

## SPORTS

## The NCAA Weekend's Biggest Winner

Arizona State's Anthony Robles, Born Without a Right Leg, Claims a National Title

By JASON GAY

## Philadelphia

He came to win. He was polite, but he wasn't shy about his goal. When asked about it, he didn't shrug or hedge and try to deflect the pressure.

"I still want to be national champion," he would say. He said things like this more than once.

## The Couch



A few hours before the most important wrestling match of his life, Anthony Robles walked out on crutches into a near-empty Wells Fargo Center in Philadelphia. He wore a white winter hat and gray shorts, and he carried a plastic gallon jug of water. Reaching the elevated mat at the center of the arena, Robles stretched. He talked with his Arizona State teammates. He sipped his water. He ran—yes, ran—tight, dizzying circles around the border of the mat, planting his crutches ahead of his body, thrusting his left leg forward, bouncing his foot twice and repeating, a furious whirl.

These are rituals of wrestlers. That was all Robles wanted to be, since he tried out for his Mesa, Ariz., high-school team, a 90-pound freshman born without a right leg. He didn't know a thing about wrestling. Just attempting the sport was going to be inspirational—and Robles didn't have a problem with being inspirational—but he wanted to win, too.

He didn't, at least at first. "Terrible," is how Robles described his early wrestling.

But he became great. Robles won state high-school championships, then a national one. Ignored by many big wrestling colleges, he had gone to nearby

Arizona State, where he'd become an All-American and win three Pac-10 titles. And these accomplishments had earned him a conspicuous amount of attention, because to many people, Robles wasn't just an athlete, but something more—a symbol of perseverance, of a refusal to quit. The stories of Robles's training took on a mythical quality—charging up hills with his Sun Devils teammates, bench-pressing 305 pounds, a 125-pound wrestler with upper-body power sculpted by a lifetime on crutches. ESPN swooned. School kids mailed letters. Wrestling fans debated whether his missing leg was an advantage or disadvantage. "I didn't get into the sport for the attention," Robles said. "I wrestle because I love wrestling. But if I can help change somebody's life for the better..."

But maybe the stress of it all was getting to him just a bit. Saturday was his last chance to win the NCAA title he wanted so badly. He had ripped through the 2010-11 season—his senior year—undefeated. He arrived in Philadelphia the No. 1 seed in his weight class, and over two days and four matches, he advanced to the finals, but he was tired. On Saturday he and his family had walked around the city, and he'd watched his brother sprint up the famous steps that Rocky Balboa once did. "I walked," he said. "I was too sore."

In the final, Robles was pitted against Iowa sophomore Matt McDonough, the defending national champion at 125 pounds. The two had never met. During the national anthem, McDonough restlessly paced back and forth, as if he couldn't wait another second. A few feet away, Robles stood still on his crutches, jaw fixed, expressionless.

"I was scared," he admitted later. So much of Robles's last wrestling season had been dedicated to sharpening his mental strength, to relaxing under duress and slowing the match down. But as the arena announcer goosed the

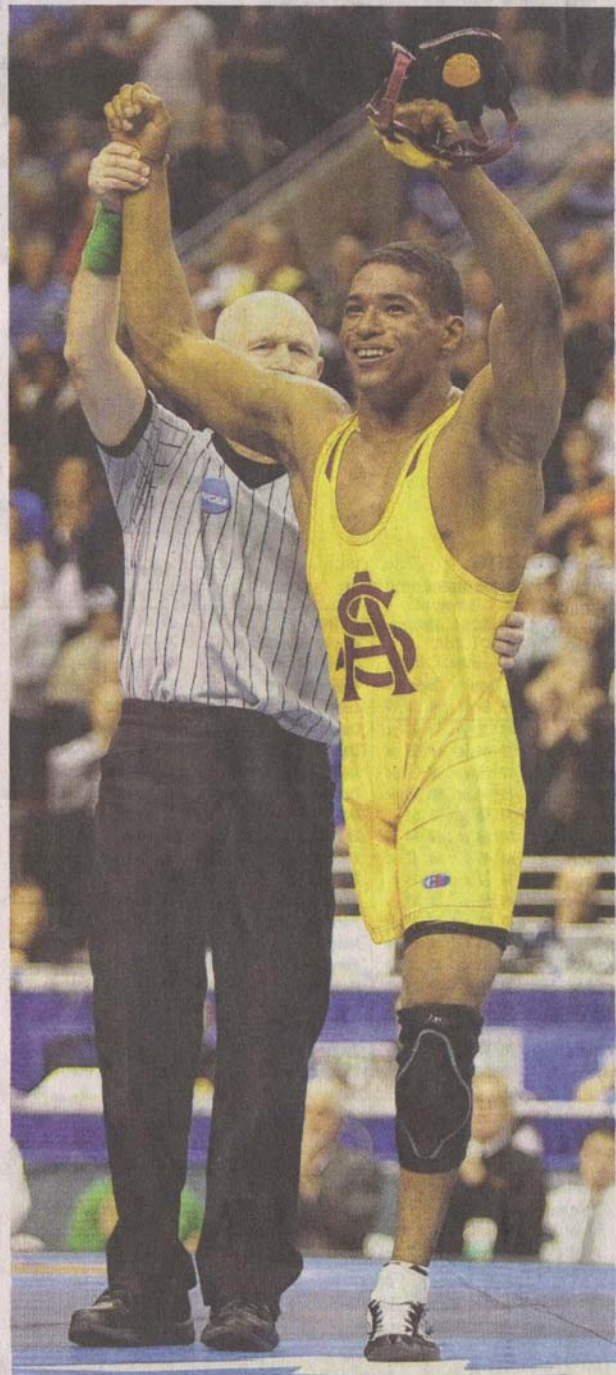
crowd—"We're going live on ESPN in 20 seconds!"—that inner calm seemed to be deserting him. Robles briefly thought he was going to throw up. "I almost started crying," he said.

It was strange, because he was usually so composed, especially in front of an audience. For a while, Robles had been saying he wanted to be a motivational speaker when he graduated. He'd gotten in contact with a Phoenix-area motivational speaker named Joel Weldon. Weldon had gone to a meeting prepared to tell Robles that speaking was a glutted profession, that he ought to try something else. "Within two minutes of meeting him, I threw my whole presentation in the garbage," Weldon said.

When the match began, Robles's jitters evaporated. Body contact does that—adrenaline takes over. Robles dropped to his knee, as is his style, and quickly gained an advantage over the rangy McDonough, taking him down. Robles's clench is ferocious—"Like a vice grip," said his coach, Shawn Charles—and McDonough, who had lost only twice in his college career, soon looked helpless underneath. Robles surged to a 7-0 lead, more than he needed. McDonough would manage only one point.

When it was over, Robles knelt on the ground, seemingly stunned. The arena's sold-out crowd soared to its feet. Robles jumped into the arms of Charles, who held his wrestler in a tight hug. There would be more interviews, including one on ESPN with his mother, Judy. News of his victory rippled through Twitter. Backstage, someone told him they thought his victory would be the sports story of the weekend, bigger even than the NCAA basketball tournaments and the NFL lockout nonsense.

He said, thank you, and reminded that he didn't get into wrestling for the attention. It was appreciated, but Anthony Robles was a national champion, and on Saturday night, that was all he wanted to be.



Anthony Robles after winning the NCAA title Saturday in Philadelphia.