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SPORTS

The Wrestler, the Philosopher, and the Amazing Pull-Up Chase

A beloved NCAA champ takes on a Harvard lecturer's incredible fitness mark



Former Arizona State wrestler Anthony Robles, left, is aiming to break Adam Sandel's mark for pull-ups in one minute. PHOTO: CHRIS SZAGOLA/CAL SPORT MEDIA/ZUMA PRESS; ADAM SANDEL



By Jason Gay

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Do you know the Guinness Book of World Records mark for pull-ups in one minute? I didn't—until about 48 hours ago.

It's 61. Now you know. Sixty-one good old-fashioned pull-ups, chin over bar, in 60 seconds. That's insane. You could give me the rest of 2018 to do 61 pull-ups and I might get...six. Or one. To get 61, I might need all of 2019. And 2020.

The current record is held by a man named Adam Sandel, who is, as you might expect, an... Oxford-educated lecturer in social studies at Harvard.

Wait, what?

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It's true. The Brookline, Mass.-raised Sandel, 32, leads one of the great double lives in America: part Ivy League philosophy teacher, lecturing on Plato and Aristotle and the Ideal of the Open Mind (that's the name of one of his classes) and part fitness superman, breaking world pull-up marks several times in the past few years. The 150-pound Sandel also holds records for weighted pull-ups—32 in one minute with a 40-lb. weight, and 18 in one minute with an 80-lb. weight.

So much for the easy stereotype of the tweedy college educator, smoking a pipe in the quad and taking his students out for pitchers: this philosophy teacher (who goes by “Professor

Pullups” on Instagram) is ripped.

Do his Harvard students know?

“They gradually started finding out,” Sandel told me the other day. “They all pretty much know by now.”

I’ll get back to Professor Pullups in a second, but this story gets even better, because now Sandel has a new, out-of-nowhere challenger: Anthony Robles.

If you’re thinking that name rings a mild bell, that’s because Robles was the talk of sports for brief stretch in 2011, when the Arizona State wrestler—who was born without a right leg—won an NCAA title in the 125-pound weight class. Robles’ dramatic victory went viral; ESPN gave him its “Jimmy V” Award for Perseverance; there’s a movie about his life set to begin filming, starring actor Jason Mitchell as Robles.

Since graduation, Robles has been touring as a motivational speaker, working with everyone from Fortune 500 companies to Wounded Warriors returned from conflicts with missing limbs.

But now he’s taking a brief detour into the world of competitive pull-ups.

“I turned 30 this July, and I was thinking, ‘Man, I want a new challenge,’” Robles told me. “I want a new mountain. I’d been training for a while, but a friend brought it up to me: ‘Why don’t you go see what the Guinness Record for pull-ups is, and see how you match up?’”

Robles has thrown himself into training, and has targeted Nov. 11 for his attempt at breaking the mark of 61. If Anthony Robles wasn’t Anthony Robles—inspirational figure, book author, legendary SportsCenter highlight—he might try to knock off the record in his local gym back in Arizona.

Instead, he’s going to do it in New York—or more specifically, in the New Jersey Meadowlands, during a break in the action at a New York Jets game on Nov. 11.

I’ll say it again: Wait, what?

There are tough crowds in sports—and then there are Jets games. Sometimes it’s hard to be a Jet in front of Jets fans.



Arizona State’s Anthony Robles, left, won an NCAA title in 2011. PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

Robles is undaunted. “My agent told me, “I could do something really cool with this, or we could keep it really small,” Robles said. “I figured, hey, the bigger this gets, the more my message will reach people.”

“I really want to break that record. It’s going to be scary trying to do

it in front of all those people. But whether I do it, or I don’t, I feel like I’ll have accomplished my ultimate goal in sharing my message.”

Again, the pull-ups Robles will do are straight pull-ups, not the swinging, “Kipping” variation popularized by CrossFit classes. Starting from a hanging position, his chin must go over the bar, and his elbows must straighten on the return. Competitors are monitored to make sure they keep their hips straight and don’t use their lower body to generate momentum.

Robles will be trying to do more than one pull-up per second.

Yeah. It’s wild.

“There are a lot of things going on, and it’s a short window, so I’ve got to make sure I get my reps right, and get the right rhythm,” said Robles, who currently weighs 130 pounds, not far from his wrestling weight.

Now because this is sports, and people love a reason to get riled up, Robles knows there will be critics who think he's got an advantage because of having only one leg—as in, there's less of him to pull up. It's the kind of chatter Robles grew familiar with during his wrestling days, when folks wondered if his missing leg and larger upper body gave him an edge.

He's not fazed.

“No matter who you are, or what you do, people are going to say something,” Robles said. “They try to drag you down, and you can't let that affect you. You just gotta do the best with what you have. You can't please everybody.”

You know who isn't trying to diminish Robles's attempt at the pull-up record? The guy who holds the pull-up record.

“I don't care who you are—if you're doing pull-ups and you can do 60, or come close to that, that's amazing,” Adam Sandel said. “Thinking about someone who doesn't have a leg, having had such massive success in wrestling, and now clearly having massive talent in pull-ups, I just find it super-impressive.”

“I'm in awe of that.”

Sandel is making another run at his own body weight pull-up record on Dec. 8, at the FIBO USA Global Fitness event in Orlando. He thinks 70 pull-ups is in the realm of possibility. Perhaps by then, he'll be chasing a new mark from Robles.

Either way, Sandel wants to go bar-to-bar sometime with his latest challenger

“Maybe if he breaks the record, or goes for it again, we can do something together, publicly” Sandel said. “That would be amazing.”

Robles agreed.

“Heck yeah—that would be awesome,” he said.

Who wouldn't want to see it? The Wrestler and the Professor walk up to a bar. I think we've found the best new rivalry in sports.

MORE BY JASON GAY

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