

The Benefits of Wrestling

By Jack Fisher

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Talking with football coaches, I find they labor under the myth that wrestling is an off-season sport that detracts from their program and does not support the goals of football. What are the goals of football? Strength, speed, endurance, quickness, coordination, balance and weight gain are the most sought after outcomes for young athletes in football. I will concede that wrestling does not support the goal of weight gain but encourages its athletes to maintain or cut weight. Football and wrestling are both maligned by the public for the methods often used by their athletes to achieve their weight goals. More has been said about the ill effects of weight gain products than the methods wrestlers use to lose weight. Now with the rule that a high school athlete cannot lose more than 10% of their body weight from the certification weight at the beginning of the season, less controversy surrounds weight loss efforts as it has achieved a more natural process. Having 275 as the limit for heavy weight wrestlers, it excludes offensive linemen tipping the scales at more than 305 pounds. Football coaches need not fear that their behemoth linemen will shrink in size, as they would be disqualified the minute they step on the scales. The sleek, speedy, muscular, linebackers and defensive backs, however, will find wrestling the most enduring off-season sport.

Ounce of ounce, you will not find a stronger athlete than a superior wrestler. Many an unskilled and inexperienced wrestler has achieved victory through strength alone. Those who achieve greatness, however, are skilled, experienced, and strong. Wrestling coaches of winning programs incorporate weight lifting and strength building as a part of their training, some even having weight rooms, free weights and weight machines of their own. Even wrestlers that do not follow a regimen of weight lifting on their own will acquire strength on the mat by the resistance they meet in their opponents. The sport demands that you overpower your opponent, hence the need for strength.

Speed is an indirect outcome of wrestling. It is achieved by the strength and conditioning requirements for a wrestler in training. Just as in track (which by the way is a sport that does not overlap in seasons with wrestling), the great sprinters do much weight training with the lower body, an effective wrestler will work the upper and lower body equally. There is great demand put on the lower body of a wrestler as he pushes against his foe while in the neutral position, or in having to lift his opponent off the mat while bringing him down to the mat under control. As a part of conditioning, some coaches require running distances and sprints to get the body in shape, just as a track coach would do for his runners to build speed and endurance.

I once overheard an outstanding wrestler (state champion at 145 and two-time state placer) who also was an all-district standout in football his junior and senior year at linebacker, comment at the end of football season, "its wrestling season now and time to get in shape!" Those who wrestle and play football will tell you that four quarters of football does not put near the demand on you physically that three, two-minute periods of wrestling will. That is why there is a 45-minute mandatory wait period before a wrestler can get on the mat for the next match. The demand for action at all times is emphasized

further by the fact that a referee will caution wrestlers for stalling if they are not actively trying to take down their opponent from the neutral position, pin their opponent if on top, or working to escape if on the bottom. You cannot build a lead in wrestling and coast to the end comfortably. Time outs are allowed for injuries only, not to catch your breath. It is no wonder that a wrestler lies exhausted on the mat at the end of a grueling match. And, then there is overtime and double overtime.

Quickness is often a trait acquired on the mat by experience. A wrestling coach can drill his team on moves over and over again, but until the match experience requires reaction to the moves of your opponent, the wrestler does not learn the value of quick reactions. The takedown, escape, and reversal are moves based on quickness. Though some thought is required in analyzing your opponent and consciously working your opponent, the truly great wrestlers will instinctively and quickly react to situations to gain the advantage. Quickness is a by-product of endurance also, as the quicker wrestler late in the third period of a close match usually prevails.

Coordination and balance are interrelated in that a wrestler measures his opponent, using a series of motions with hands, arms, and feet to lift, trip, drag, push, or pull his opponent to the mat under control. The wrestler uses his momentum and his opponent's momentum to set up takedowns. Riding your opponent requires great skill in positioning and balance. The great wrestlers keep their opponents off balance at all times with a series of coordinated moves. A two-time state placer in wrestling at 215 attributed his success in football as a two-time all-district defensive lineman to wrestling teaching him how to maintain balance and use his opponent's momentum to his advantage. He might have been a three-time state place or champion and three-time all-district or all-state defensive lineman, had he not had his knee blown out in football his junior year.

Wrestling is the only off-season sport that supports all facets of a football program. Even weight gain is achieved after wrestling season ends. Most wrestlers will tell you that as soon as wrestling season is over, most of them balloon up to weights well above where they started the season.

There are other benefits that wrestling has over football as a sport, which should be analyzed as well. The injuries in wrestling are less debilitating than in football. It is unheard of to have a wrestler go through knee surgery or shoulder surgery or any surgery as a result of injuries sustained in wrestling. The most frequent cause for matches to stop for injuries in wrestling is for blood time due to bloody noses, scratches or scabs being knocked off.

Though football is a team sport and emphasizes team work for success, a valuable lesson for any athlete to learn, wrestling combines the advantage of team work as a dual team member, while allowing a wrestler to rise to victory based upon his own merits or handle defeat with no one to blame but himself. There is a combination of teamwork and individual acclaim in wrestling. If team unity is lacking or the team as a whole is weak or even non-existent, a wrestler can experience a successful season and even be a state champion as was the case for a young man several years ago from the small town of Pilot Point, Texas.

Great football players would make good wrestlers just based on athletic ability, but great wrestlers would make outstanding football players. Football should become the off-season sport for wrestlers.