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## **Not Too Old To Learn**

### **Veterans still winning while adapting to new FILA rules**

By Mike Finn, W.I.N. Editor

Is it possible for old dogs to learn new tricks?

That's also the question that could be posed to at least six veterans of Olympic-style wrestling who were among the 21 competitors who won U.S. National championships, April 29-30, in Las Vegas. Why were these wrestlers, aged 30 or older, even competing in a post-Olympic year.

"I don't have a gold medal," said 145.5-pounder Chris Bono, 31, already a two-time world team member. "That's what keeps me going."

"I want to win one more world title and go from there," said 121-pound Sammie Henson, who at age 34 is a three-time national champion, world champion (1998) and an Olympic silver medalist (2000). "I retired a couple times because my heart was not in it. But it's here now and you can't question when it's there."

But even Joe Williams, 30, asked himself that question after finishing fifth in last summer's Olympic Games in Athens, Greece.

"Anytime you don't reach your goals you are always going to consider the possibility about doing something else," said Williams, who captured his sixth U.S. Nationals title.

Wrestling has been the life of these older grapplers, including heavyweights Tolly Thompson, 31, in freestyle and Dremiel Byers, 30, in Greco-Roman, and 34-year-old Stephanie Murata, who was the oldest of the champions competing in either men's freestyle, men's Greco-Roman or women's freestyle.

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These wrestlers also may have the biggest adjustments to the major rules changes which were announced by FILA during last summer's Olympics.

“Listening to the rule changes, I thought it fit well with my style,” said Williams. “That was one of the considerations I had whether to keep going. It’s going to benefit the guy who is out there hustling and wrestling. There are a lot of opportunities to score so it makes it more of a challenge again.”

Wrestlers and fans got a chance to experience these new rules on a national stage at the Las Vegas Convention Center at the U.S. Nationals. The following is a breakdown of several of the new rule changes and their impact on the sport.

### **More matches/shorter matches**

A year ago, matches lasted at least six minutes — unless there was a fall, technical fall or injury — and were divided into a pair of three-minute periods. At the U.S. Nationals, nearly 84 percent of the matches lasted four minutes or less.

That’s because under the new rules, a match ends when a wrestler wins two of three periods with a period lasting two minutes in length. And the majority of the matches in Las Vegas were decided by just two periods. And of the 720 matches that took place, over 25 percent of those resulted in pins or technical falls, which automatically ends a period and match.

Not winning the first period did not affect many wrestlers as nearly 60 percent of the wrestlers who lost the first two-minute period came back to win the match.

“After those first two minutes, they clear the scoreboard and it’s back again as if you are starting again,” said women’s 105.5-pound champion Sara Fulp-Allen, one of eight first-time champs, who

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lost the first period, 2-0, of her finals match to Caitlyn Chase but came back to record a fall in the second period. “It’s nice to have that break and say, ‘All right, that’s over. Here we go again, a fresh start.’”

Daniel Cormier, the 211.5-pound men’s freestyle champion did not believe the 30-second intermission between periods provided that much rest time.

“It’s not much of a break,” said Cormier, who only went to three periods once in five matches.

“Thirty seconds doesn’t help you that much. If a guy is dead-tired, he’s going to be dead-tired even after he gets a 30-second break.”

The current set-up is also like multiple sprints, instead of a couple long runs considering a weight class is decided in one day with only a 15-minute resting period between matches. In the past, a weight class was determined in two days and wrestlers had at least 30 minutes between matches.

The weights, which featured the most wrestlers, also meant the most matches for a champion. At 163 pounds in men’s freestyle, where 70 wrestlers entered and competed in 87 total matches, eventual champion Joe Williams wrestled seven matches between 10 a.m. and 8 p.m. on April 29, the day nine different weights — three each in men’s freestyle, Greco-Roman and women’s freestyle — held competition. (The remaining 12 weights were held in similar fashion on April 30.)

“A one-day tournament puts a lot of concentration on your training and making sure everything in order,” said Williams, who admits to being one of the old men in this sport. “Every time I go into practice, I’m concerned about injuries and making sure my body is feeling good before I train that day.”

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“All these rules are going to benefit the guy who has the best stamina and shape,” said Cormier. “It should benefit (the U.S. team) because we are normally the most-conditioned athletes. We usually wrestle harder than anyone in the world.”

### **Scoring almost pointless**

In reviewing the 21 championship matches, 18 went the distance of at least two full periods, including three that lasted three periods. Of those matches, 86 points were scored, which was 25 fewer points scored in 19 matches that went the distance during the old rules of 2004. And unlike the old rules, in which a winner needs to score at least three points in a match, the new winner needs to score just one point more than his opponent per period for the match victory. That meant once a wrestler got on top with a takedown, he usually shut down his offense and wrestled defensively the rest of the period since passivity calls were also eliminated with the new rules. And without passivity calls, there were fewer times in which wrestlers competed in par terre. The only new rule that prevents total stalling occurs when the last wrestler who scores in a period also wins a period even if the score is tied.

These new rules appeared to have an even bigger impact in Greco-Roman as every finals loser was shut out. Many periods ended in 0-0 deadlocks and were decided after both wrestlers went into a clinch, in which the first to lock had to score in 30 seconds or his opponent earned the point. Many of the clinches also ended if a wrestler stepped outside the large circle, which led to more pushing than wrestling.

“You definitely have to stay in the middle,” said 184-pound Greco champion Brad Vering. “You have to be careful when you are driving guys out of bounds because that opens you up for a possibility for them to score.

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“It does take a little bit of the excitement out of it. But it doesn’t matter what the rules are. You have to roll with what they give you.”

“Someone told me a long time ago that all the good guys have one move and they can get to it from anywhere in a match,” said Dremiel Byers, the Greco-Roman heavyweight champion. “I believe that and try to have three good moves and try to find one of them during the match.” The freestyle wrestlers had a similar rule in deciding a 0-0 deadlock, but their clinch consisted of one wrestler earning the option of wrapping his arms around one leg.

“(The current clinch) is better than the other one (which was identical to Greco),” said 145.5-pound freestyle champ Chris Bono. “I don’t think I won too many of the other one.

“But it’s pretty ridiculous to tell you the truth. We should wrestle until a point is scored even if it takes 10 or 15 minutes. That would be a little more exciting for everyone, too.” But these new rules are here to stay and the wrestlers have accepted that. “I don’t think things have to change,” Byers said. “People just have to wake up and find a competitiveness inside of them. I look at these rule changes as adversity and I think everyone should.”

“It’s like anything, we have to adapt,” Cormier said. “To be the best in the world, you have to adapt.”

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