

Parents Guide to Wrestling

(Excerpts taken from Parent's Guide to Youth Wrestling ©2000 by Bill Campbell)

Introduction

Of the many sports your child can participate in, Wrestling is perhaps the most misrepresented, misunderstood, and underrated. The ratio of participation to public awareness is remarkably lopsided. Each year hundreds of thousands of kids participate in this sport, yet the average person knows as much about wrestling as they might know about rugby or polo -- which combined, involve far fewer athletes. The purpose of this guide is to generate new interest and awareness among parents whose children want to participate in this exciting and rewarding sport.

Hopefully, this guide will help expose the myths and uncover the benefits wrestling has to offer, and most importantly, help parents understand how this unique sport best compliments other sports choices their child makes.

Q&A

Doesn't wrestling involve or eventually lead to the kinds of things professional wrestlers do on television?

If you've been exposed to high school or college wrestling, you may already realize that so-called "professional wrestling" (i.e. WWF) as depicted on television, is entirely different from the actual sport of wrestling. So different, in fact, that there is little, if anything in common:

The Actual Sport of Wrestling

- Based on self-discipline, hard work, skill and determination.
- Conducted on a mat with regulation shoes, kneepads and headgear.
- Physically demanding, but relatively safe and non-violent. Does not involve or even tolerate actions intended to cause injury.
- World-class wrestlers utilize skills, strength and endurance developed over a lifetime of practice and hard work.

"Professional Wrestling"

- Based on theatrics, entertainment value and shock factor.
- Conducted in a ring with boots and outrageous costumes.

- Violent in nature with contestants depicting punching, kicking, body slams, etc.
- Showcase events typically involve participants with no amateur (real) wrestling experience.

If wrestling is nothing like WWF on TV, then what is it all about, and what should parents and kids know about the sport when considering their options?

Wrestling is perhaps the purest form of athletic competition to exist in the realm of organized sports. There are no bats or balls, or pucks or sticks. No pads or helmets or jerseys. There's no time to rethink strategy, regroup, or even to catch your breath. There's only you, and your opponent of equal weight and size. Experience, preparation and the will to succeed will determine the victor. There's no doubt about it, wrestling tops the list of intense, highly-competitive sports.

Wrestling involves a unique balance of practically every aspect of physical and psychological conditioning. Strength is as important as stamina. Speed as technique, strategy as intensity, and power as is coordination. However, it's not always the natural athlete that ultimately succeeds in the sport - it's the natural competitor.

Kids that are strong for their weight, well coordinated and naturally aggressive are usually more successful early on in the sport. However, it's the highly competitive kids that really enjoy the sport, that eventually achieve the highest levels of success. True competitors come in all shapes and sizes, and in varying degrees of natural talent. Many of the best wrestlers the world has ever seen, such as John Smith, Dan Gable and Dave Schultz were not star athletes. They are and were ordinary people with an extraordinary competitive drive.

Gifted athletes, especially those that are strong and well coordinated, typically do well and take an early liking to the sport. Some kids that thrive on competition, with only average or below average natural ability, often surprise parents and coaches by eventually surpassing more gifted kids through hard work and preparation.

Although it is wise for parents and coaches to de-emphasize winning, victories can be extremely gratifying because of the strong sense of personal accomplishment. The effort put forth in practice and preparation is apparent in competition, and not lost in a team effort. This aspect of wrestling can be a great motivator and teacher, and can develop a person's work ethic, self-confidence, and ability to achieve in all areas of life. Wrestling is great for exposing the "champion" within most any kid, but especially with those that love to compete.

How does wrestling compare with team sports such as soccer, baseball and basketball?

Wrestling is considered an individual sport, but includes many of the benefits of team sports. Wrestling differs from most team sports in that during competition, athletes must rely entirely on their own individual abilities for success. Those that dedicate the time and effort will eventually achieve at a level directly proportionate to the investment they have made - even if their teammates prepare and perform at a different level.

Similarities exist in that teammates still depend on each other in team competition. Team victories in meets and tournaments are determined by the number of individual victories, and the extent to which each match was won or lost. Wrestlers also develop an appreciation and respect for teammates that have been through the same challenges, and a strong sense of belonging and camaraderie with teammates and other wrestlers.

Other team sports may be better for developing interactive player-to-player skills such as passing and blocking, but wrestling can offer benefits that other team sports lack. The individual nature of the sport provides an outstanding opportunity for young athletes to develop a sense of responsibility and self esteem while learning the relationship between effort and achievement.

What physical effects can the sport of wrestling have on children?

Sports offer opportunities for children to improve their strength, flexibility and coordination, while having fun. Most sports activities rely more on some muscle groups and less on others. For example, most sports focus primarily on pushing motions (leg/arm extension) such as throwing, hitting, kicking, jumping and running.

Experts believe that unilateral (equal emphasis on all muscle groups) physical development is especially important in young athletes. Isolated development at an early age, over a long period, increases the risk of injury and limits long-term foundational growth. Swimming, gymnastics and wrestling are among the few sports that engage both pulling and pushing muscle groups.

Of all the sports choices a parent and child can make, wrestling is perhaps the best sport for overall physical development because it involves all muscle groups, and requires the greatest balance of athletic skill. In other words, wrestling does more to improve basic things such as strength, balance, speed, agility and intensity, and is not as specialized as most other common sports.

Does wrestling teach or promote aggressive or violent behavior?

Aggressiveness? Yes. Violence? No. Wrestling is often referred to as the toughest sport, and in many ways it is, but it is certainly not violent, nor does it lead to unruly or destructive behavior.

One of the factors that make wrestling so different from most other sports is that wrestling involves head-to-head competition. Each wrestler's efforts work in direct opposite from each other as in a tug-of-war contest. Success in wrestling requires the ability to attack, as well as the ability to stop your opponent's attack. The same factors apply with boxing and martial arts, but an attack in wrestling is nonviolent. Wrestling does not permit opponents to strike one another, and imposes strict penalties or disqualification for violent behavior. In essence, wrestling is unique in the fact that it can be very aggressive without being violent. The objective is not to destroy or harm one's opponent, but to out-manuever them and to gain control.

The intensity with which wrestlers compete increases with age and experience. Kids wrestling, especially the younger age groups, is not nearly as intense as high school or college wrestling. It's common for new wrestlers to feel somewhat intimidated at first, not knowing how they compare with other wrestlers, but that is soon overcome. Wrestling, perhaps more than any other sport, is a great for building confidence while retaining a healthy dose of humility. The long-term result is that it develops the champion from within, and leads to greater success both on and off the mat, and does not turn kids into bullies or thugs.

Is wrestling a "dangerous" sport?

There is a common misperception among the non-wrestling public that wrestling is a very dangerous sport. Perhaps it's the aggressive nature of the sport, association with "Pro Wrestling", or perhaps fear of the unknown. Several studies have been conducted in recent years that show wrestling to be safer than many more common sports including football, ice hockey and gymnastics. Most notable in these reports, is wrestling's low percentage of serious, permanent and life-threatening injury in relation to other sports. A quote from USA Wrestling Club Organizing Guide has the following to say about Risk of Injury:

"Wrestling is a contact sport and injuries will occur. As would be expected, wrestling has more injuries than tennis and swimming, but most wrestling injuries are minor, consisting of sprains and strains. Wrestling has fewer serious injuries than football, basketball or ice hockey. There is a lesser chance of getting seriously hurt when wrestling than when riding in a car, skateboarding or riding a dirt bike."

Safety factors in some ways unique to wrestling include:

- Rules, regulations, and state certified officials.
- The high ratio of officials to athletes (one for every two).
- Greater strength and flexibility as a result of more emphasis on practice and preparation.

- Competitors are matched by age and weight.
- Perhaps the most notable difference with respect to the risk of injury, is the lack of high-impact collision that occurs in most other common sports. Wrestlers do collide, but never at great momentum or speeds as can happen with sports that involve running such as football, baseball, soccer, hockey and basketball. Also, overuse injuries from highly repetitive motions such as pitching are virtually non-existent in youth wrestling because of the variety of movement, and there is no risk of injury from hard objects such as bats, sticks, balls or pucks. On the other hand, wrestlers are more susceptible to some communicable skin infections such as ringworm, but these incidents are quite rare, and can be prevented with the proper precautions, such as washing the mat and showering after practice.

Wrestling injuries can and do occur, but are more of a factor at the collegiate and international levels where match intensity is much higher. Most injuries occur during periods of horseplay or unsupervised activities such as before or after practice or competition. Parents and coaches can reduce this risk through proper planning and preparation.

Can wrestling have an effect on character development?

Success factors in sports, or anything for that matter, are part God-given (i.e. height and size) and part acquired (i.e. endurance). Success in wrestling depends most on acquired factors, and unlike most other sports, wrestling does not favor athletes of any particular height, size, weight, muscle type, race or social class, and does not rely on superior vision or hearing.

Wrestlers learn, by the nature of the sport, that long-term success has much more to do with the investment made than the "natural" gifts one is given. Wrestlers learn the value of preparation and hard work, and the role it plays in achieving one's goals. Wrestling provides real-life experiences that build and strengthen the following character traits:

- Self Reliance
- Mental Toughness
- Work Ethic
- Competitive Spirit
- Responsibility
- Self Discipline
- Goal Orientation
- Confidence

In order to keep this in perspective, one must realize that character development is a slow process, driven by a variety of positive and negative influences with varying degrees of impact. Sports can play a significant role in character development, but other influences may have an even greater

impact. Wrestling, in itself, is not a character development solution, but years of participation can provide positive influences. A person's overall character includes many other dimensions, such as integrity and compassion, which may have little if anything to do with sports.

Muscle types are categorized as fast-twitch and slow-twitch. Fast-twitch muscle fibers deliver power, and are favored in explosive sports such as football. Slow-twitch fibers are superior in endurance activities such as long distance running. Training can compensate for some of this difference, however, it's a known fact that the ratio of slow-twitch to fast-twitch fibers varies from person to person, providing some with a "natural" advantage over others in particular sports.

Can wrestling be an aid in self-defense?

Who would win in a fight between a world-class boxer and a black belt kung-fu expert? How about an NFL linebacker versus a world-renowned jiu-jitsu champion? Opinions vary widely, but the truth of the matter is that each sport, or self-defense discipline, offers its own unique advantages that become more or less important depending on the situation. For example, boxing skills are quite valuable in a fistfight, but are practically useless if attacked from behind.

Most fight situations begin as a fistfight, but end up on the ground in a grappling contest with the better wrestler being the victor. Grappling, or wrestling skills, are actually more important in most self-defense situations, than the ability to punch or kick. The highly controversial sport of Ultimate Fighting proves this point.

Ultimate fighting, much like organized street fighting, began in 1993 with contestants of virtually every discipline. More than thirty forms of martial arts have been represented including everything from aikido to wing chun kung fu. Win/loss statistics compiled since inception list wrestling as the most effective discipline. Always able to take their opponent to the ground and remain in control, wrestlers with no other martial arts training fared extremely well against world renowned experts in Karate, Jiu-jitsu and other similar martial arts disciplines. Although wrestlers are relatively rare in the sport, past champions have included several excellent wrestlers such as Dan Severn and Mark Shultz, whom easily won matches against much bigger and stronger, internationally acclaimed martial arts champions.

Involvement in wrestling is a great way to build confidence and the ability to defend one's self, without resorting to the violent tactics inherent in most other forms of self-defense. Wrestling skills are an enormous asset in a schoolyard brawl or even a street fight, however, wrestling's non-violent nature does not prepare one for other aspects of self-defense such as disabling or disarming an assailant.

Is wrestling only for boys?

In the 1970's and early 1980's, with the exception of a few isolated incidents, wrestling was a male-only sport. Over the last ten years female participation has increased to the point that it is not uncommon to find girls participating in youth and high school programs. Women's divisions have been created in U.S. and international freestyle competition, and some tournaments are exclusively for women. Unlike Japan, where female participation sometimes exceeds male participation, in the United States, there are still far fewer girls than boys, however, female involvement is growing rapidly at all levels.

Girls can benefit from wrestling just as boys can; however, the social, mental and physical challenges can be much greater. In addition to the normal challenges of the sport, a female wrestler may feel singled out if she is the only girl on the team. Girls also face greater physical challenges. Differences in strength can be minimal at young ages, but as children reach puberty, boys typically gain a significant strength, advantage. Overcoming these challenges requires great determination and mental toughness; however, some girls have proven they can be successful competing against boys despite these obstacles.

Parents with daughters willing to accept these challenges should take the time to interview coaches and be sure they are satisfied with the coaching staff's acceptance and effectiveness in integrating girls into the program. If possible, it's best to select a team with other girls, or to join with a girlfriend.

What forms of wrestling exist, and what avenues exist beyond the high school and college levels?

Wrestling, like soccer, is an international sport, prevalent in virtually every major country. It's also the oldest organized sport, and dates back well over 5,000 years. Over time, many variations, such as sumo wrestling, have developed in different parts of the world.

Wrestling in the United States is practiced in three styles: folkstyle, freestyle and Greco-Roman. Folkstyle, the predominant form of scholastic wrestling in the United States, is found in our high schools, colleges and clubs. This style is unique to the U.S. Rules are established by the National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA] and the National Federation of State High School Associations.

The other two styles, freestyle and Greco-Roman, are practiced internationally, and are gaining popularity in the U.S. as we continue to advance as a world wrestling power.

World and Olympic championships in Freestyle and GrecoRoman wrestling are conducted by FILA, the international governing body responsible for the administration and rule development of the sport. USA Wrestling

conducts annual regional and national tournaments in all three styles for male and female wrestlers of all ages.

The differences between Freestyle, Folkstyle and Greco-Roman are subtle to the novice observer, but rather significant to the wrestler. There are differences in rules, scoring and strategy. Freestyle and Greco-Roman focus more on wrestling from the feet. They are identical except that Greco-Roman is limited to upper-body holds. Folkstyle, on the other hand, places greater emphasis on establishing and maintaining control and involves more mat wrestling.

Wrestlers advancing beyond the college level can compete in Freestyle and/or GrecoRoman World and Olympic competition, however there is no avenue to advance beyond that to a professional level. It's unrealistic for wrestlers to fantasize about aspiring to the level of notoriety and fame associated with other more popular sports, or to imagine themselves, one day earning a living as a professional wrestler. Dan Gable, for example, is as much of a legend in wrestling as Michael Jordan is with basketball, but Dan is virtually unknown outside the wrestling community. It's not likely that wrestling champions will ever come to be known for their achievements in the sport.

General info

Folkstyle basics

Objective

The primary objective in folkstyle wrestling is to gain control of your opponent and to ultimately pin your opponent by holding your opponent with their back (both shoulder blades simultaneously) on the mat for a period of at least two seconds.

Match Basics

Wrestling matches consist of three periods. Periods can vary in length from one minute in duration for younger age groups, to as long as three minutes for college wrestling. Either wrestler can win the match at any time if they are able to pin their opponent or develop a lead of more than 14 points. Otherwise, the wrestler that can accumulate the most points by the end of the third period (or after overtime in the case of a tie) wins the match.

There are only two positions from which referees start, or continue a match. The first is neutral position, with both wrestlers standing and facing each other. The other is the referee's position, where one wrestler starts on his hands and knees down on the mat, and the other starts on top, behind and in control. The first period always begins in the neutral position. Each

wrestler has their choice in one of the remaining periods, to choose to start from top or bottom referee's position, or in the neutral position. If the action must be stopped before the end of a period, the referee restarts the wrestlers in the starting position that best reflects the position the wrestlers were in when the action was stopped.

Scoring

The scoring system is rather simple. Takedowns (when from a neutral position one wrestler is able to bring the other to the mat and gain control) are worth two points. Escapes (when the bottom wrestler is able to break free from the top wrestler and revert back to a neutral position) are worth one point. Reversals, (when a wrestler on the bottom is able to reverse the control so that the opponent is on the bottom) are worth two points.

Back points (also called near fall) are awarded when one wrestler comes close to pinning the other (i.e. exposing the other wrestler's back) and are worth two or three points depending on the length of time that the opponent's back is exposed. In addition, penalty points can be awarded when the opposing wrestler performs illegal moves or is penalized for excessive stalling.

Competition is conducted in a manner as to promote and require good sportsmanship. Competitors are expected to show respect to opponents, officials and coaches regardless of the outcome of their match. Both wrestlers are required to shake hands before and after the match. It is also common practice for each wrestler to shake the hand of their opponent's coach after the match.

Officials

Officiating is more objective than subjective in that it does not require judging, as with sports such as gymnastics or figure skating. However, situations can and do occur that are subject to interpretation. Those situations most often involve out of bounds calls, determination of when/if control is sufficient to award points, and determination of when/if stalling or penalties apply.

Equipment

Basic wrestling equipment includes a headgear, wrestling shoes, and a singlet. Wrestling shoes offer more ankle support than the traditional shoe and are designed lightweight and tight to the foot to promote freedom of movement. Headgear can prevent outer ear injuries and bruises during practice and competition. The standard wrestling uniform, known as a singlet, is designed to fit snug to the body so that it does not restrict the movement of either wrestler. Kneepads are sometimes worn by choice.

History and fame

Wrestling has a fascinating history with deep roots in virtually every major culture on the planet. Evidence found throughout the world indicates that wrestling is without question the oldest sport ever practiced. Cave drawings and carvings located in France dating back fifteen thousand years show evidence of an early form of competitive wrestling.

Wrestling was later popular in Greek and Egyptian culture, and is prevalent in the architecture of many temples and tombs. Match results are recorded in Japan dating back to the year 22 BC. Wrestling was also a common element of Native American culture prior to the arrival of European settlers.

Although even the most accomplished wrestlers receive little if any public notoriety, quite a few famous people began their lifetime of achievement on the wrestling mat. A stroll through the National Wrestling Hall of Fame in Stillwater Oklahoma offers the surprising discovery that, many historical and current day prominent people were once wrestlers. A partial list includes:

U.S. Presidents -

George Washington, Zachary Taylor, William Taft, Theodore Roosevelt, Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Jackson, Ulysses S. Grant, and Chester A. Arthur.

Several well-known Congressmen, Senators, and other Statesmen and Military leaders

including General Norman Schwarzkopf

Several Scientists

including Benjamin Franklin and Nobel prize winner Dr. Norman Borlaug.

Several well known actors

including Tom Cruise, Tony Danza, Kirk Douglas and Robin Williams.

The coach's role

An effective coaching staff is essential in helping kids derive the greatest benefit from their involvement in the sport. Coaches need to be effective in planning, organizing and running practice sessions, and coaching mat-side during competition. They are also called upon in a host of other related activities, but most importantly, coaches should strive to create and maintain an environment in which the champion in every child can blossom.

It is the coach's responsibility to provide opportunities for growth, achievement and excellence that can lead to success on and off the mat. A good wrestling coach is effective in preparing his wrestlers for the challenges of competition and is able to instill positive values such as goal

setting and self-discipline, while maintaining a high degree of enjoyment and fulfillment for the wrestlers.

In addition, coaches must be perceptive, flexible and creative enough to address individual needs. In summary, the coach should be a person wrestlers trust, look up to, learn from, and rely on for support. This is certainly a tall order given personal limitations and other commitments most coaches face. It is more practical however, for these virtues to be present collectively within a coaching staff.

The parent's role

Wrestling can be relatively demanding, not only for the wrestler, but also for the parent. Wrestling clubs typically hold practice sessions two, and sometimes three times per week, in the evening, after the high school practice is over. Many open tournaments during the school wrestling season are held on Sundays, which may conflict with other family plans, but at a minimum require a good deal of preparation, driving and patience.

Some tournaments are a good distance from home, and usually require an early start. There are other responsibilities as well, ranging from fund raising activities to helping with tournaments or participating in other team activities. The parent's role, however, extends beyond such tasks. Matches and practice sessions offer new and unique learning opportunities for young athletes. Involved parents spot these opportunities and make the most of them.

Most importantly, kids need support and encouragement. They need to be able to stake claim to something positive about themselves that they can build from in developing self-confidence. Parents can facilitate this process by identifying and reinforcing strengths while helping their child to see past their weaknesses. Your positive reinforcement as a perceptive and caring parent can be the single most significant influence in your child's athletic development and personal growth. A famous Lao-tsu quote sums it up like this...

"To see things in the seed, that is Genius."

Here's some additional do's and don'ts:

- Don't impose your ambitions or expectations on your child. Remember that wrestling is your child's activity. Improvements and progress occur at different rates for each individual. Don't judge your child's progress based on the performance of other athletes and don't push them based on what you think they should be doing.

- Be supportive no matter what. There is only one question to ask your child, "Did you have fun?" If meets and practices are not fun you should not force them to participate.
- Do not coach your child. Your job is to support, love and hug your child no matter what. Conflicting advice and criticism work against the coach's efforts and only serve to confuse and demotivate your child. If you feel you have the experience and ability to contribute to the team as a coach, volunteer your services through the proper channels.
- Get involved. Your club needs your help and support. Attend parent and club meetings to find out how you can help. And most importantly, show your child that you care by attending as many meets and tournaments as possible.
- Acknowledge your child's fears. Their opponents appear to be much more intimidating through their eyes than through the eyes of a grown-up. Consider their perspective and don't expect them to compete with the confidence and mental toughness of a seasoned expert.
- Do not criticize the officials. Unless you have been there, you have no idea how challenging officiating can be. Expect that in some matches your child could lose as a result of an error on the part of an official or score keeper. That's life. Help your child to understand that the official does their best to score the match fairly, and that it is important that we respect the ruling of the officials regardless of how we feel about the situation.