On Campus

Pottery Slam

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Mike McLaughlin

Rolexes. Cash. Convertibles. There’s almost no limit to the incentives that some recruiting colleges have dangled in front of prized high-school athletes. It’s a matter of leverage, and recruits know when they have it. So when Arizona state wrestling champion Garrett Ryan considered his list of college options, he first made sure his needs would be met.

“There had to be a pottery program,” says Ryan, who weighs in at 240 pounds. “That was the real deal-breaker.”

Ryan, now a sophomore, chose Columbia in part because of the ceramics studio in Teachers College. When the former Ivy League rookie of the year isn’t in Dodge contorting opponents into any shape he wants, he can often be found in the studio

doing a similar number on lumps of clay. With his immense shoulders hunched over a potter's wheel, he delicately molds vases, cups, and other fine objects.

"I always loved working at the wheel," says Ryan, who got interested in pottery in a high-school art class. "But it's not a relaxing or Zen process — it takes a lot of careful focus. You have to be controlled in your movements, keep your muscles locked in place, and be firm with your hands so the clay doesn't get wobbly."

It's this precise, deft, tactile manipulation that links Ryan's two seemingly disparate passions. In wrestling, he's known as a strategist who eschews brute strength in favor of composed maneuvers.



Garrett Ryan

"I'm trying to control my opponent and get him into the positions I want," Ryan explains. "It's the same for ceramics. I'm trying to keep the clay from going where it

wants to go. Clay doesn’t naturally want to keep spinning; it wants to jump outside of the wheel.”

Even with a full course load and wrestling tournaments in places like Cuba and Azerbaijan, Ryan finds time to get his hands gloppy. He says an insatiable pursuit of perfection drives him in both of his crafts. While a layperson looks at a Ryan vase and sees elegance, its creator occasionally sees inconsistent weight distribution or an under-trimmed lip. And while Ivy League officials awarded Ryan all-conference honors his freshman year, the heavyweight tactician only looks ahead.

The 2020 Summer Olympics will be held in Tokyo, and Ryan has designs to be there. And if he makes it to the games in Japan, his family and friends back home will rise at dawn to tune in to his matches, sipping from glazed coffee mugs that were meticulously and lovingly hand-made.



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