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An American Dream, Story

Cejudo Grabs Piece of History

By **Bill Plaschke** **Los Angeles Times**

BEIJING — He has shared everything for most of his scuffled life, from twin beds to sofa cushions to last bites.

It only made sense, then, that when he stunningly won an Olympic gold medal in freestyle wrestling Tuesday, the Los Angeles-born son of undocumented Mexican immigrants would also share.

With his most beloved piece of cloth.

The American flag.

Oh, what a pair they made, young Henry Cejudo and Old Glory, dancing cloth-to-cheek across the floor of a gym that rocked and roared in disbelief.

That flag gave a chance to a kid who paid for wrestling by selling tamales on the street. That kid now held it tight as he dropped to the mat and dissolved in tears.

"I'm living the American dream," said Cejudo, 21. "The United States is the land of opportunity, and I'm so glad I can represent it."

The flag gave his mother a chance to raise six children on menial wages in countless apartments from Los Angeles to Las Cruces to Phoenix. The son now flapped it across his back like a cape.

"The USA is the best country in the world because it allows you to express yourself in whatever you can do best," said his brother Alonzo, watching from the stands. "Wrestling is just Henry's way."

That flag gave a high school education to a kid too poor to celebrate Christmas, then gave that kid a chance to become an Olympian even after he finished 31st in last year's world championships. The kid now wore the flag around the gym like an expensive new coat.

"I don't want to let it go, man," Cejudo said about an hour after his 55kg victory over Japan's Tomohiro Matsunaga. "I might just sleep with this."

The tiny, bushy-haired champion smiled a huge smile, his face a strange mixture of tears and welts and happiness, and it was then he was reminded America had one more thing to give him.

For winning the gold medal, he will be awarded bonuses and donations equaling \$65,000.

"I'm rich!!!" he screamed.

"This is unreal," said Frank Saenz, his Phoenix-area high school coach who was weeping with others in the stands. "Such a big country ... how does this happen?"

Born in 1987 in south Los Angeles to two undocumented Mexican immigrants, Cejudo faced the same long odds encountered by thousands in his neighborhood.

When he was 4, his parents separated and his mother moved his family to New Mexico. Two years later, his single mom moved the family to Phoenix.

With only a single couch in his living room, and at least one or two siblings in his bed until he was 17, there wasn't much.

"So we took off the couch cushions and used them to fight," said Alonzo. "We were like "American Gladiators."

His mother, Nelly Rico, was not in the Beijing Agricultural University Gymnasium stands, because she does not have a passport.

"If you ask my mom, she will tell you she is American," he said, later adding, "This gold medal is hers."



ED WRAY/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS Henry Cejudo of the United States is the son of undocumented Mexican immigrants. The wrestler, who lived in Las Cruces a couple of years, is now also a gold medal winner.





ED WRAY/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS USA's Henry Cejudo wrestles Japan's Tomohiro Matsunaga in their 55 kilogram freestyle gold medal match.