

Cuban Connection Drove Anthony Echemendia To Ohio State



Roughly five months after defecting from his home country of Cuba, Anthony Echemendia found himself in the United States.

One of the brightest young wrestlers the country had to offer, Echemendia wanted to the chance to hone his craft in America, not Cuba. To do so, he left in the middle of the night, travelled across Peten, Belize and Mexico all the way to the El Paso border.

Following two months of detention at the border following a request for political asylum, Echemendia was allowed through in October of 2018, released to wrestling coach Fernando Villaescusa, whom Echemendia knew through a connection with his dad.

The same month, Echemendia enrolled at Sunnyside High School in Tucson, Ariz. Sunnyside is one of the top high school wrestling programs in the country and happens to employ Villaescusa as an assistant. Echemendia's senior year certainly wasn't traditional, but it was legal and legitimate and, most importantly, allowed him to wrestle competitively for the first time since his departure from Cuba.

The time off didn't impact Echemendia. Wrestling at 152 pounds, the senior went 22-0 for Sunnyside and easily won an Arizona state title. He kept winning. At the Junior National Championships in July, he went 14-0 wrestling in both the Greco-Roman and freestyle tournaments on his way to a double junior championship. It was his first Greco-Roman tournament.

His combined 139-10 score at the tournament drew attention.

He started receiving calls from schools all over the country, though just one truly drew his eyes: Iowa State. After a visit to the campus in early September, Echemendia ended his recruitment before it ever really began, committing to the Cyclones on Sept. 20. Shortly after, he showed off his talent again, at "Who's Number One," a yearly event put on by FloWrestling. Echemendia won the 65kg division with a 10-0 tech fall victory over the nation's No. 8 recruit, Cornell commit Joshua Saunders.

That's when Ohio State reached out. Or, at least, when the call went through.

"We reached out to him initially and didn't get a response," Ohio State head coach Tom Ryan told BSB. "That's because, probably, our correspondence didn't get to him, what we thought was reaching out to

him.

“I saw he was committed, I was like ‘wow,’ we didn’t know if he was eligible to wrestle or not, we didn’t know the scenario. So I reached out to Coach (Anthony) Leon at Sunnyside who just does a good job over there at Sunnyside High School, which is where Echemendia went to high school. I reached out to him, he said he was over at Iowa State, he had committed to Iowa State.”

After initial conversations yielded little to no return for the Buckeyes and with just a month until the Nov. 13 National Signing Day, Ryan knew he needed to act quickly to get involved with the Cuban. More importantly, he would need to get creative.

Enter Casimiro Suarez.

An assistant with the Ohio State men’s gymnastics team for the last eight seasons, Suarez is a well-known face around campus. He’s gregarious and passionate and has a strong relationship with Ryan. More importantly, Suarez has something few on campus could claim: He’s Cuban.

“We started the conversation, and I think what really broke the ice in the relationship was our men’s assistant gymnastics coach. He’s a Cuban,” Ryan explained. “So I went to him, because I was trying to build trust. (Echemendia) was hearing a lot of things from a lot of people who had a stake in the game.

“But you go to a guy who had no stake in the game, he’s from Cuba, he understands what this guy grew up with, I think he really opened the door to ‘hey these guys here are going to take care of you.’ So that was big for us, that relationship was really important, and we’ve got a really great relationship with Cas.”

To start that connection, Ryan didn’t do anything extravagant. He just gave the gymnastics coach who had left Cuba in 1996 a phone number, with a request to give Echemendia a call.

After Suarez introduced himself, the Buckeyes were in. Echemendia was familiar with the coach’s success as a gymnast in Cuba and had grown up reading about him.

“Of course,” Suarez told BSB, when asked if the two connected quickly. “Because I am from Cuba, and then I introduced to him my name. I said, ‘I am Casimiro Suarez. I was a very famous gymnast in Cuba, one of the best in the country.’ ”

Suarez explained that Ryan had given him the phone number and that he wasn’t looking to sell Ohio State, just that he wanted him to give advice to someone following a similar path to the one he had taken more than 20 years prior.

“I want to be honest with you on the situation that you are in now,” Suarez told Echemendia over their first phone call, “that I think is not going to be right for you. You know I am from Cuba, I want to help you. I want to say the truth. I know how hard the process is.”

For Suarez, this was more than a tie to his home country. While his Cuban heritage heavily inspires him and helped create the bond between the two, Suarez sees some of himself in Echemendia. He sees values that guide him.

“We have the appreciation for the people helping us and doing something for us,” Suarez said of his Cuban heritage. He wanted to give the help to Echemendia that he didn’t receive when he arrived in

America.

“Now for that reason, as soon as I find out this about him,” Suarez said of the chance to help Echemendia, “I went on to talk to him and to explain to him the opportunity that is open for him. Especially at this university. Because for me, this university made my life complete, made my dream come true. And it’s a nice place when everybody involved in the athletic department wants to take care of you.”

Aside from the Cuban connection, Suarez has a strong belief in the ability of Ohio State to put a young man like Echemendia on the right path, just as it did for him.

“I didn’t only explain to him what the school offered for him,” he said. “I talked to him, told him, ‘It’s your life. I want the best thing for you because you are a Cuban. And in this country, it’s a wonderful country, but it’s a hard country for the immigrant. You need to understand, I know every school is going to try to recruit you. All you need to think, what is going to be the best thing for you? What are your priorities? Your priority is what? To compete? To be doing wrestling? To be a champion? Or to also have education? To be with people that want to take care of you?’

“Then I told him, ‘Coach Ryan and his whole coaching staff, they love you. They want you.’ And I told him that ‘every school wants you too. Because you, you’re amazing. You are a very good wrestling guy, but you need to see a little bit more far forward. What are you going to do after that? You’re not going to be wrestling for all your life. That can be 10 more years, can be 20, but then the rest of your life is going to depend on what you are doing. You have the opportunity to start it in one of the best schools in the country, in the United States. And also, you’ve got people around here that are going to help you. I am going to be around you, and I’m going to help you.’ ”

Shortly after the call, Echemendia started to show more interest in Ohio State. Ryan took visits to Arizona to meet with him, where the two bonded and built trust over a shared love for hiking. Echemendia took a trip to Columbus on Oct. 26 to meet with his potential future teammates.

“So that opened the door,” Ryan said of that first phone call. “Once he came here and saw the place and we got to know each other better - I’ve been flying out to Colorado Springs (where he is training) every week - I was allowed to see him three times, three contacts, I saw him three times, spent time with him, hiked with him, spent a lot of time with him, got to know him really well.”

A few weeks after his visit to Columbus, Echemendia signed with Ohio State on Nov. 13, marking the end of his recruitment. Because he signed with the Buckeyes, working with the team and staff is much easier.

“Now that he’s signed the NLI - my last allowable visit was last week,” Ryan told BSB on Nov. 13. “But now that’s he’s signed the NLI, all the rules are off from that standpoint. I can go see him again. So I’m going Sunday night (Nov. 17), spend some time with him - he has no family here. I’ll spend all day Monday with him, we’ll find another mountain we want to hike, we’ll hike the mountain and then I’ll be back here.”

A university spokesman confirmed to BSB that Ryan did make that visit. It likely won’t be his last to see his latest recruit, one who could be a future star at Ohio State. Echemendia is set to enroll in January, when, according to Ryan, he may actually be eligible to wrestle for the Buckeyes immediately.

"We know he's eligible, we just don't know how many years he has," Ryan said. "He just graduated from high school, so we're still working on that. The main thing was deciding what school to go to, and now it's our compliance office working with the NCAA. We're looking into a bunch of things right now. How many years does he have? I think he's a freshman. He's 20, he just turned 20, so the thought is, he's a freshman.

"He can redshirt, he can wrestle, but what's really important to him as well is citizenship. There's a lot of pieces, a lot of layers to this with him. It's not as simple as it is with an American recruit. We're still working through all that. Step one, before we can really dive into anything and get all the answers, you can't promise anything until he commits. Once he commits, now you can start to work with him on citizenship and green card, all the things that you can't use as enticement during the recruiting process. We're digging into it now."

On the citizenship question, Echemendia's legality in America will come from the Cuban Adjustment Act, which he has already applied for. The CAA states that once an immigrant from Cuba has been in America for one year and one day, he can qualify as a permanent resident. Echemendia reaches the requirements and will likely be approved.

As for wrestling, as Ryan alludes to, there are still quite a few questions. Even if everything else goes perfectly, Echemendia would still need a weight to wrestle at, and his expected weight of 149 pounds is currently filled by a potential All-American in redshirt freshman Sammy Sasso.

"I don't know," Ryan said, laughing, of where Echemendia would wrestle. "I know he's strong enough to wrestle heavyweight. That I know. I know he'll compete against anybody, anytime. He loves to compete. I know he has Olympic aspirations. He was a standout in Cuba, and they're great at wrestling.

"He was an elite-level wrestler in Cuba at the freestyle level. There will be a little transition on bottom I suppose, although his coach has said he didn't have any problems in high school against high school wrestlers on bottom, but he's a little more of a freestyle expert. So there will be a little transition, but we don't know yet where he's going to end up, what weight, what year he is, but we know this: We know we love him. I'm excited about him being a part of the program.

"I think he brings a lot of things, Echemendia. I think a lot of the top schools in the country wanted him, but I think what he brings, as much as anything - besides his talent level and his love of the sport, his toughness - he brings a gratitude. He's from an area where you're just not given much, so anything he gets he's so grateful for, and that's an attitude that we want to run rampant here."

That final sentiment is the strongest, from all parties involved. The wrestling program is delighted to have him aboard. Echemendia feels that he's found the place that fits him, as he told USA Wrestling that he "chose Ohio State because they are honest people." Suarez, however, put it as concisely as he could.

"It's great," he said of Echemendia choosing Ohio State. "I've got my own son starting over here in the university (his son is a freshman at Ohio State). It's a happy family. I feel like I am in Cuba. Over here, it's amazing. I don't have any problems. For that reason, I am happy. I am very happy. I'm happy now."

The full version of this story can be found in Vol. 39, No. 11 of Buckeye Sports Bulletin.