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Planning For Practices

Nutrition, and Weight Control

By Dan Gable

Nutrition and weight control are probably the most controversial subjects in wrestling. Of course, the key issue here is weight loss. The image of a dehydrated wrestler wearing a sweatsuit in a hot gym in order to lose weight is not a healthy one for the sport. What wrestling needs to promote in terms of nutrition and weight is fitness and health.

Rules on Weight Control

Following the lead of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, the National Federation of State High School Associations has tightened regulations on weight control in wrestling. The NCAA made eight rule revisions after the deaths of three college wrestlers during weight-loss workouts.

All state associations are now required to develop and use a weight-loss program that discourages severe weight reduction. Each wrestler is also required to establish a certified minimum weight before January 15. Certification at a lower weight is then prohibited during the season. Another rule requires wrestlers to have at least half of their weigh-ins during the season at the minimum weight to be used during the state tournament.

Education is the key here. Athletes and coaches need to understand the importance of proper nutrition and end the training practices that brought about the association of starvation with wrestling. School systems should require nutrition courses. In addition, coaches, especially wrestling coaches, should have classroom-type discussions with their athletes about healthy eating and adequate fluid intake.

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One key to success is being able to get quality work and effort out of your team on a consistent basis. Without proper nutrition, wrestlers' attentiveness and stamina will fall off drastically, especially late in practice. I constantly read my athletes to gauge when to do a certain workout or conditioning drill and for how long. The more I can keep them working with quality efforts and attentiveness the better they are going to get.

Water availability along with an electrolyte (sports) drink is a must. The drinks should be cold for incentive to drink as well as for recuperation purposes. Disposable cups should be used and not shared. If your water source is a drinking fountain, make sure the water is cold and easily drinkable. Oftentimes in older facilities drinking fountains are nearby but barely working. Keep them usable and clean. Drinking fountains are not for spitting, blowing one's nose, or getting rid of gum or chewing tobacco (which should not be permitted, anyway). Keep tissue and plenty of garbage cans for trash handy.

Coaches should have their athletes' body compositions tested and have all the needed data and calculations for each athlete. The maximum weight loss under normal conditions should be no more than two pounds per week. Within this range, wrestlers should be able to maintain their strength and keep a positive attitude. Don't let the athletes just tell you what they weigh; weight checks are necessary. Keep your eyes open for signs of incorrect weight loss measures or weight loss that is too rapid. Clear warning signs are lack of sweat, jumpy attitude, poorer performance, noticeable changes of body size, and frequent trips to the bathroom.

Because of recent tragedies in the sport involving wrestlers and weight loss, extra emphasis is being placed on education and safety rules. Specific concerns about the role of supplements and possible prescription drugs while training intensely are being looked at as well.

At the University of Iowa we test the body fat composition of our wrestling team once a year, and then periodically check some wrestlers throughout the remainder of the year. Each year in early to

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mid-September the team has mandatory testing with the team athletic trainer. This is within a month after they have returned to school and right around the start of organized practices. The results are used as a guide for the coaches and medical staff to evaluate the roster and begin making decisions about who will wrestle in which weight class. It also allows enough time to counsel and guide the wrestlers on how to safely and properly lose any extra weight over the next eight to ten weeks leading up to their first competition, which is usually in late November. New weight procedures could make for a possible date change of early testing.

The testing method we use at Iowa is caliper measurement. We have access to underwater weighing equipment, which is supposedly the most accurate measurement of body fat, but we use the calipers for several reasons. First, it is less time consuming for both the athletic trainer and the athlete. Second, calipers are more readily available and the test is easier to perform. Finally, underwater weighing has a high learning curve for those being assessed. If the testee is not well trained in having this done, the results may vary dramatically.

We test six different sites on the body with the calipers and use a formula developed by exercise physiologists which is specific to male high school wrestlers. Although these are collegiate wrestlers we are testing, the difference is believed to be minimal. The six sites we measure are the scapula, triceps, chest, suprailiac (hip), abdomen, and thigh. (See the worksheet at right)

We also measure their body weight and use the body fat percentage to estimate the "ideal" weight of the wrestler. The ideal weight is theoretically what the wrestler would weigh if they dropped their fat percentage down to five percent fat, which is the figure recommended for college-age athletes not to drop below. For high school athletes, it is recommended that they not drop below seven percent body fat.

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In an attempt to be consistent among team members and from one reading to the next on the same athlete, we have an experienced technician perform the tests on all the athletes each time. In our case, the team athletic trainer performs all of the testing.

We recommend that the athletes be tested in the morning hours before they have eaten or worked out. It is important that they are well hydrated since a dehydrated state can skew skinfold readings. This is also when a most accurate weight can be assessed. It is possible and highly likely that with new procedures for making weight, hydration testing will be used along with skinfold measurement.

Attitude

Proper attitude is the last but certainly not the least ingredient for wrestling success. This trait affects all other areas. Without the proper attitude, a wrestler will only go so far. Physical ability can make a wrestler a winner early on in his career, but at more advanced levels where the difference in talent narrows, talent alone won't do it. Your athletes have to be motivated to a very high level for them to be champion wrestlers. Their competitive abilities must be brought out of them through an internal desire to excel and maximize their abilities.

Through observation and good communication you can tell which athletes need to work on their attitude. Through team and individual discussions, you can bring about big improvements. Even highly motivated wrestlers need personal attention, so don't overlook anyone on the team. You can address attitude in many ways, but it starts at the top, so make sure you (the coach) represent what you want your wrestlers to accomplish.

Next issue: Practice - Part 5.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Dan Gable stands as one of the United States' greatest collegiate and Olympic champions. As head wrestling coach at the University of Iowa from 1977 to 1997, Gable won the Big 10 Conference Championship in each of his 21 seasons. He also won an unprecedented 15 NCAA Wrestling Championships, including nine straight from 1978 to 1986.

As coach of the 1984 Olympic wrestling team, Gable led the United States to seven gold medals and two silvers and was named "best coach." An Olympic wrestler himself in 1972, Gable dominated the field, going unscored upon in six matches to take the gold. Now serving as assistant to the athletic director at the University of Iowa, Gable has been inducted into both the Olympic Hall of Fame and the National Wrestling Hall of Fame, and in 1996 he was listed as one of the top 100 U.S. Olympians of all time.

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