

Winnipegger in Serbia to take on the world

WRESTLING CHANGED HIS LIFE

BEN LITTLE

WHEN Sam Pereira joined his Winnipeg school's wrestling program in Grade 8, he simply wanted an outlet for his energy. Ten years later, he's representing his country at world championships.

Pereira, 22, who attended St. John Brebeuf School in River Heights, is a four-time national champion freestyle wrestler, who's medalled in four international events. He takes the mat today in Novi Sad, Serbia, where he hopes to reach the podium at the U23 World Wrestling Championships.

"It's changed my life dramatically, in a very positive way," he said of his early introduction to the sport. Pereira attended the University of Alberta before transferring to Simon Fraser University, the only Canadian school that competes in the NCAA.

For the past couple of months, Pereira has trained at the Lehigh Valley Wrestling Regional Olympic Training Center in Lehigh, Pa. He rooms with Mike Macchiarello, a NCAA champion and U.S. National Team wrestler, and three-time NCAA All-American Jordan Wood.

"They're both very influential people for me," Pereira said. "They've helped me out a lot, mentally and physically. They're great people to have around."

Since he arrived at Lehigh in early August, Pereira has been learning under Kerry McCoy, Lehigh's executive director and head coach, a two-time NCAA champion and former U.S. Olympian.

"He's just a good person," Pereira said. "When speaking to him, you know that's a figure that you can gain knowledge from."

McCoy said it didn't take long for Pereira's competitive side to stand out in training.

"The first thing I think about with Sam is he's open, always willing to learn," McCoy said. "I think that's what helps people to get better and improve."

He said there wasn't much of an

adjustment period for Pereira, who's competed against many of Lehigh's athletes through international competition and the NCAA.

"He's just a great guy to be around, we have some great conversations," McCoy said. "Very humble, very laid-back, we get along very well... it's pretty cool to see how he's fit in."

Pereira echoed his respect for McCoy.

'I think the biggest thing that I liked is just how hard it was. Physically demanding, mentally demanding... I just didn't really have the same love for (hockey)'

—Sam Pereira

"Wrestling's a tough sport, he's a very understanding coach," Pereira said. "He takes the time out of his day. I already feel like I have a personal relationship with him."

As he prepares for his second world championship, Pereira reflected on where he fell in love with the sport, when teacher Nathan Polakoff established a wrestling program at St. John Brebeuf School.

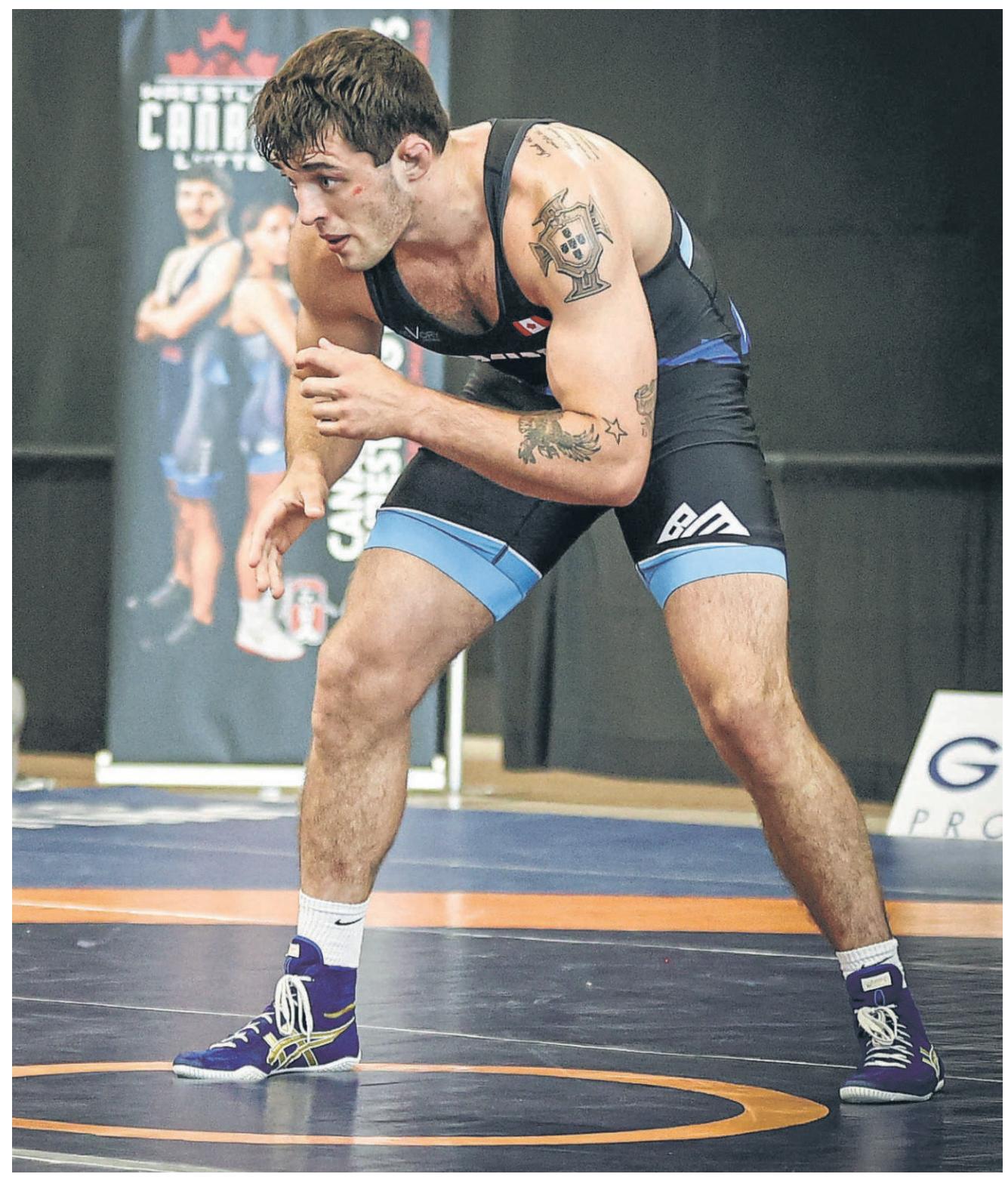
"I just thought, 'Got to get my energy out somehow,'" Pereira joked.

Pereira, who played hockey at the time, realized that he enjoyed wrestling for different reasons.

"I think the biggest thing that I liked is just how hard it was," he said. "Physically demanding, mentally demanding... I just didn't really have the same love for (hockey)."

Pereira credits Polakoff as his first real mentor and the one who inspired his love for the sport. Polakoff said he is just a small cog in Pereira's growth as a wrestler.

"It's wonderful that Sam thinks of me as the start of his journey," said Polakoff. "The kid is just so talented and such a grounded guy... you'd never



Sam Pereira was looking for an outlet for his energy when he took up wrestling as a Grade 8 student at St. John Brebeuf School.

JOE PEREIRA PHOTO

know how hard he's been working because he's just always pleasant, happy to see you and humble."

Now the principal at St. Joseph The Worker School in Transcona, Polakoff is still a Canada A official, and a United World Wrestling level 2 official — qualified to referee around the world in both Greco-Roman wrestling and freestyle wrestling. He is also the Western Canada representative for wrestling officials.

The husband and father of three said despite a busy work life, he finds a little extra joy in officiating and teaching the sport he loves.

"I just love seeing kids have that light bulb go off in their head when they do

a move right, or see that smile on their face when they figure it out," said Polakoff. "It's something that I still love to do and love to be involved in."

Polakoff and Pereira still cross paths every once in a while, catching up at different wrestling events.

"I'm just in awe that Sam is where he's at today," Polakoff said. "It's all due to him."

As physically demanding as the sport is, keeping a cool head is equally as important, Pereira said.

"There's so much mental work that goes into this," he said. "You're going through endless hours of physical torture."

"You're basically going to fight this

guy. Like, 'Who's the better man' almost... there's a lot of mental that goes into that."

Pereira said to execute this weekend, he wants to focus on his training and let the results speak for themselves.

"You can't worry too much about the outcome," Pereira said. "I'm a God-driven person, there's always going to be a plan... the biggest thing is just having confidence inside yourself, which is an easy thing to be said, but a very hard thing to execute."

You can watch Pereira and Team Canada this weekend through Flo Wrestling, or the United World Wrestling website.

NBA Commissioner 'deeply disturbed' by gambling arrests

TIM REYNOLDS

NBA Commissioner Adam Silver, in his first public comments since the arrests of Portland head coach Chauncey Billups and Miami guard Terry Rozier on gambling-related charges, said Friday night he was stunned by the indictments that have rocked the league.

"My initial reaction was I was deeply disturbed," Silver said. "There's nothing more important to the league and its fans than the integrity of the competition. I had a pit in my stomach. It was very upsetting."

Such was a sentiment shared by many around the league on Friday, one day after the indictments were unsealed and nearly three dozen people — most notably, Billups and Rozier — were arrested by federal officials.

Rozier was arrested because federal officials allege he conspired with associates to help them win bets based on his statistical performance. The charges are similar to what former Toronto player Jontay Porter faced before he was banned from the league by Silver in 2024.

Billups faces charges of conspiracy to commit wire fraud and money laundering for participating in what federal officials called Mafia-backed rigged poker games. He also matches the credentials of someone described only as Co-Conspirator 8 in an indictment detailing how some people gave bettors inside information on player health statuses.

The arrests have overshadowed the opening week around the league.

"I apologize to our fans that we are all dealing with this situation," Silver said during the in-game interview.

— The Associated Press

Englishmen known for abundance of talent and attitudes

Rashford and Bellingham face off in El Clasico

JERRAD PETERS
KICKABOUT



IT isn't often you get a "first" in El Clasico. Not when Real Madrid and Barcelona have been battling for more than a century, and not after Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi completely reconfigured the rivalry's statistical categories.

There will be one during Sunday's match at Estadio Santiago Bernabeu (10:15 a.m., TSN3).

For the very first time, a pair of Englishmen will go head-to-head in club football's most famous contest. On the home side: Madrid's Jude Bellingham, born in Stourbridge in the West Midlands. On the guests' Barca's Marcus Rashford, born in Manchester.

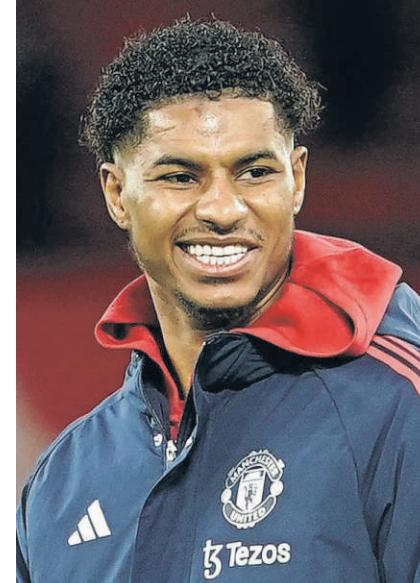
Both are England internationals. Both are coming off disappointing seasons. Both scored midweek in the Champions League. Both have well-known attitude problems.

Either one could be the hero on La Liga's 10th matchday of the campaign.

Yes, there are some obvious similarities between the two, but in no way are they mirror images of each other.

Bellingham, who turned 22 during the summer, won a league and Champions League double as a 20-year-old, after which he finished third in Ballon d'Or voting. As part of the England team that finished runner-up at Euro 2024, his stoppage-time equalizer prevented a round of 16 embarrassment against Slovakia.

In 2023, he became the 11th most expensive player of all time when he joined Real Madrid from Borussia



DAVE THOMPSON / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS FILES

Barcelona's Marcus Rashford scored twice against Olympiacos on Tuesday.



MATT SLOCUM / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS FILES

Real Madrid's Jude Bellingham has been called one of the most complete players in the world by his coach.

Dortmund for €103 million.

Over the same period, Rashford was omitted from the Euro squad and scored 11 Premier League goals for Manchester United and two more for Aston Villa, which he joined on loan in January. Banished from United training during pre-season, he was loaned to Barcelona in July.

The Catalans have the option of signing the 27-year-old permanently for a cut-rate fee of €35 million — about what Nottingham Forest paid for James McAtee.

Reading the tale of the tape, it might seem as though Bellingham has the advantage ahead of El Clasico. Five years Rashford's junior, he's already accomplished more than his countryman and still has time — a lot of it — to bury a rather unsavoury reputation.

And yet, he hasn't played for England since a 3-1 loss to Senegal four months ago. Rightfully citing the midfielder's shoulder problem, which

required surgery, Three Lions boss Thomas Tuchel left Bellingham out of September's squad for World Cup qualifying. He didn't call him up for this month's matches, either, and it wasn't because of the shoulder.

Back in June, Tuchel told the BBC that Bellingham's "explosion towards referees and the anger in his game" needed to be channeled into productive energy. He added his mother found the player's behaviour "repulsive."

If Bellingham takes the lesson, he should meet or exceed the standard he set two seasons ago when he scored 23 goals and was named La Liga's MVP. On Wednesday, following his goal-scoring performance against Juventus, Madrid manager Xabi Alonso called him "one of the most complete players in the world."

Rashford is another story. Actually, he's several stories — at least two of which have played out in the few months he's been at Barcelona.

First off, his very presence in Spain

is due to a breakdown in the relationship with boyhood club Manchester United. One could make the case that Red Devils head coach Ruben Amorim, who took over the Premier League outfit 11 months ago, was never well-disposed to the forward to begin with, but the fact is Rashford's performance over a two-year span was always going to result in his exit.

In recent comments made on *The Good, The Bad & The Football* podcast, United legend Paul Scholes condemned Rashford's "disgraceful" demeanor and alleged he'd "quit on United."

September reports in Spain suggested Barcelona had already soured on the player as well, with *El Nacional* claiming the loan would be terminated early and Rashford "lacked spark," barely participated" and had "difficulties associating with his teammates."

In his first full appearance for the Blaugrana, Rashford was hauled off at half time. In late September he was punished for arriving late to training. He said he'd slept in.

And yet, he scored twice against Newcastle in the Champions League — and was named Man of the Match — and followed up the display with assists in three consecutive games. In the fourth, he scored at Sevilla. On Tuesday, he scored twice more against Olympiacos.

This is a striker, don't forget, who bagged 30 goals in 2022-23. He's also the one Barcelona hopes shows up on Sunday.

For all their challenges, for all their faults, both Bellingham and Rashford go into El Clasico in their best form of the season. Together, the two Englishmen will make it a unique "first" in the rivalry's history.

Individually, they're also working on themselves. The player who makes the biggest difference at the Bernabeu could well be the one who's done the better job of it.

jerradpeters@gmail.com
jerradpeters.bsky.social