Gold Medal Superstar

Henry Cejudo stunned the world when he won an Olympic gold medal.

By Siobhán McGowan

Henry Cejudo celebrates after his Olympic win.

The year was 2008. Henry Cejudo, a 20-year-old Mexican American wrestler, stepped onto an Olympic floor mat in Beijing, China. While waiting for the match to begin, Henry eyed his competitor—a tough wrestler from Japan.

Henry knew the match wouldn't be easy. But that was okay—he was used to the challenge. In fact, his whole life leading up to this point had been nothing but a series of tough challenges.

Tough Beginnings

Henry was born to a poor family in California. He lived in a cramped trailer with his mother and six siblings. To pay the bills, his mother worked many jobs. The jobs never lasted long, and the family moved many times as a result.

Henry's difficult childhood made him an angry kid. He often got into fights with the neighborhood kids.

"I was a tough little kid," he says. "We didn't know where our next meal would come from. We didn't know who was going to knock at our door and evict us. I felt on edge all the time."

Wrestling to the Rescue

One day, Henry went to the gym to see his brother, who was wrestling for the school team. Henry watched the match—and loved it. He figured that wrestling was something he could do. After all, he was used to fighting. That's when he decided to try out for the team.

During tryouts, Henry beat all the kids his size. He even beat some who were bigger than him! The coach was impressed—and awarded Henry a spot on the team.

From that point on, Henry won match after match. He loved how wrestling gave him the opportunity to channel his anger. Finally, he seemed happy.

Many coaches noticed Henry's hard work and dedication to the sport. They felt he had a good chance at making the US national wrestling team. So, they suggested he move to Arizona, where he could train at an Olympic facility. Henry was nervous, but he agreed. It was a decision he would not regret. After months of hard work and training, he was chosen to be a member of the national team. Henry was heading to the Olympics!

During the Olympic finals, Henry wrestled an opponent from Japan.

Olympic Gold

At the 2008 Summer Olympics, Henry competed in three rounds

before reaching the finals. All the matches were tough—and the final round would be no different.

When the bell rang to start the competition, Henry charged forward. His opponent was the first to score a point, and came dangerously close to pinning Henry to the mat. But Henry fought back and ultimately scored two points. At the end of the second period, he slammed his opponent to the floor to score three more. When the competition time ran out, all the judges agreed: Henry was the victor. He had won the match—and the Olympic gold medal.

Stepping up to the podium to receive the medal for Team USA was one of the proudest moments in Henry's life. He was the youngest wrestler in US history to bring home the gold in Freestyle Wrestling. He was also the first of Mexican descent.

"I'm living the American dream," he said after the win. "The US is the land of opportunity!"

Inspiring Others

Today, Henry still fights—but in a different sport. Recently, he became a mixed martial arts (MMA) fighter. And when he's not in the ring, he can often be found giving motivational speeches about the importance of sports.

"I was a kid who grew up in poverty, a son of Mexican immigrants that came to the United States with a dream," he said. "My hope is that other people will find inspiration in my story. Life can be rough, but if you work hard at something you care about, it's bound to get better."

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