

# Cejudo is turning Arizona's Valiant Prep into national power

**E**ric Larkin, the 2003 Dan Hodge Award Recipient and Outstanding Wrestler as the NCAA's 149-pound champion, envisioned a Western-based school that had its roots in Eastern and Midwestern preparatory tradition.

This private school would be one where excellence would be experienced and enhanced throughout each student's academic, athletic, and social life. Likewise, it would embrace and emulate the core values of wrestling: the character to welcome life's challenges and the disposition to use these lessons into a continuous cycle of self-improvement.

Thus, Phoenix's Valiant College Preparatory was founded in 2018 with this mission: "Guided by relentless focus on our educational principles, we will constantly strive to implement the critical initiatives required to achieve our vision."

At the most recent Junior/16U Nationals in Fargo, wrestlers from this school showed off that vision, especially Larkin's son, Kyler, who won the 126-pound 16U freestyle title and was named the O.W. He was among 10 other All-Americans from Valiant, including fellow champs Adrian Meza (120 pounds/16U freestyle) and Davian Guanajuato (113 Junior Greco).

To embark upon this principled path, the staff begins by interviewing prospective students and their families to determine their readiness to take on the path toward greatness in all pursuits on and off the mat.

Then to equal Valiant's elite academic status, Larkin secured Angel Cejudo as head coach of the wrestling program. In high school, Cejudo went 150-0 earning four 5A Arizona state titles for Phoenix Maryville. In 2005, Angel became a resident at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs.

There he was joined by his brother Henry, still in high school, as well as his mother who had relocated from Mexico. At age 19, Henry went on to become the youngest-ever Mexican-American wrestler to earn Olympic gold with Angel at his side as his drilling partner and a voice in his ear.

"For me, the OTC was the best decision," said Angel. "It allowed me to meet new people and train in a challenging environment. It was my destiny, thus I remained there eight good years. High school kids who trained there sought me out to learn how to execute certain moves."

By Bill X. Barron



(G. Wyatt Schulz photo)

**Kyler Larkin (left) was named O.W. in 16U freestyle after he beat Landon Robideau of Minnesota at 126 pounds in Fargo.**

"When I was young," relates Angel, "I fell in love with wrestling and didn't want to miss a single practice. I found out who I am in the wrestling room. While some run away from the challenge, to me it is the greatest sport."



**Angel Cejudo**

"With mentors like Brandon Slay and Kevin Jackson, I earned a degree in the sport science of wrestling. As a training partner, I studied international opponents, then emulated their style. For example, the Russians had a terrible stance, but when they shot it was quick and explosive."

"In my heart," Angel relates, "I always knew I would be a coach because I have an intuitive feel for the sport. At Valiant, I have my own canvas to paint and clay to mold. But first it begins with building a strong foundation and finding a genuine love for the sport."

Angel embraces the total vision for Valiant Prep.

"Academics definitely come first," he said. "For myself, all I thought about was wrestling; then I learned that one day wrestling will end. To reach full potential, a

student must also experience life, earn a college degree, live a good life after wrestling.

"I tell my wrestlers to stay in the lane. Our teachers are good at what they do. They all have master's degrees. If you don't do your homework, you don't practice. You earn that privilege. You carry your own weight."

As evidence of their success, Angel and Eric point quickly to four perfect math scores earned by wrestlers on the 2019 Arizona Merit Exam.

Paralleling classroom excellence on the mat, Valiant had three 2019 High School Nationals finalists in Virginia Beach: Tanner Mendoza (1st, Jr. 170), Ramon Ramos (1st, So. 126), and Kaleb Larkin (2nd, Fr. 113), as well as third-place Benji Alanis (So., 126).

Wrestlers at Valiant have their own morning wake-up call with a 5:45 am work-out, which begins with a pep talk, followed by footwork and drills.

"There are a lot of like-minded kids in the room," said Cejudo. "The kids are there because they want to be. They are there because they want to be great. We call it 'champions by design.' One style doesn't work for every individual, so we train to who they are. What shot they take is their choice. What counts is that they finish it."

"The journey to the top takes discipline and focus. We expect our kids to be self-driven and self-motivated. With a room of athletes who want to be there, we can let them go because the energy is contagious."

"You have to be tough — only the tough will remain. If you survive, the sport has found you out."

"At the same time," continues Cejudo. "We have the freedom to meet with kids at all levels, while emphasizing the same training style and technique. With all these kids together in one room, they come to understand our shared vision."

The Valiant coaches emphasize technique that will be successful in national as well international tournaments.

"We teach to the highest level and the greatest detail. If you perfect the fundamentals: maintain great posture, lower your level, control each situation, if you follow these principles, all else falls into place."

For Angel, it is important to "not violate the principle of growth. We respect the rules of sport science. A coach can overwork younger kids. We start by teaching reaction drills. Weightlifting is done in accordance with stages of

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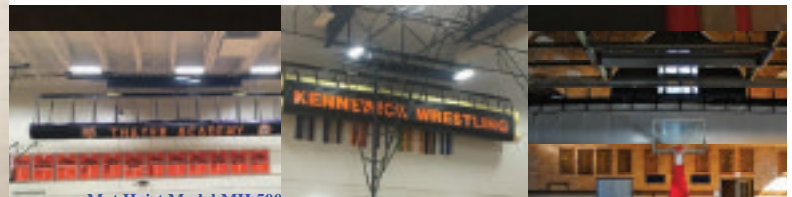
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# Women earn team title; men net two golds at Cadets

Note: The following story was compiled from several stories that appear on *TheMat.com*.

While the future of American Olympic wrestling is unknown, a large group of young USA athletes have suggested that they should be considered among future stars.

That includes 14 wrestlers who claimed medals — especially five gold medalists — at the 2021 UWW Cadet World Championships last month in Budapest Hungary.

And three of those Cadet World champions, wearing red, white and blue singlets — Amit Elor, Katie Gomez and Erica Pastoriza — as well as four other bronze medalists, led the USA women's freestyle team to the country's first World team title on the Cadet level.

Team USA finished with 149 points, ten points ahead of second-place India with 139. Russia finished in third with 134 points.

Pastoriza set the tone for the session in the 40 kg finals, pinning her opponent, Romania's Alexandra Voiculescu, with an arm bar in 1:34. Pastoriza went unscored upon in this tournament.

Ward was next up in the 46 kg bronze-medal bout. Ward, who advanced through repechage, earned an 8-1 decision over Belarus's Svetlana Katenka. Ward controlled the match and never seemed to be in any jeopardy.

At 53 kg, Katie Gomez became Team USA's second World champion. She cruised through her match with Russia's Natalya Khramenkova, who had no answer for her varied leg attacks. Gomez claimed the title with a 10-0 technical fall, scoring all of her points via take-downs.

Elor closed out the night with a pin over Ukraine's Yevheniia Siedyk in the 69 kg finals. At the time of the fall, Elor, a 2019 Cadet World bronze medalist, was already leading 10-0. She is another wrestler who went unscored upon in the event, earning two pins and a 10-0 technical fall.

This came after three other American women — Angie Dill, Audrey Jimenez and Lillian Freitas — earned bronze medals.

Dill earned a 32-second pin over Kazakhstan's Aida Alzhanova to claim her medal. Dill immediately headlocked Alzhanova to her back, and held her there for the fall. It was Dill's second pin of the tournament.

At 49 kg, Audrey Jimenez dominated Romania's Delia Voiculescu to the tune of a 10-0 technical fall victory. Jimenez scored three separate takedowns to pull



U.S. Women's Cadet World coach Jess Medina (center) held up the championship trophy.

ahead, 6-0. On the third takedown, she locked up a leg lace, and picked up two turns to close out the first-period technical fall. Jimenez went 4-1 across the tournament with all four wins coming by shut-out technical fall.

Freitas would not be denied a spot on the podium her second time around. Freitas bested Turkey's Bukrenaz Sert, 4-0, at 73 kg to close out the night for Team USA. Freitas scored one takedown in each period and utilized her superior defensive position to prevent Sert from putting a point on the board.

## U.S. 2021 Cadet World Medalists

The following is a list of American wrestlers who earned a medal at the 2021 Cadet World Championships in Budapest, Hungary.

Name, Weight	Style	Medal
Amit Elor, 69k	Women's FS	Gold
Bo Bassett, 45k	Men's FS	Gold
Katie Gomez, 53k	Women's FS	Gold
Erica Pastoriza, 40k	Women's FS	Gold
Meyer Shapiro, 65k	Men's FS	Gold
Luke Lilledahl, 48k	Men's FS	Silver
Cory Land, 55k	Greco-Roman	Silver
James Mullen, 110k	Men's FS	Silver
James Rowley, 80k	Men's FS	Silver
Angie Dill, 43k	Women's FS	Bronze
Lillian Freitas, 73k	Women's FS	Bronze
Nat. Jennings, 51k	Men's FS	Bronze
Audrey Jimenez, 49k	Women's FS	Bronze
Ava Ward, 46k	Women's FS	Bronze

Men's freestyle, the opening style of the Cadet Worlds, was the first to create news for American wrestling fans as both Bo Bassett and Meyer Shapiro captured gold medals and helped the young American men claim second as a team.

At 45 kg, Bassett became the second American to claim a Cadet World title. Bassett, who earned two pins and a technical fall en route to the finals, was the youngest competitor in his bracket at only 14 years old.

For gold, he squared off with Russia's Alikhan Ashinov in a battle that was pivotal to the team race. Ashinov was the third wrestler to score the first takedown on Bassett in this tournament.

Bassett stormed back, earning two points on a go-behind and quickly followed it up with a set of exposure points off another Ashinov shot. Bassett sprinkled in a little bit of folkstyle on top, using a head lever turned into a cement job to stick Ashinov at the 1:25 mark.

The second day of the Cadet World Championships wrapped up with Meyer Shapiro bringing home a gold medal for the Red, White and Blue. Shapiro, the 65 kg champion, defeated Georgia's Giorgi Gogritchiani in the finals, 8-4.

Shapiro got on the board first, earning a passivity point in the first period. However, 20 seconds into the second period, Gogritchiani executed a perfectly-timed lateral whip for four points. Shapiro quickly got a reversal to cut the score to 4-2.

With only 90 seconds left in the match, Shapiro got to work, setting a high pace and increasing his attack rate. He scored his first takedown at the one minute mark, still trailing on criteria, 4-4. 20 seconds later, he converted on another takedown, taking the lead 6-4. He tacked on another two points countering a last-ditch throw attempt by Gogritchiani, nearly earning a pin before the final buzzer.

Greco-Roman only netted one medal, but that color was silver from Cory Land.

In the 55 kg finals, Cory Land fell to Russia's Valerii Mangutov, 8-0. Mangutov executed a four-point lift in the first period and a go-behind into a gut-wrench for two turns in the second period to clinch the title.

Land wrestled a phenomenal tournament leading up to the gold-medal match. In his opening bout, he earned a 10-0 technical fall over Berati Inac of Turkey, a 2021 Cadet European bronze medalist. He followed it up with a thrilling victory over Sweden's Adam Silverin, 9-6. In the semifinals, he blanked Zhantoro Mirzaliyev of Kyrgyzstan, 5-0. This was Land's second trip to Cadet Worlds, finishing eighth in 2019. ■

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development.”

From the Cubans, Cejudo learned how to “warm up to properly lubricate the joints, manage stress by accommodating the work-out, and build the athlete before the wrestler through acrobatics training such as backward throws and flips.”

Angel remembers competing in RMN Events when they first started in 1999-2000 with only a couple of tournaments. “Now they are a top Western attraction. They provide the opportunity to compete against the very best here at home.

“You have to go to an RMN event to appreciate what they do. High level kids need to compete against others at that level. The only tournament series that consistently has that caliber of competition is RMN.

“The sport has been threatened by the pandemic and

even the Olympic Committee who considered dropping Greco. Despite all that, Ed and his family have kept the faith. Because of them, kids can continue with the sport they love.”

“Ed Gutierrez is true to who he is,” recalls Angel. “He’s a man of courage, respect, and honor. RMN are the only events that consistently begin with a prayer, support of the military, and then the national anthem.”

Under the guidance of his mother, Angel grew up immersed in the tradition of the church. “I learned that we went to church to reinforce our faith. James 2:14 recites that ‘faith without works is dead.’ You must act upon that in which you have faith. Then lay out the truth for all to see.”

To know Angel Cejudo is to know the mind of a learner and a champion of the heart. “When I started coaching elite girls, they bought me a calendar to schedule their

training. They have it tougher than boys; they must prove they can do the sport.

“Growing up, they struggle to find time to train and to find training partners. Regardless of roadblocks, they have still made it happen.” Angel trained his daughter Genesis, who placed fifth at 106 pounds in the 2019 Fargo 16U Girls Championships.

“I have transferred my hunger for wrestling into coaching,” stated Angel. “The vision – I am living that now. We’re going to break the chains from where we grew up. We will win national team titles, while teaching the next generation to give back, to get into college.

“Our kids will be home grown, not recruited. If you want to be part of something great, come join us!” ■