'Nunavut! Stand up!': Gold medal day for Avalak

Wrestler from Cambridge Bay makes history with territory's first-ever gold medal; dedicates his efforts to his late brother

Gord Howard

With his gold medal in one hand and the flag of Nunavut in the other, Eekeeluak Avalak made Canada Summer Games history on Aug. 11.

In an emotional match that, when it was over, had the entire gym on its feet cheering, the 18-yearold wrestler from Cambridge Bay became the first Nunavut athlete to ever win gold at the Canada Summer Games.

"Nunavut! Stand up! This is not only my moment, this is all of our moshouted ment," he afterward, talking with reporters.

Not only was it Nunavut's first-ever gold, it was only the second medal of any kind a territory athlete has won at the Canada Games since Eugene Dederick captured bronze in judo in 2007.

After Avalak won, he ran a lap around the wrestling mat holding the flag, Nunavut jumped into the arms of his coach, Chris Crooks, with the crowd cheering in a standing ovation that lasted for more than a

Avalak shared the crowd's emotion: It would have been his late brother's birthday a few days before the match, and he had dedicated his effort at the games to him.

In an interview, he spoke a few words in Inuktitut, then said, "That means brother, I love you. His name was Joanasie. My older brother. He would have been 27.

"He passed away, he chose his own destiny, in 2015 on my sister's birthday ... this is for him."

The gold-medal match lasted the full two rounds but Avalak was in charge throughout. He held the centre of the ring, keeping his opponent, Fred Calingay of Alberta, to the outside and on the defensive.

To get to the gold medal match in the 52kilogram division, earlier that day Avalak had to beat hometown favourite Zubin Gatta of nearby Niagara-on-the-Lake. The summer games are being held around Ontario's Niagara region, about 100 kilometres from Toronto.

For the final, all the Nunavut entourage was in the gym, cheering on Avalak and afterward they



Nunavut wrestler Eekeeluak Avalak, centre, poses with his Team Nunavut mates after winning a gold medal on Aug. 11 at the Canada Summer Games in Ontario's Niagara region. (Photo by Denis Cahill, special to Nunatsiaq News)

exchanged hugs and posed for photos on the gym floor.

"I think he's like a god to me ... when he won, I was like almost in tears," said wrestling teammate Jonah Kunilusie, from Pangnirtung, Avalak's semifinal victory.

"He's the captain of the team at this point," added wrestler Kaaju Arreak, from Iqaluit. "I was also almost tearing up as well when he won, because he was also representing us as Inuit to win gold."

Avalak, like the rest of the members of Nunavut's wrestling team, got to the games despite having nearly none of the advantages athletes from larger provinces and territories

Living in Cambridge Bay, he's at least able to work out with his coach, Crooks, and teammates Jusipi Dimitruk, 14, and Kiana Ekpakohak, 16, one of the female team mem-

Other members, like Kunilusie and Arreak, have no other wrestlers or coaches in their communities. They have to train alone, receive some instruction virtually, and travel south to train with the team a couple of times

Despite having the smallest contingent at the games, Nunavut has been a crowd favourite at most events.

When Avalak won

gold, there were two or three other matches going on at the same time but the entire crowd stood to applaud him.

Crooks, his coach, said he understands why the audience was rooting for

"I think a lot of the wrestling community understands his situation he doesn't have many teammates, we live in an isolated community, we don't have, like, nutritionists How far he has come, with what he has done, is mind-boggling to the other coaches.'

Crooks said, "for him to beat kids who have five or six different training partners while he has me, an old man, and a 14-yearold boy and a [teenaged] girl ... it's phenomenal.

"Those who know his journey know the trauma he has been in."

Crooks and his wife, co-coach Paula Cziranka, took in Avalak to live with them nearly two years ago. Then earlier this year at a nationals event, Avalak's cousin died by

The pair have helped Avalak secure a place at Vimy Ridge Academy, in Alberta, to finish his high school education while training with some University of Alberta wrestlers.

After that, they hope, he will go to university.

"For him — and we've talked about it the last couple of years — he has goals of trying to make the national team, trying to be Olympian,"

"In order to do that, he can't stay in Cambridge Bay ... he needs more sup-

The Aug. 11 competitions also saw some other notable achievements in wrestling.

Both Kunilusie, in the 56-kilogram division, and Isaiah Angutimmarik, at 65 kilograms, won their first-ever matches. In the placement competition, Kunilusie finished in seventh place and Angutimmarik ended in ninth

Inuit-themed pin set is hot trading item at Summer Games

Gord Howard

Everyone loves an underdog — especially one with cool commemorative pins.

Nunavut fielded the smallest team at the Canada Summer Games, but there's big demand for the specially designed pin sets it provides to its athletes, coaches and staff.

Each province and territory does the same for its the Quebec track suit teams, and they've been the jersey, the sweater, hot trading items all week shorts and a hat," he said. at the games, being held around Ontario's Niagara

region this week.

"The Nunavut pins are crazy," said Jusipi Dim-14-year-old itruk, a wrestler from Cambridge

He said he heard one Ontario athlete had traded for a Nunavut pin set, then turned around and sold it for \$150.

"I traded a set yesterday (to another athlete) for

Dimitruk figures the rule of supply and de-

mand also helps make Nunavut gear a hot commodity at the summer games.

While Team Nunavut has 31 athletes, plus coaches and staff, other teams are much larger. Ontario's squad, for instance, is about 10 times the size of Nunavut's.

"I've traded one set and one T-shirt, for which I've got a P.E.I. jacket and the whole Quebec set," Dimitruk said. "Nunavut gear is top of the class."

The pins are seen as a way to get athletes to mingle with competitors from other parts of Canada. They're meant to be collected and traded, though selling them is generally discouraged.

The metal pins are also seen as a way to showcase the homeland as a good place to visit.

Nunavut's chef de mission, Jeff Seeteenak, from Baker Lake, agreed there has been big demand for the territory's pins.

"Oh yes, we're seeing it every day. Every day," he said.

"And this is what we're known for at these games, that we have the nicest pin sets. We're one of the most coveted pin sets, and there is always a Nunavut theme to it."







Nunavut's commemorative pin set, shown here, includes a moveable arm showing the woman skinning a seal. (File photo)



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