

Decisions, decisions

ZACH PIZARRO MADE ALL THE RIGHT DECISIONS TO BECOME WILKES UNIVERSITY'S LATEST ALL-AMERICAN

By Gary R. Blockus '79



ZACH PIZARRO MAY BE THE POSTER BOY WHO PROVES that college is a major exercise in how each choice you make can affect your life.

The Wilkes University senior did not begin his college career at Wilkes and did not begin his college career as a wrestler, yet the choices he made eventually led him both to Wilkes and to wrestling.

Pizarro made those choices pay off on March 6, when he earned All-American status by claiming fifth place at the 2010 NCAA Division III Wrestling Championships at the U.S. Cellular Center in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

“I wasn’t seeded at all,” Pizarro says of entering nationals and getting virtually no respect from a seeding committee that ranks the top eight wrestlers in a 16-man bracket. Pizarro’s reward for winning the 197-pound championship at the Metropolitan Conference Tournament was to meet defending national champion and top-seeded Jared Massey of Augsburg College in the opening round.

“I wouldn’t have considered myself as an underdog,” he says, “but to go into the national tournament with other people thinking of you as the underdog, and to come out as an All-American, that was a great feeling.”

But before Pizarro got the chance to wrestle Massey not once, but twice in Iowa, he took a long and winding detour that led him down Tobacco Road before ever reaching the banks of the Susquehanna in Wilkes-Barre.

“I attended North Carolina State University in the fall of 2005,” says Pizarro, who starred in football and wrestling at Easton (Pa.) High School, a perennial football and state wrestling power just 50 miles southeast of Wilkes-Barre. “I felt like the college experience was a little too much for me at that point in my life.”

After a semester off, he transferred to Wilkes and decided to play football in fall 2006, then found out the passion he had for the sport had worn thin.

“I spoke to coach [Jon] Laudenslager before arriving on campus, so I decided to give wrestling one more shot, and am happy I did,” he says.

“We actually tried to get him to come out for wrestling that first year, but he hurt his thumb in football,” says Laudenslager, who has coached four All-Americans in his seven years as head wrestling coach. “We got him to come out his sophomore year and he lost in the conference finals. He’s been in the conference finals three times and won twice.”

The Colonels finished second in the conference after setting a university record with 22 wins.

“We set the school record, but our percentage wasn’t as good as teams that were 21-0 and wrestled in Division I,” Laudenslager says. “We moved to Division III in 1999.”

Still, under Laudenslager, the Colonels garnered a conference championship in 2009, their first in 34 years.

Pizarro’s second trip to nationals is almost certainly his last, although he does have one semester of eligibility remaining. Pizarro did not perform as well as he had hoped in 2009 during his first time at nationals, where he watched roommate Frank Heffernan gain the podium as an All-American at 174 pounds. Heffernan entered the 2010 national championships as the No. 5 seed, but did not place.

“Wrestling at Wilkes has been more than I ever expected,” says Heffernan,

Wrestlers Win in the Classroom

Wilkes wrestlers such as graduating All-Americans Zach Pizarro and Frank Heffernan don’t limit their success to the mats. They also excel in the classroom.

The Colonels wrestling team combined for a 3.261 GPA to rank 15th nationally.

“Both Zach and Frank are solid students,” Wilkes head wrestling coach Jon Laudenslager says. “We encourage our wrestlers to be all-around students, to get their work done in the classroom. That work ethic from wrestling carries over to the classroom and creates a great environment for the team.”

Laudenslager is a firm believer that academics and athletics not only go hand-in-hand but offer similar tools on the road to success.

“If you’re not doing well academically, every aspect in your college life is going to struggle,” he says, “from athletics to your social life, to your family life when you get home. Our team goal is to graduate everybody in the program. We do study halls and things like that to get guys off to a good start when they get here.”

who ended his senior season 31-9 with more than 100-career wins. “Watching Zach at nationals, that was exciting. He lost both his matches to the No. 1 seed, the returning champ. He wrestled really well out there. He was just as tough in his last match as in his first.”

Pizarro, a business administration major who was as excited about job interviews lined up in April as he was earning All-American status, gave Massey all he could handle in the opening match, which he dropped 3-1. They met again in the consolation semifinals, where Massey scored a takedown in the first sudden victory period for a 6-4 decision.

“What really helped Zach,” Laudenslager says, “was having that defending national champion in the first match. He may have lost 3-1, but he walked away knowing he could beat anybody else in that bracket, including that kid. If he was in the other half of the bracket, he may have even made the finals. That first loss really helped him know he belonged there and could win there.”

Pizarro, who went 4-2 at nationals, ended his collegiate career by pinning Martin Porter from Delaware Valley College in 2:28 for fifth place.

Top left: Wrestlers Zach Pizarro, right, and Frank Heffernan finished successful careers wrestling for the Colonels. Pizarro earned All-American status in 2010, and both wrestlers competed at nationals for two consecutive years.

Below left: Zach Pizarro pins an opponent with the skill that earned him All-American status.