

**“Any wrestler who says they haven’t dreamed about having a gold medal put around their neck is a fucking liar - Who wouldn’t want one?” - Josh Thomson**

# FOUNDATIONS

The unsung world of collegiate wrestling continues to be a factory for future MMA success.

BY MATT BEARDMORE



Jon Fitch uses his wrestling prowess to thwart a triangle attempt by the always brash Josh Thomson.

**T**owering above his competition on the three-tiered podium, he proudly celebrates with this priceless golden prize and a steady stream of tears. The countless hours of training and sacrifices are paid in full as Old Glory rises with the crescendo of “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

Like every other young wrestler, Strikeforce World Lightweight Champ Josh “The Punk” Thomson has envisioned this moment of Olympic glory at least once.

But as often as Thomson and other young matmen have pictured this patriotic salute to Red, White and Blue, the temptation of a wallet full of MMA green can overcome the lure of a wrestling medal made of gold.

“Obviously, wrestling didn’t bring in any money,” Thomson says, making a point to credit North Idaho College (sorry, Stanford) for all his wrestling skills.

While the best an amateur wrestler could once hope for after hanging up their school’s singlet was a coaching position, an improbable Olympic berth, or an acting gig for Vince McMahon, decorated collegiate wrestlers including Randy Couture, Matt Hughes, and others have proven that a comfortable living is available to those transitioning from the mat to the Octagon.

“Finances are good right now,” says Thomson, who raked in more than \$40K for his June 2008 victory over Gilbert Melendez. “But in the beginning, I was going broke.”

In his pro debut in 1997, Thomson

coughed up 25 bucks just to show up. He received a paltry \$150 for his second fight – a mere percentage of the checks he’s scribbling his John Hancock onto these days.

“(Wrestlers) try to find something to possibly bring in some money, but they all look for something for their competitive drive,” says the 30-year-old from San Jose, California.

Cain Velasquez, also managed by Zinkin Entertainment, pursued MMA following his All-American wrestling career at Arizona State, although not for the six-figure paydays, 27s on his ride, or a spot on MTV’s *Cribs*.

“I really wanted to hit somebody, and I couldn’t do that in wrestling,” Velasquez says.

Even if his motives of becoming a MMA champ were purely financial, it would be hard to question this 26-year-old from Yuma, Arizona.

“I pretty much grew up with nothing,” says Velasquez, whose father, Efrain, Sr, had a third-grade education, while his mother, Isabel, ended her schooling following seventh grade.

With wins in his first four pro MMA fights – including a first-round TKO over Jake O’Brien at UFC Fight Night last July – and a few more Ws, this up-and-comer could be on the verge of some big-time bucks.

“I never thought that I’d be making a living like this,” Velasquez says.

If today’s earning potential for MMA fighters existed in the early-1990s, Uni-

versity of Iowa wrestling head coach Tom Brands would have needed a Brinks truck to haul his cash to the bank.

Yet the former four-time All-American and three-time NCAA champ at Iowa isn’t sure he would have taken that path toward MMA stardom.

“It’s hard to say,” he says. “You’re talking to a wrestler. Ever since I started, I knew what the pinnacle was. I had good coaches that made sure you watched the Olympics. I understood what the 1980 boycott was all about.”

Sixteen years after the United States bypassed the Summer Games in Moscow, Brands lived every young wrestler’s dream, winning a freestyle Olympic gold at 136.5 pounds in Atlanta.

“You can’t win the gold medal in fighting,” Brands says, “but a lot of these guys go (to MMA) based on money.”

For those who complain that there’s no money in wrestling, the no-nonsense



A young Cain Velasquez parries for position in a collegiate wrestling match.



Heard by  
a worldwide  
audience live  
every Monday.

**Go Beyond the Fight  
with PMR and your  
host Larry Pepe every  
Monday at 9 p.m. (EST)**

Pro MMA Radio (PMR) brings you the latest from the exciting world of mixed martial arts every week.

Guests include:

- Top Fighters
- Elite Trainers
- Industry Insiders

From Top MMA Promotions

On Demand Replays and Podcasts available 24/7!

Visit [prommaradio.com](http://prommaradio.com)

Presented by



Hawkeye offers this free piece of advice:

"If you're the best in your weight class in your country, you're going to make a good living," he says. "The motivation is the key ingredient."

Jesse Jantzen understands this drive. After becoming the first four-time high school state wrestling champ in New York State history, he was a three-time All-American at Harvard, finishing third at 149 pounds as a sophomore and junior before winning that weight class his senior year.

In June, Jantzen competed at the US Olympic Wrestling Trials in Las Vegas, but couldn't advance to Beijing in the 145.5-pound freestyle weight class.

"I didn't achieve my ultimate goal, but I'm still happy I had the opportunity to do it and pursue a dream," says Jantzen, 26.

Taking a break from the job hunt (a degree from Harvard can't hurt) and unpacking at his new pad in Manhattan, Jantzen says it's tempting to consider all the money he could be making in the UFC.

"The UFC is just knocking it out of the park with the money they're paying people," he says. "(USA Wrestling) needs to find a way to get our athletes funding for training. If you win the Olympics you can make a pretty good living, but past that, it's hard."

So has MMA become a threat to wrestling? It seems just the opposite.

"MMA is definitely making wrestling more popular," Jantzen says. "People are saying, 'That guy was a wrestler.'"

Wrestling is the sixth most popular sport for boys, trailing football, basketball, track and field, baseball, and soccer.

"The reality is that within the grassroots structure, wrestling has always been strong," says Mitch Hull, director of national teams for USA Wrestling. "It's never

been in danger of people losing interest."

Glenbard North (Ill) senior Jimmy Chase can vouch for that. While classmates were sleeping until noon, catching rays at the beach, and rocking the PS3 all summer, the defending Class AA 130-pound state wrestling champ was enjoying a Vegas Vacation, of sorts.

Chase, just 17, competed at the US Olympic Wrestling Trials at the Thomas & Mack Center in June, advancing to the consolation finals in Greco-Roman, where he took fourth at 55 kg/121 pounds.

"(A gold medal) would be for everything that I worked so hard for," Chase says. "Right now, all I'm looking for is gold in 2012 and 2016."

Although he may wrestle with the confidence and skill of a man twice his age, Chase--like many high school kids--remains a diehard MMA fan. "You can't help but respect these guys," he says, mentioning Matt Hughes and Urijah Faber as two of his favorites. "By the time I get out of college, the MMA guys will be making as much money as guys in other pro sports. It's definitely something I would want to do."

Hull won't have to convince Chase to stick around the mat for a few years, but with Title IX contributing to the loss of approximately one-fifth of the number of college wrestling teams from 1991-'92 to 2004-'05, and with only one US wrestler bringing home Beijing gold this summer (Henry Cejudo at 55 kg/121 pounds), amateur wrestling can't ignore MMA's impact on its sport.

"MMA can find the best competitors from wrestling and other styles and cherry pick certain individuals," Hull says. "We can't compete with that, but top wrestlers know that an Olympic medal will help them be more marketable with MMA."

Grabbing gold and green? Now that's music to any wrestler's cauliflower ears. 🍷

### Who says no one cares about wrestling?

According to the 2007-'08 High School Athletics Participation Survey conducted by the National Federation of State High School Association, wrestling has grown in each of the five categories from a year earlier, including the number of boys competing (up nearly 1% from 257,266), girls competing (a 9.5% increase to 5,527), and boys teams competing (up nearly 7% to 10,090).



ABOVE: Jesse Jantzen locks horns with an opponent.

LEFT: Jimmy Chase explodes with a powerful throw.