



## Wrestling: An Elementary Approach

by John Yockey

Wrestling has been in existence for thousands of years, as evidenced by pictures of wrestling techniques inside Egyptian tombs that date back to 3400 B.C. (Fox, 1986). During this time, kings, philosophers, presidents, and commoners have enjoyed the sport. In wrestling, two wrestlers try to *pin* each other's shoulder blades to the ground by unbalancing or controlling their opponent. As with all sports, there are specific rules that guide competition. In many countries, wrestling occurs on an informal basis. In the USA, amateur wrestling is competed in a variety of age groups, ranging from the masters division (ages 35 and older) down to children only 4 years old.

Very few books or articles refer to wrestling at the elementary school level. One of the most comprehensive books written on elementary and junior high wrestling is *Elementary and Junior High Wrestling* (Hopke & Kidder, 1977). To my knowledge, wrestling is currently conducted only on a sporadic basis in elementary school physical education.

Various wrestling styles are evident at both the professional and amateur levels. The three most popular styles in the United States are Greco-Roman, Freestyle, and Folk-style. In Greco-Roman wrestling, competitors attack only the opponent's upper body. Wrestlers in this style are not allowed to touch each other's legs with their hands or use their legs to score a takedown on the opponent. In Freestyle, wrestlers may attack any part of the opponent's body, with no restrictions on the types of throws used to score a takedown or fall. Folk-style is very similar to Freestyle, the only differences being that the wrestlers cannot use high amplitude throws, they are not allowed to lock hands while controlling their opponent on the mat unless they have their opponent in a pinning combination, and the point system for scoring varies. Folk-style is the type of wrestling used in interscholastic competition in the USA at the junior high, high school, and college levels. It is also the only style that will be discussed in this article.



### Benefits

The positive impact of wrestling has been noted by many researchers. Carl Gabbard (1978) has asserted that wrestling develops physical elements such as speed, agility, and muscular endurance. He also noted that wrestling helps in the development of self-concept, body awareness, self-control, and sportsmanship. Jarman and Hanley (1983) agree with Gabbard. They noted that wrestling helps develop an individual's strength, stamina, and flexibility. Additionally, individuals gain mental development through learning different techniques and strategies, as well as acquiring an understanding of the human body and how it works. There is development in the social domain as well, as wrestlers learned to work with others, to interact with an opponent, to respond to authority figures, and to follow rules. Wrestling helps participants grow both emotionally, as they learn to deal with success and failure, and spiritually, as they experience varying stages of courage and perseverance. Wrestling brings together people from all walks of life, striving to be the best they can be. And, most importantly, it's a fun activity.

Participation in wrestling can give students opportunities to strengthen their understanding of the six national standards for physical education (NASPE, 2004). In particular, wrestling contributes at least four of the standards:

**Standard 1:** Demonstrates competency in motor skills and movement patterns needed to perform a variety of physical activities.

**Standard 2:** Demonstrates understanding of movement concepts, principles, strategies, and tactics as they apply to the learning and performance of physical activities.

**Standard 5:** Exhibits responsible personal and social behavior that respects self and others in physical activity settings.

**Standard 6:** Values physical activity for health, enjoyment, challenge, self-expressions, and social interaction.

## Drawbacks

The greatest drawback to participation in wrestling, as in any sport, is the potential for injury which, in turn, can lead to litigation. Such litigation may occur due to negligence on the part of an uninformed instructor or an unforeseen accident. Thus, special attention must be given to safety factors when teaching wrestling. Physical education specialists who choose to include wrestling as a unit in their physical education program must be prepared to make modifications to fit the ability and mentality of their students. If students do not demonstrate responsible personal and social behavior, the repercussions could be catastrophic. Some areas in which modifications may need to be made are the following:

- Gender (boys vs. boys and girls vs. girls)
- Equity of size between partners (similar size is important).
- Athletic ability of individual students (Do you want partners of similar ability to work together to challenge each other or would it be better to have one student with greater athleticism to help a partner?)
- Types of lead-up activities (thumb, arm, leg, Indian, folk-style, etc.)
- Specific techniques to be taught (take-downs, escapes, reversals, and pinning combinations) based on the class's understanding of prior techniques or concepts.

## Individual and Group Needs

The equipment needs for wrestling are very minimal when compared to most scholastic sports. Each participant should wear shorts or sweat pants, a t-shirt or sweatshirt, appropriate footwear (wrestling shoes, high-tops, or socks), and headgear to protect the ears. Other needs include a large area without obstructions in which to lay mats, enough mat space to safely accommodate all the students, and a first aid kit. An appropriate student to teacher ratio is no more than 20:1.

## Developing a Curriculum

When developing a wrestling unit, the first area that needs to be addressed is safety. Without safety, this

unit will not be a fun or effective component of physical education, and the potential hazards could detract from desired goals. In order to ensure safety, students must have a clear understanding of expectations and goals for the unit. So, the physical education instructor must consider whether it is his or her intent to introduce combative sports, to develop an appreciation of different types of movement, or to promote fun and fitness. Once the goals are clear, it is important to cite them as students are informed of both the potential hazards and the benefits.

To further ensure safety, there should be no inappropriate behavior during the wrestling lessons. Neither is it necessary for students to exhibit live (full go) wrestling during class. Live wrestling is more appropriate when offered after school as an intramural or club activity for those interested in truly testing the skills they have learned.

## Lead-up Activities

Lead-up activities can and should be used as a precursor to introduction of a wrestling unit. Use the lead-up activities to help determine if a class or specific individuals will be capable of participating in a manner that will ensure safety for all. In particular, prerequisites for offering a wrestling unit would include units on stretching, physical training using body weight resistance, and basic gymnastics, such as rolling (forward and backward) and cart-wheels. Offering these units first prepares students physically for the unique rigors of wrestling.

Other possible lead-up games and activities can be found in many physical education resource books. For example, *Hooked on Fitness* (Harrison, 1993) lists six possible games: Quick Hands, Leg Wrestling, Push-up Pull, Native American Hand Wrestling, Arm Wrestling, and Hold'Em Back. Another source, *Games from Long Ago & Far Away* (Carr, 2001), lists five additional activities: Hoppo Bumpo, Parok-Pamin Sinam, Chicken Fight, Stork Fight, and Kirip (Nicrobarese Wrestling). Other lead-up activities might include variations of sumo wrestling using a ten foot circle, drilling techniques with a partner (one step technique or a series of techniques combined using varying amounts of resistance), or situation wrestling.

## Preteaching Warm-up

In order for students to increase their heart rate and improve flexibility, thereby reducing the risk of injury, a 5-10 minute warm-up routine should be used at the beginning of each class. This routine should begin with some form of aerobic activity like jogging, jumping jacks, or jump-rope, while flexibility activities should emphasize stretching the legs, back, and neck. Examples of these stretches include modified hurdlers, butterfly, lunges, spinal roll, spinal twist, and neck

bridges (forward, backward, and side to side). An excellent resource for finding out more about stretching is *Stretching* (Anderson, 1980).

## Progression of Basic Skills and Concepts of Movement

Before learning any wrestling techniques, one must possess an understanding of basic skills and concepts. Without this understanding, the techniques will be difficult to learn. Jarman and Hanley (1983) consider there to be seven basic skills: stance, motion, level change, penetration, lifting, back step, and back arch. Of the seven, this article will touch on only the first four (stance, motion, level change, and penetration).

- *Stance* is the position of one's body while wrestling. Stance may be a neutral stance (on one's feet) or in a referee's position (on the mat in a top/offensive or bottom/defensive situation). The neutral stance can be further categorized as square or staggered and refers to one's foot position in relation to shoulder position. A square stance has feet placed parallel to one's shoulders. A staggered stance has one foot forward and one foot behind the shoulders.
- *Motion* is the movement of one's body while attempting offensive or defensive techniques. While moving, wrestlers need to maintain good balance and body position. This enables them to execute techniques more easily and, in turn, be more successful against opponents. Motion may be used to create an opportunity to take an opponent from his/her feet and to the mat, reverse a position, escape from a bad position, or pin/win by scoring points against an opponent.
- *Level Change* is the height at which wrestlers move their bodies in relationship to their opponents. Level change may also be used as a set-up to create an opening in an opponent's stance. Level change generally refers to a wrestler lowering the height of his/her hips and shoulders to score a takedown.
- *Penetration* refers to invading an opponent's space (getting inside his/her defenses). This may be done by using a body part such as an arm or leg on or around an opponent's leg. Penetration may also be made by using one's hips or limbs to lift or off-balance an opponent. Penetration may occur at an opponent's centerline (straight through) or by moving in a circular direction to create an angle to take the opponent's balance.

Using these four skills gives an individual a sound working knowledge of a variety of wrestling techniques. The other three (lifting, back step, and back arch) involve greater risk and should be attempted only by individuals preparing for interscholastic competi-

tion after more extensive preparation than this unit will permit.

## Wrestling Techniques

When deciding which techniques should be taught in a wrestling unit, consider these: take-downs, break-downs, escapes, reversals, and pinning combinations. A take-down is scored when a wrestler takes an opponent off of his/her feet to the mat safely and controls the opponent from behind. A breakdown is used by the top wrestler, when both wrestlers are on the mat, in an attempt to turn the bottom wrestler onto his/her back. An escape is when the bottom wrestler gets away from the top wrestler and regains his or her feet. A reversal occurs when the bottom wrestler forces a change of position with the top wrestler while on the mat. A pinning combination is evident when a wrestler has control (generally, on top) and is in a position to try to pin the opponent's shoulders to the mat for three seconds.

## Examples of Techniques

Take-downs: double leg, single leg, duck under, ankle pick

Breakdowns: tight waist & near arm, tight waist & near ankle, tight waist & far ankle, double knee block

Escapes: standup (cut or shear)

Reversals: switch, wing roll, sit out and Peterson roll

Pinning Combinations: half-nelson, near side cradle, cross-face cradle

## Class Format

The following format lists some examples of techniques and drills which may be used during a class period. In an elementary (grades 5 and 6) physical education class lasting thirty minutes, the lesson plan format could be set up as follows:

### Minutes Activity

1-10	Warm-up: jog, do tumbling and agility drills, stretch
11-15	Introduce and drill specific technique: e.g., double leg takedown
16-20	Introduce and drill defense to a double leg takedown: e.g., block and sprawl and snap and spin behind
20-25	Introduce and drill a pinning combination: e.g., half-nelson
25-28	Conclude class by reviewing techniques presented during class. Discuss how these techniques can benefit someone according to NASPE standards.
28-30	Put away any equipment, put on shoes, get drinks, and line up to leave class.

An excellent addition to this format would be an opportunity to practice the techniques taught in a realistic situation. This could be done by offering wrestling

as a club or intramural activity after school with a wrestling tournament at the end of the training sessions.

## Resources

As with many other activities, which the physical educator may desire to teach but lacks personal experience, it is advisable to seek out an expert, someone with specific knowledge who can serve as a resource or mentor such as a coach or former competitor. Such a resource can serve as guide toward more specific information. However, keep in mind that you, the physical educator, are always ultimately responsible for what occurs in your classes.

To seek out further information, valuable web sites include these: <http://www.themat.com> or <http://www.jjhuddle.com>, state associations such as the Ohio High School Athletic Association (<http://www.ohsaa.org>), national associations like USA Wrestling (<http://www.usawrestling.com>), and the National Wrestling Coaches Association (<http://www.nwcaonline.com>).

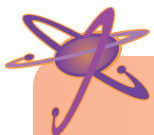
## Discussion

Is wrestling an appropriate activity to teach at the elementary school level? Based on the information presented in this article and this writer's experiences as both a physical education teacher and a wrestling

coach, the answer is Yes! Wrestling as a physical education unit can be taught in a safe and age-appropriate way. If taught correctly at an early age, such as grades four or five, students who choose to participate without supervision on the playground or at home will be able to do so safely. Wrestling can positively impact individuals physically, mentally, socially, and emotionally and can be used to meet some NASPE standards. Finally, while there is an abundance of information on wrestling in general, information pertaining to wrestling at the elementary level is somewhat limited, and much of that is quite dated. However, I hope this article serves as a catalyst encourage more educators to take a chance and try to teach wrestling.

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## Gym Classes Aim to Breed Champions

Students at La Crescenta Elementary School in California don't just throw a ball around and play tag in their physical education classes. They learn sports techniques, perform cardiovascular exercises, and increase muscle strength. That is why they are champions. La Crescenta Elementary School was named the California Champion for category 2 (schools whose population is between 200 and 500) in the President's Physical Fitness Challenge for the second year in a row.

"We learn how to do volleyball, how to set, bump, serve, how to play, how to score . . . to play like a pro," fifth-grader Michael Lee said. Lee is one of about 280 fourth-, fifth- and sixth-grade students in physical education teacher Janet Goliger's fitness classes at La Crescenta Elementary. The students participate in Goliger's classes for one hour every Tuesday and Thursday. Her structured program works the children's motor skills, movement patterns, sports techniques and concepts, and basic fundamental skills that they can build upon each year. The school's administration agrees that pushing kids to learn how to play sports correctly and increasing their physical fitness awareness is important in building a healthier future.

Source: [pelinks4u.org](http://pelinks4u.org)

