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U.S. Wrestlers Given Incentive to ...

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U.S. Wrestlers Given Incentive to Bypass Mixed Martial Arts



Toshifumi Kitamura/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

United States' wrestler Henry Cejudo celebrates his victory over Japan's Tomohiro Matsunaga in the men's 55kg freestyle gold medal match at the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games

By GREG BISHOP

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The gold medal that Henry Cejudo won in freestyle wrestling at the last Olympics sits somewhere inside his sock drawer. It earned him more fame than fortune, although enough money to splurge on a Mercedes E500.

If Cejudo repeats his golden performance in 2012, the payoff will be considerably more lucrative.

USA Wrestling announced this week the creation of a medal fund that would pay wrestlers \$250,000 for an Olympic gold medal, \$50,000 for a silver and \$25,000 for a bronze.

"This is bigger than just wrestling," Cejudo said Thursday in a telephone interview. "This is bigger than the quarter-million. This is going to change everything. It's going to revolutionize the sport."

The incentive program, called the [Living the Dream Medal Fund](#), grew out of the United States' underwhelming haul of three wrestling medals at the Beijing Games, the desire to energize the sport by strengthening it at the grass-roots level and, most important, the urge to keep wrestlers in the sport.

Cejudo, 22, acknowledged that he had considered converting to [mixed martial arts](#). He said he had watched M.M.A. since seventh grade and that his grappling skills would pay dividends inside the steel cage. He said he knew of at least five Olympic-caliber wrestlers who had switched and others who were considering it.

"M.M.A. is growing, and it's a basic wrestling sport," Cejudo said. "A lot of fighters are ex-wrestlers. A lot of guys take the easy way out, make quick money. This fund will keep wrestlers in wrestling."

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It certainly represents a major increase. Cejudo made \$40,000 — paid by USA Wrestling and the [United States Olympic Committee](#) — for the gold. Wrestlers can earn more through private contributions and sponsorships.

Most of the new medal bonuses will be paid from private contributions, but the figures also include the previous contributions from the United States Olympic Committee and [donations](#) of between \$5 and \$5,000 from the public.

According to Rich Bender, the executive director of USA Wrestling, the more money made in public donations, the less financial obligation the fund's stewards will have. That money could then be spent in other areas, like training.

In Beijing, Cejudo was the [only American to win a gold medal](#). Adam Wheeler took a bronze medal in Greco-Roman and Randi Miller won a bronze in women's freestyle. The Greco-Roman team won its first world championship in 2007, which added to the disappointment at Beijing.

"The best-case scenario would be paying out 18 \$250,000 bonuses," Bender said, meaning one bonus for each of the six weight classes in each of the three disciplines.

He added: "The results from Beijing weren't what we expected or hoped for. I like to think we're getting close to a double-digit count in wrestling. We want to get back on top."

Wrestling's incentive program compares favorably with those of other Olympic sports. USA Table Tennis pays \$100,000 for an Olympic gold medal, but no American athlete in that sport has ever won one. Basketball, curling, biathlon, tennis and softball do not pay anything. Some sports, like tae kwon do, do not disclose the amount they pay.

Most Olympic athletes make their money from sponsorships, and often those sponsors pay bonuses for medals. [Michael Phelps](#) earned \$1 million from Speedo for his performance in Beijing.

Wrestling also increased its payout for world championship medals — \$50,000 for gold, \$25,000 for silver and \$15,000 for bronze, up from \$21,000, \$13,500 and \$11,000.

Cejudo, meanwhile, has taken a year off from wrestling to capitalize on the opportunities that arose from his victory. He has traveled the world, teaching in camps and clinics; has sought marketing opportunities; and agreed to be the subject of a soon-to-be-released book.

Recently, Cejudo committed to trying for the London Games in 2012.

"I always wanted to be the best," Cejudo said. "But the fund totally locked me in." His voice rose. "I'm coming for that quarter-million."

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