



# National Federation of State High School Associations

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## **Weight Management - Changing a Culture** By Sam Crosby, Chair, NFHS Wrestling Rules Committee

Over the last several years, the NFHS Wrestling Rules Committee has adopted rules that attempt to discourage wrestlers from losing extreme amounts of weight. The most significant rules include:

- Requiring each wrestler to establish a certified minimum weight before Jan. 15.
- Prohibiting a wrestler from wrestling more than one weight class above the certified weight without recertifying at a higher weight.
- Recommending body fat measurements and hydration levels in establishing a minimum certified weight.
- Prohibiting the use of sweat boxes, vinyl suits, diuretics or other artificial means of quick weight reduction.
- Permitting wrestlers to have a two-pound growth allowance.
- Requiring shoulder-to-shoulder weigh-ins one hour before the start of a dual meet and two hours before tournaments.

This year, the rules committee made a strong statement in revising the weigh-in procedure - a statement that emphasizes the importance of safety in urging wrestlers to wrestle as close to their natural weight as possible. With the new weigh-in rules, wrestlers may not leave the weigh-in area once they report to weigh in; nor may they engage in any activities in the weigh-in area that encourage dehydration. In dual-meet competition, wrestlers at weigh-in may step on and off the scales only three times, to allow for possible discrepancies in scales, and in tournaments the wrestlers may step on each available scale one time to make weight. With the new weigh-in procedures, it is hoped that everyone connected with wrestling will begin to move away from an emphasis on the sport of cutting weight to concentrate on the sport of wrestling.

Wrestling is a wonderful activity with many advantages for the student-athlete. It is a sport that is highly competitive, exciting and satisfying. It is a sport that provides for individual and team competition. It is - and should be - fun. Unfortunately, the practice of losing weight by not eating, restricting fluid intake and over-exercising reduces the sport's fun.

For too long, the wrestling community has unthinkingly accepted the myth that to be a good wrestler, you must cut weight. The generally accepted thinking is something like this: if your natural weight is 135 pounds, you may be a good wrestler at 135 pounds. But if you wrestle at 130 pounds, you'll be a better wrestler. And if you can make it down to 125, you'll be a state champion. No facts support that widely held view, yet wrestlers and parents subscribe to that faulty reasoning.

I suggest that losing excessive weight is, in fact, detrimental to an athlete's performance. A wrestler who cuts excessive weight decreases in strength, diminishes agility, reduces quickness and promotes the development of a negative attitude for the sport of wrestling. The wrestler's sole focus becomes one of losing weight. His every waking moment turns to thoughts of food and drink. All his practice time is spent not on improving wrestling skills but on using methods to lose weight. Interest in the sport of wrestling wanes; interest in the sport of losing weight becomes paramount.

Why then do we in the wrestling community persist in supporting, and even encouraging, wrestlers to lose weight? Do wrestlers really believe that after losing 10 pounds during the week that they are stronger, faster and more agile than their opponent? Whatever the rationale, somehow losing weight has become the acceptable norm in the wrestling culture, accepted not only by the wrestlers but also by coaches and parents too. In fact, if you talk to a non-wrestling person about the sport, their first thought about wrestling is one of cutting weight. The non-initiated usually will share bizarre stories about some wrestler they know who had to lose weight to wrestle. Those stories are not endearing and soon the term wrestling becomes synonymous with losing weight.

To improve the great sport of wrestling, we have to make a cultural shift to begin to disabuse those who think that wrestling and losing weight are inseparable companions. We have to make a cultural shift so that young athletes can wrestle at their proper weight to enjoy the competition, to have fun wrestling with someone of equal, natural weight. But changing culture is difficult.

How do we change the culture of wrestling, to change the myth that losing weight is an expected practice? First, we need rules. I believe the rules are in place now, especially with the current revisions in the weigh-in procedure. Once the rules are in place, everyone in the wrestling community needs to follow the rules.

If we are to succeed in eliminating the sport of cutting weight from wrestling, we need the support of the coaches - coaches are extremely important in establishing standards of behavior for their wrestlers. We need coaches who read the research and share important information with their team; coaches who will stand up both in public and private to endorse the importance of developing good nutritional habits for the health and safety of their student-wrestlers.

We need athletic trainers willing and able to monitor body fat and hydration levels to assist coaches in controlling the amount of weight a wrestler can safely lose. We need wrestlers who are responsive to their coaches; wrestlers who realize the dangers inherent in rapid weight loss; wrestlers who work in practice, not to lose weight, but to improve their skills.

Furthermore, we need parents more knowledgeable as to what is a reasonable weight loss; parents who will step forward and demand those severe weight-loss practices be eliminated from their school's wrestling program. We need administrators to monitor their wrestling program and to implement in their school a wellness curriculum that stresses the importance of nutrition in the normal growth and development of high school athletes.

And we need officials who accept the rules as written and enforce their implementation in a fair and reasonable manner. Finally, we need the continued guidance and support from the NFHS Sports Medicine Advisory Committee, a group that has been instrumental in our efforts to eliminate unhealthy practices of severe weight loss in wrestling.

Changing culture will not be easy. But if we truly care about the sport of wrestling and the young athletes whom we guide, we all need to work together to implement fair, reasonable and safe weight-cutting practices in our schools. Remember that wrestling is a sport and it ought to be fun.

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