

Whole Cardenas family enjoying Daniel's goal for four

If you were to climb every 14,000-foot-er in Colorado, 54 snow-capped summits await your ascent. But to those who live in these mountains, the summit is in the climb.

You climb for the challenge, yet any wisdom one acquires is tempered in humility by the experience of many false summits. Ultimately, whatever height you gain must be relinquished, for you must descend in order to reach a new mountain-top.

For Daniel Cardenas — the nation's top 152-pounder and now in his senior year at Pomona High School near Denver, Colo., — “a loss is not really a loss, because that is how you grow,” he said. “Losses ground you. They make you re-double your work ethic. My focus is on preparing for the next opponent, not on my record.”

This perspective has also helped those close to him.

“Wrestling has made us better parents,” asserts Dan's mom Adrina. “We have conditioned our kids to do this for themselves, to choose what they want from every experience. In time, they will figure out their own way to win. It is only when we step back that our kids really begin to grow.”



Colorado High School Activities photo

With a state title this season, Daniel Cardenas could become the second Colorado wrestler to win four individual and four team championships.

Cardenas' coach and dad also share this perspective.

“You may know where you are at, but it's easy to forget what got you there,” said his father, whose first name is also Dan. “Soon enough, life and wrestling humble you. Stay true to yourself, to the people

you surround yourself with, and to God. What you don't know, wrestling will teach you.”

Pomona's powerhouse team is 23 percent Cardenas, with brothers Mark (11th grade, ranked 4th at 113 lbs.) and Geno (10th, top-ranked at 106), are the state's top 5A team aiming for its fourth consecutive state title.

If Pomona repeats and Daniel captures his fourth high school championship (120, 138, 145, 152), Cardenas will become only the state's second eight-timer: winning four individual titles along with four team titles. Jake Snider (125, 140, 140, 145) and Ponderosa first performed this feat in 2007-2010.

In addition, if Cardenas earns his fourth high school podium, he would be Pomona's first four-timer and Colorado's fourth seven-time school champ, after winning the RMN-sponsored State Middle School Championships in 6th, 7th, & 8th grade.

In fact, 2022 would be Daniel's 13th consecutive state title, beginning with the 6-&-under 45-pound bracket at the Colorado Youth State Championships.

Yet Daniel is most proud that he has remained humble. “It's been preached to me my whole life, so it's second nature to allow my actions to speak for me.”

Dad echoes this theme in his own life. “Our kids surpass us in knowledge and ability,” Dan said. “Not too long ago, my teachings came full circle. I was going through a rough patch, and I was stuck until my son reminded me that ‘life is like a wrestling match.’ At 42 years old, I realized that all life lessons come back to us.”

Young Daniel first began to traverse the country chasing after RMN Triple Crowns (championships in multiple states) and similar creative awards geared to incentivize higher goals. Yet he is most appreciative that “RMN attracted national-caliber competition to local events, which raised the bar for every Colorado wrestler.”

“RMN promoted wrestling in such an inviting way that we all caught the bug,” Adrina added. “They made it enjoyable for kids. I kid that wrestling raised our family, but it's true. The sport has certainly done a lot better for us and other families than words could ever explain.”

Both dad and son agree that RMN's spotlight finals have prepared him to excel in elite championship competition.

“Middle School State began with a call out, then a walk into the arena accompanied by a significant person,” remembers the older Daniel. “We competed on a raised stage with Ed (Gutierrez) announcing as master of ceremonies.”

Despite the success of his sons, Dan has managed to set his own ego apart from their accomplishments.

“We had to find a balance between wrestling and family. Parents: even when

By Bill X. Barron

you see a spark or shimmer from your son or daughter, don't forget why you got into this sport.

“This sport teaches us lessons (my word for wins and losses). Stay grounded in the moment. Keep it fun. With the right company, consistent practice, and through trial and error, both wrestling and life come into focus. What's most important is that your kid ends up being a good person.”

As the younger Daniel relates, “wrestling has shaped me into the person I am today.”

When Blair Academy contacted the Cardenas family in ninth grade, it was ultimately Daniel's decision.

“I chose to stay home so I could share my high school experience with family, friends, and my hometown team,” he said. “It was the right choice.”

Just the same, Daniel is heading to academically-elite Stanford, whose collegiate wrestling team has quickly rebounded from near extinction to a highly-competitive and rapidly evolving program under the tutelage of new coach Rob Koll, who also built a consistent top-ten NCAA program at Cornell in the Ivy League.

With a recruiting class that includes Connecticut's Nico Provo (NHSCA and National Prep Champion), Ohio's Wyatt Richter (St. Edwards), and Missouri's Jack Darrah (USA National Folkstyle Champion), “Stanford is signing kids I'd love to be around. I look forward to calling them my brothers!” exclaims Daniel.

As Pomona sets its sights on a fourth consecutive state crown, Daniel reminisces that “our coaches have all been give and give and give. Coach Sam (Federico) has always made sure to provide us with a competition level that makes us better.

“He got us The Shop, our own club and team gym,” Daniel said. “I can call Coach Kelly (Flaherty) any time for private lessons. And Ben VomBaur (Bear Cave) tutors me on how to beat the best without changing my style.”

Though every tournament brings those looking to knock off Cardenas, he learned a long time ago to focus on the next opponent, not a name on the bracket.

To continue performing at an elite level, Daniel knows he has “to work hard all the time. I don't let up or allow them back in the match by scoring easy points. In time, I break each opponent mentally before destroying them physically.”

“The boys have guided us where we want to be,” concluded Adrina. “With God providing the way, we have managed to stay humble as a family. We remind them that every achievement only moves the bar higher. And that no bar gets set until the initial expectations have been met.” ■

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