

2026 NCAA Wrestling Championship

Wednesday, March 18, 2026

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Arena

Levi Haines

Sal Perrine

Jesse Mendez

Yonger Bastida

Media Conference



doing my job, going through school. And hopefully I can repay him a little bit what he's given to me along with our other coaches. Just look forward to hopefully being able to give back to him in some way in the future. And don't plan on going anywhere anytime soon.

Q. Sal, welcome home. You said a little bit about it, but just reflect how this journey has been that you're going to be able to end your college career here on mats not too far away from where you grew up?

SAL PERRINE: I grew up 20 minutes away. I've been in this arena a lot. Having the opportunity to represent where I came from, just going to mean the world to me for one last time.

Q. Jesse, you've been a menace all year. You've got that dog in you. How have you been able to capture the momentum from the season to the Big Ten to try and win your third NCAA title and potentially a Hodge Trophy?

JESSE MENDEZ: It starts in the summer. Throughout the summer and we've been putting the work in. You want to start the season strong.

I made an emphasis on trying to widen the gap this year and continue to score bonus points throughout the year. And last year I had a couple hiccups. And that was a big emphasis for me, was my performance, the way I wrestle.

And I really want to wrestle with an extreme focus and an offensive mindset for seven minutes. Just from the start of the season till now, that's been my mindset. And I look forward to carrying that into the tournament.

Q. Yonger, how does it feel to be able to be here and represent Cuba and all the little kids who look up to you and hope to one day be in your position?

YONGER BASTIDA: Man, it means a lot. It's a beautiful opportunity for me and for everybody up here to be able to be here representing either the country or school or whatever. It means a lot. I can't wait for tomorrow, the next few days.

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Sal Perrine, Yonger Bastida, Jesse Mendez and Levi Haines.

LEVI HAINES: I think it's been a good season. I've seen our team progress pretty well throughout the season. We have a lot of young guys in the lineup and they've been taking care of business, getting better. It's been fun to watch those guys get better along with everybody else. And I think we're right where we need to be headed here into the national championships.

JESSE MENDEZ: It's been a really fun season. I'm excited to cap my career off in Cleveland. And we've had a really good year, a fun year. Just getting to see my guys go to work every day and continue to get better throughout the season. I think we're ready to peak at the right time.

YONGER BASTIDA: We're ready, until the job is done, and we are just focused for what is coming, which is the tournament tomorrow. And for myself, I'm excited to be representing my school. It's my last season. I'm excited about tomorrow.

SAL PERRINE: I'm excited to be represented Ohio and here in my hometown and rep it. Plan to have a better ending this weekend.

Q. Levi, in Cael's press conference this week he talked about you and said you're going to be one of the guys, as much as anybody that's ever come through the program, that he's going to miss. When you look at the legends that have come through Penn State, what is it like to hear him say something like that about you, and what does that mean to you?

LEVI HAINES: It means a lot to me. It means I was



Q. Levi, you guys come in with seven No. 1 seeds, and you've broken the scoring record the past two years. What is the success for you guys in this tournament? Is it breaking the scoring record again? Is it getting 10 All-Americans again? What do you guys talk about as to what you want to achieve here?

LEVI HAINES: I don't think we focused too much on the results, stuff like that, breaking records or anything.

I think each and every one of us kind of comes in with a goal of just being ourselves and staying true to our character throughout these tournaments. The big moments it's easy to stray way from who you are and let that stuff kind of come in a little bit.

So I think that's our main focus this weekend, just being ourselves and competing hard.

Q. Sal, huge cheering section. Northfield, Macedonia, they're going to be here in force a lot of Italian Americans coming. What's it like knowing that you have the momentum, the cheering section, it's the last ride?

SAL PERRINE: I think it makes it pretty easy to go out and just let everything fly. It's a big tournament. It can get to you at some point. But just letting it fly and just being yourself out there. It's pretty easy when you have somebody supporting you from the back.

Q. Jesse, big story line heading into the weekend is a potential match with you versus Sergio Vega, true freshman. You were there one time as a true freshman. How much do you think about that match? How much are you preparing for that?

JESSE MENDEZ: I try not to think about it too much. But you will get excited for those matches. Going into your senior year, you get a fiery freshman, and you want those cool story lines when you're looking back at your career. I'm really excited for it. Hopefully the cards play out to where that match-up happens.

Q. Yonger, you were out last season. So obviously your absence was felt. A lot of chirping this season of your return and your dominance and maybe how the season before that went. What do you hope fans and your competition thinks going into this and what they should expect from you?

YONGER BASTIDA: Just seven minutes of hard wrestling, that's what they can expect. For seven minutes I just have that fight. It's going to be my purpose in that minute.

Q. Levi, how did the experience at the Senior World Championships prepare you or help you get to this point for your run here in the NCAAs?

LEVI HAINES: Yeah, it was a great opportunity just to keep getting better all summer. I was always getting ready for another tournament. And through that and I just had a lot of opportunities to just get better at wrestling.

Each match I just treat it as practice for my next one. And I think I made a lot of big gains throughout the summer and got to see some cool places, meet some cool people.

I think it's just kind of been getting ready since the Senior Worlds, and just getting better from every little piece of data collected through competing.

Q. Levi, Pennsylvania, once again, leads the tournament with 50 qualifiers. Is that a point of pride for you? I know you've got teammates from all over on the Penn State team, but do you enjoy representing Pennsylvania and the lineage that has come through the NCAA Tournament from there?

LEVI HAINES: Absolutely. It's really cool to be a part of. I just think it's just really neat to see the history and heritage of wrestling in the state of Pennsylvania. Just seems like it keeps on getting better and better.

We just watched the state tournament last weekend. And it seems like it keeps getting better and better. I look forward to watching some of those guys in the national tournaments in the future.

Q. Yonger, 2022, you're an All-American at 197. Now you're at heavyweight. The guys are much different, they're bigger. You're really athletic. You've been battling injuries. What is it like to wrestle heavyweights compared to 197? And does 2022 seem like a really long time ago?

YONGER BASTIDA: It's way better. I don't have to cut weight which is hard, everybody knows that. Well, you know I feel way better at heavyweight. I'm stronger and faster, I would say, yeah. I feel like at heavyweight I'm at my best.

Q. Jesse and Levi, you both wrestled four years straight. No redshirt. You both won national titles before. Explain the decision to not redshirt. And then also what would it mean for you to end your career with an NCAA title?

JESSE MENDEZ: It wasn't like the plan coming out of high

school to go in off the rip, but once you get in the room and you start getting that itch, I just wanted to go right away.

And I started talking to coaches. I felt like I was ready, especially in a really tough weight class in my freshman year at 133 with guys like RBY and Vito and Daton Fix, it was a tough weight class. I think the best way to get better is to go up against the best. And that's what I wanted to do.

I wanted to throw my hat in the ring early and see where I was at. I think it's kind of catapulted me to have the success I've had.

And then to finish off my college career with a national title would really cap off my career. But I don't really hold myself to my accolades. I'm trying to focus on my compete and my performances, and I just want to wrestle like me for seven minutes.

LEVI HAINES: Similar to Jesse, my coaches and I just decided that at the time we just thought I was ready to go, and I knew they had my best interest in mind. So just listening to them.

And I feel like at Penn State, if you can get in the lineup, you go wrestle. I felt really good about it. I trusted them and just getting better each time I step on the mat.

That's what I plan on doing this weekend, not too worried about finishing off my career with a national championship. Hopefully my career is a lot longer than just this weekend.

I don't really try to focus on that. Just focusing on being myself, I think, is what I'll look back on and be that's what I'm most proud of, is in those big moments that I was true to myself. And I feel like when you hit all those boxes, usually the winning takes care of itself.

Q. Despite the pressure, despite the expectations, how do you continue to find joy in this sport?

LEVI HAINES: I just like throwing people down.

YONGER BASTIDA: That's what we love, just go out there and wrestle hard. That's what we love. That's what we've been doing since we were kids.

JESSE MENDEZ: Yes, it's easy to get caught up in the noise a lot of people talking about you, your performances, whether the people love you or they hate you.

But at the end of the day we're doing what we love. And you're blessed to be able to get to do what you do every day. Whether that comes with a lot of stress, that's what

you signed up for, and you signed up to do what you love.

SAL PERRINE: It's a great opportunity to represent our schools in a big arena in front of thousands of people.

Q. Jesse, you've been vocal in the past about the Hodge Trophy, specifically. You talked about, in addition to one-upping Jagers, because you didn't win it as a freshman, you said you needed to get the Hodge Trophy. Why is it important to you, and what would it mean for you to bring that home and bring another Hodge Trophy to Ohio State?

JESSE MENDEZ: Yeah, I just think with me and J's relationship, we're always trying to one-up each other. We're always taking digs at each other, making fun of each other. If I just got something I could hang over his head that he can't go back and change, that's a win in my books.

Q. Levi, "Country Boy Can Survive," "Dinosaur," what's the Hank Williams Jr song this potential weekend? Has there any been any hunting, any just down-home, good old-fashioned fun lately?

LEVI HAINES: Yeah, I don't know what the song will be. It will probably be Hank Jr of some sort. No, we're always outdoors and doing something. So we have a good time.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports