

WRESTLING USA

MAN-OF-THE-YEAR AWARD

HENRY CEJUDO

Colorado Springs, Colorado

Henry Cejudo, the 21-year-old prodigy who had competed in only one world-level senior tournament before Beijing, 31st in the 2007 world championships, made history by winning the Olympic gold medal at 55 kilograms. His gold medal assured the United States of winning a freestyle wrestling gold for the ninth consecutive Olympics at which it has competed (1980 boycott). Two years after U.S. coach Kevin Jackson called him the future of wrestling, the future became the present in a dazzling four-match flurry, making Cejudo the youngest American to win an Olympic wrestling gold medal.

Cejudo, crying the moment the match ended and wrapping himself in an American flag, Tomohiro Matsunaga of Japan 2-2 on tiebreaker and 3-0 in the best-of-three match. The tears that fell moments after he defeated Matsunaga gave way to a smile as wide as a wrestling mat, as he realized that he had done it. And, too, how he had done it.

"I always knew I was going to be here," Cejudo said, his blackened right eye a contrast to the gold medal he clutched ever-so-tight. "I watched the Olympics as a kid and I knew I'd be here. It was tough. But it's all worth it."

Cejudo bypassed a college career to try to become an Olympian. American wrestlers are supposed to go to college, then enter the Olympic program when they're experienced and ready; Cejudo did so at age 17 and is the only wrestler to win a national senior championship before leaving high school.

But winning an Olympics so soon, with so little world-level experience, almost never happens. Cael Sanderson was the only U.S. freestyle gold medalist in Athens, but he had a long and storied amateur career and was a four-time



*Henry Cejudo
Colorado Springs, CO*

unbeaten NCAA champion.

His parents were undocumented Mexicans who met in Los Angeles. His mother had six kids, four with his father, Jorge, who was in and out of prison until dying of heart problems at age 44 in 2007. Henry never saw him after age 4.

The family was miserably poor, sometimes moving from apartment to apartment under the cover of night because they lacked rent money. His mom worked several jobs at a time. Sometimes they stayed with friends, sometimes with relatives, sleeping six or seven to a room in bad neighborhoods, drug deals going on down the street. Always, though, someone was there to offer a helping hand.

"I'm proud of my Mexican heritage," Cejudo said. "But I'm an American. It's the best country in the world. They call it the land of opportunity, and it is. Maybe if some other kid watches this, he can do the same."

Henry and older brother Angel emu-

lated the pro wrestlers they saw on TV and the Mexican boxers they revered, and they entered a youth wrestling program in Phoenix. Angel was the first ace, winning four high school state titles, and Henry did the same winning two in Arizona and the last two in Colorado Springs at Coronado High School.

His story produced the 125th Olympic wrestling medal for the United States and its 50th gold. Only swimming and track and field, with far more events, have produced more American golds.

On August 19, 2004, Henry Cejudo moved from Arizona to Colorado Springs, to attend Coronado High School. He was a high school junior who left his family and home to live at the U.S. Olympic Training Center and pursue his dream of winning an Olympic gold medal.

Exactly four years later, on August 19, 2008, Cejudo won the 55 kg/121 lbs. weight class in freestyle wrestling at the Olympic Games in Beijing, China.

"The same day I got to this school was August 19. That is the day I won the Olympics. It was exactly four years. That makes this an even bigger story," said Cejudo. "His work ethic and determination was every coach's dream, which is why he was a four-time state champion, two in Arizona and two in Colorado. I think Henry is probably one of the greatest high school wrestlers in the history of the sport."

"It's definitely a life-changing experience," Henry said. "But at the same time, I love to talk to kids and deliver a message that you can be all you can be. It's about hard work, dedication and coming through."