfield. They opened Kour Magic two years ago.

To be sure, they teach gymnastics. But there's much more to it than the sport itself. There's how to enjoy winning without reveling in someone else's defeat. There's making mistakes without feeling you've failed. There's realizing how to represent the sport—that being an athlete doesn't mean much unless you're a good person first.

## *mind, body & soul*

Filatova won team gold medals in 1976 and 1980, plus an individual bronze.



IMAGES COURTESY OF MARIA FILATOVA

And there's the work ethic.

"Never give up," says Filatova. She drives home the point by telling a story about falling at the 1978 World Cup, as she was trying to defend her 1977 title. "I found myself under the beam, and I was in total shock. People were saying that there was going to be a new champion. But then I did floor, got a 9.95 and won the championship." A simple lesson in perseverance, but one that says it all.

Olympic gymnasts are certainly qualified to talk about perseverance. They often forsake what we commonly think of as childhood for a life spent practicing and traveling to competitions. From the time she turned 11, Filatova lived with her coaches. She trained through the morning, went to school, trained at night, and repeated the process the following morning, day after exhausting day.

To get to the Olympics, you need "everything," she explains. Yet no matter how much talent—how much body, mind and heart a girl puts into the quest—her chances of getting there are extremely small. An estimated 67,000 compete in the USA Junior Olympic program alone (not to mention the "other" type, rhythmic gymnastics, which incorporates items such as rings and ribbons).

So, while the girls at Kour Magic have their own goals—

some may be aiming for a chance to compete on a college team, others are there for the fun and fitness— Filatova says her goal for the gym is different from her personal ambition growing up.

“I just want to see happy kids, and that they know they are always loved,” she says.

But gymnastics is competitive, both on the mat and as a business. As a former Olympian, Filatova can be exacting as a coach, and some local gym owners who have worked with her are no fans of her style and approach.

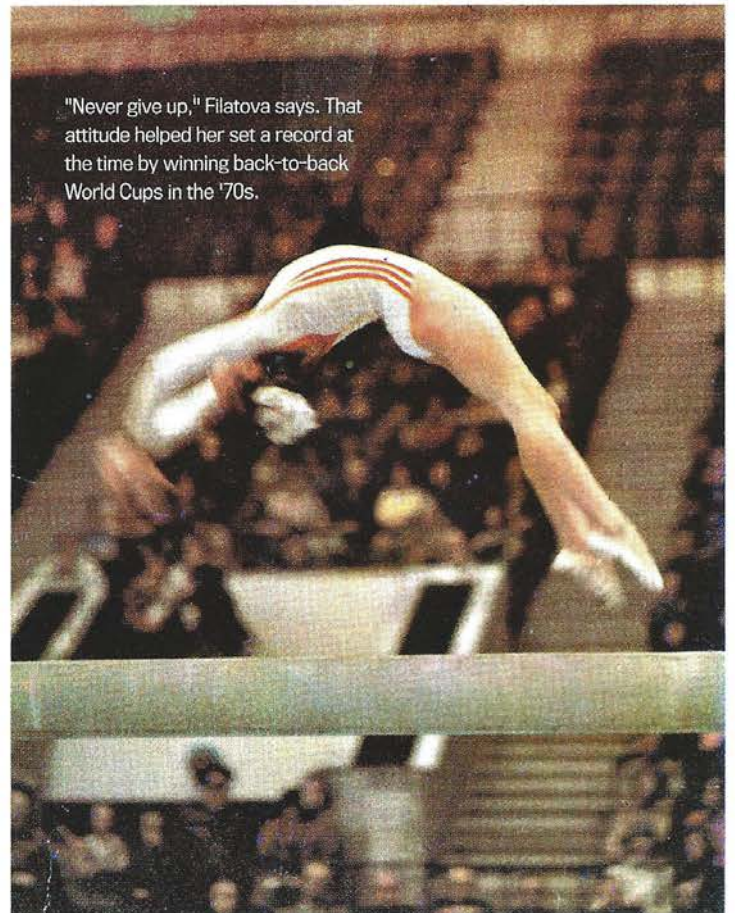
At Kour Magic, she won't mince words when making corrections to a gymnast's work. Unlike at other gyms, you also might hear a few family squabbles in Russian (though, for all I know, they're complaining about how the iced tea tastes). But the choice words are all about motivation. Achievement, after all, is a subjective notion.

As Filatova puts it, “Everyone has their own definition of success.”

Four times a week, my daughter skips off happily to the gym and returns home smiling. So I can say for sure that at least one young gymnast is succeeding. **R**

---

*Cynthia Kolko, a writer living in Pittsford, is the author of a novel set in the Finger Lakes, Fruit of the Vine.*



"Never give up," Filatova says. That attitude helped her set a record at the time by winning back-to-back World Cups in the '70s.