

Thursday Thoughts: The Breakdown Are you thinking about being a wrestling coach?

By Jon Gums

When I started teaching almost 30 years ago, I thought coaching was a bonus, a chance to get to not only know students at a different level, but to change lives.

There have been many influential wrestling college coaches throughout history who have made a significant impact on the sport and its development. Some of the most notable include:

1. Dan Gable - A former Olympic champion, Gable is widely regarded as one of the greatest American wrestling coaches of all time. He led the University of Iowa wrestling team to 15 NCAA titles and a record of 355-21-5 during his 21-year tenure.
2. John Smith - A two-time Olympic champion, Smith has been a highly successful college and international coach, leading Oklahoma State University to six NCAA team titles and coaching several Olympic and World champion wrestlers.
3. Bob Williams - A former national champion wrestler and coach at the University of Oregon, Williams is widely regarded as one of the most innovative and influential coaches in the sport.
4. Pat Smith - A four-time NCAA champion and Olympic bronze medalist, Smith has been a successful college and international coach, leading Oklahoma State to multiple NCAA team titles and coaching several Olympic and World champion wrestlers.
5. Bill Kilpack - A former Utah State University wrestling coach, Kilpack was known for his innovative coaching methods and was instrumental in the development of modern wrestling techniques.

Some of us have also got to experience influential coaches at the high school level including

1. Bob Hirsch - Former Watertown and Milbank High School wrestling coach who wrestled for Vermillion High School and continued his wrestling career at Northern State University in Aberdeen, becoming a two-time NAIA All-American.
2. Randy Burwick - Long time Hettinger wrestling coach who was 2-time State Champion for Dickinson, 4-time NDCAC Champion and 1985 National Champion for DSU and multiple time coach of the year.
3. Dave Mellen - Past Mandan High School wrestling coach All-American at Dickinson State College. Coached 21 years at Mandan High School and coached them to their only wrestling state championship.
4. Nick Storhaug - Hall of Fame Lisbon Wrestling coach, life long wrestling sponsor, coach of the year, North Dakota's Class B 2nd Best Career Won/Lost Record (217-27).
5. Ken Ruml - coached wrestling at Howard High School from 1976-2011, 3 individual team titles and one dual championship with an insane dual record of 436-7.

There are so many and would love to list them all but that would be more pages than I can type today.

These are just a few examples of the many influential wrestling coaches who have made a significant impact on the sport and its development. Their contributions and achievements have inspired future generations of coaches and athletes, and their legacies continue to shape the sport today.

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I experienced personal growth and a love for sports because of the coaches in my life. First, my dad, HOF wrestling coach Hilbert Gums, he will always be my first coach and biggest inspiration. There are so many other coaches that molded the young Jon Gums, from baseball to track, football to wrestling. I have thought about ways to make it a bit easier for new coaches and making lists of things they need to think about and making lists of how to be a not only a great coach but mold their craft so that they have a positive influence on the athletes.

It truly is a privilege to have that opportunity to coach if coaches take that perspective they can start on the right path. I have taken notes at coaches' clinics, read books, fell down many a rabbit hole online trying to figure out what is best coaching and what good coaches do. I feel I can help by making a few lists and maybe a bit of explanation in categories of wrestling coaching that sometimes might be overlooked or is second nature for many of coaches. Take this with a grain of salt and see if you can find useful tidbits if you are thinking of becoming a coach or need to brush up on your coaching skills.

Step one: Figuring out your coaching philosophy.

Wrestling coaching philosophy refers to the beliefs and values a coach holds about the sport of wrestling and how they approach coaching their team. Some common aspects of a wrestling coaching philosophy include:

1. **Emphasis on technique:** A coach may prioritize teaching and refining proper wrestling techniques, both offensive and defensive, in their athletes.
2. **Physical and mental preparation:** A coach may stress the importance of both physical and mental preparation for wrestling, including strength and conditioning, nutrition, and mental toughness training.
3. **Character development:** A coach may view wrestling as an opportunity to develop positive character traits in their athletes, such as discipline, perseverance, and teamwork.
4. **Team-oriented approach:** A coach may prioritize the success of the team over individual achievement, encouraging teamwork and cooperation among their athletes.
5. **Competitive spirit:** A coach may cultivate a competitive spirit in their athletes, encouraging them to strive for success and continuously improve their skills.
6. **Respect for the sport:** A coach may emphasize the importance of respect for the sport, the rules, and one's opponents.

The specific elements of a wrestling coaching philosophy may vary from coach to coach and may change over time, but all successful coaching philosophies should aim to help their athletes grow and succeed as both athletes and individuals.

During the Dakota Grappler Live Podcast, archived on YouTube I have interviewed several coaches and I love listening to their coaching philosophies and who and where they developed them. This sport is so rich with tradition, and North and South Dakota have produced some of the most influential coaches in the sport.

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I started to ask questions about why I became a wrestling coach during one of my many sleepless nights. I started to write a list of questions one might have to ask oneself.

When becoming a wrestling coach, it is important to reflect on your goals, beliefs, and values to ensure success as a coach. Here are some questions that one might consider asking oneself:

1. What are my goals for this team and for individual wrestlers? This is where you should pull out that notebook or journal you should keep, some place you can look back and re-evaluate yourself from time to time. A coach Barry McCleary from Napoleon says he still has my dad's practice notes and practice plans from 35-40 years ago I would love to see them some time, to see how he evaluated duals and wrestling tournaments and how he addressed daily practice routines.
2. What do I believe is the role of the coach in the sport of wrestling? Also, do not overlook at the aspect of the roles of any assistant coaches?
3. How do I want to approach coaching, including practices, meets, and overall team management?
4. What are my coaching strengths and weaknesses, and how can I address them?
5. What is my philosophy on discipline, teamwork, and sportsmanship?
6. How do I plan to communicate with my athletes and their families?
7. How will I evaluate the success of my team and individual athletes?
8. What resources, such as equipment, facilities, wrestling clubs, and funding, do I have access to, and what resources do I need to acquire?
9. How will I stay current with new techniques, training methods, and rules in wrestling?
10. What is my plan for continuing my own education and professional development as a coach?

Asking these questions can help you gain clarity on your coaching philosophy and approach and provide a roadmap for success as a wrestling coach.

I think a large percent of my successes as a coach and teacher was having clear goals not wishful thinking or just luck. So, I made a small list of Goals coaches need to look at. I like using S.M.A.R.T Goals.

SMART is an acronym used to describe a framework for setting clear, achievable, and measurable goals. SMART goals are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound.

1. **Specific:** The goal should be clear and defined, specifying what exactly is to be achieved, and write them down! Just search the internet and you can find plenty of SMART goal worksheets to add here for completing this.
2. **Measurable:** The goal should have quantifiable metrics for determining progress and success.
3. **Achievable:** The goal should be realistic and attainable, considering available resources and limitations.
4. **Relevant:** The goal should align with the overall mission and values of the organization or individual and the sport of wrestling dah.

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5. Time-bound: The goal should have a clear deadline for completion.

By using the SMART framework, goals become more focused, attainable, and effective, which can lead to greater motivation, accountability, and success. The SMART approach can be applied to both personal and professional goals, including in coaching and athletic contexts.

Goal setting is an important aspect of coaching, as it provides focus and direction for both the coach and the team. Here are some key areas for goal setting for wrestling coaches:

1. Team Goals: These may include winning a certain number of matches, achieving a specific record, or winning a conference, state championship qualifying for duals and individuals.
2. Individual Goals: These may include helping each wrestler achieve a specific win-loss record, improving technical skills, or reaching personal bests in strength and conditioning.
3. Skill Development Goals: These may include improving technique in specific moves or positions, increasing endurance, or improving mental preparation.
4. Program Development Goals: These may include building a stronger youth wrestling program, improving facilities and equipment, or expanding the reach of the program, and building a team culture.
5. Coach Development Goals: These may include continuing education, attending coaching clinics, or earning certifications.
6. Building a community for help, as much as one might want to do everything, you will need help along the way, so developing a team other than the athletes you are coaching. I would call it a wrestling family.

It is important to regularly evaluate and adjust goals as needed to ensure they remain relevant and achievable. Additionally, involving athletes in the goal-setting process can help build buy-in and accountability for both the coach and the team.

I mentioned that my dad's assistant coach still had my dad's practice plans so that is where I will do my next list. Most athletic directors require new coaches to start making specific practices plans. I do think it should become a habit and done for each practice.

Developing effective wrestling practice plans can help ensure that athletes are making progress and reaching their goals. Here are some steps to follow when creating a wrestling practice plan:

1. Identify goals: (for each practice) Determine the specific goals for the practice, such as improving a particular technique, increasing endurance, or working on a specific aspect of mental preparation.
2. Assess the team: Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the team, including the skills and experience of individual athletes.
3. Determine the structure of the practice: Decide on the length of the practice, the number of drills and activities, and the order in which they will be completed.
4. Select drills and activities: Choose drills and activities that align with the goals of the practice and match the abilities of the athletes.

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5. Incorporate conditioning: Plan for strength and endurance training, such as weightlifting, cardio, or agility drills, to help athletes perform at their best.
6. Plan for live wrestling: Include live wrestling in the practice plan to help athletes apply their skills in a competitive environment. I always liked small groups and timed goes under wrestling conditions and scenarios (like 30 seconds down by 3 points).
7. Consider review and feedback: Allocate time for reviewing and critiquing athletes' performance, both individually and as a team.
8. Evaluate and adjust: Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of the practice plan and make adjustments as needed to ensure that the goals of the practice are being met.
9. Don't be afraid to post these every day in the practice room.
10. I can put together a practice plan form maybe in a different Thursday Thoughts, I have not had to do that for years (so I just put that on my to-do list).

By following these steps, coaches can develop a structured and effective practice plans that supports the goals and needs of their wrestling team.

As most of you probably know, I consider myself a life-long learner. Being a lifetime learner means a person is committed to continuous learning and self-improvement throughout their lifetime. It involves a willingness to explore new ideas, seek out new experiences, and constantly strive to expand one's knowledge and skills.

Lifetime learners are curious, open-minded, and willing to take risks. They recognize that learning is a continuous process and that there is always something new to discover and explore. They are also self-directed, taking the initiative to seek out new information and resources, and are proactive in their own learning.

Being a lifetime learner can have many benefits, including personal and professional growth, increased confidence, and a greater sense of fulfillment and purpose. By embracing a lifelong learning mindset, individuals can develop their skills, explore new passions, and build a rich and meaningful life.

Staying current with new techniques, training methods, and rules in wrestling is important for coaches to ensure that their athletes are performing at their best and remaining competitive. Here are some ways to stay current:

1. Attend coaching clinics and workshops: Participating in coaching clinics and workshops can provide opportunities to learn from experienced and knowledgeable coaches, as well as network with other coaches.
2. Read relevant books and articles: Staying up to date with the latest research and best practices in wrestling can help coaches improve their training methods and techniques.
3. Participate in online forums and discussion groups: Joining online communities of wrestling coaches can provide a platform for sharing information and ideas, and for learning from others' experiences.
4. Watch videos of matches and training sessions: Places like flowrestling.com can enhance analyzing videos of matches and training sessions can provide insight into new techniques and training methods, as well as help coaches identify areas for improvement.

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5. Attend competitions and events: Attending wrestling competitions and events can provide a chance to observe and learn from top-level athletes and coaches.
6. Stay informed about rule changes: Regularly review the rules of the sport and make sure to stay up to date on any changes.
7. Get involved in out of season programs that teach other styles of wrestling to including freestyle and Greco.

By pursuing ongoing learning and professional development, coaches can stay current with new techniques, training methods, and rules in wrestling, and continue to improve their coaching skills and knowledge.

One big step a coach must make for long-term success is to build trust with their wrestlers.

Building trust with wrestling athletes is an important aspect of coaching, as it can impact the athletes' performance and motivation. Here are some ways I feel build trust with wrestling athletes:

1. Communication: Regularly communicate with athletes, listen to their concerns and feedback, and be transparent and honest in your interactions.
2. Consistency: Follow through on commitments and be consistent in your actions and decisions.
3. Respect: Treat athletes with respect and foster an environment where they feel valued and heard.
4. Support: Be there for athletes, both on and off the mat, and support them in their goals and aspirations.
5. Encouragement: Provide positive and constructive feedback and encourage athletes to develop their skills and confidence.
6. Fairness: Be fair and impartial in your treatment of athletes and avoid showing favoritism.
7. Confidentiality: Maintain confidentiality when appropriate and respect the privacy of athletes.

By building trust with wrestling athletes, coaches can create a positive and supportive environment that fosters growth, development, and success.

Another aspect not to overlook is dealing with what I would call stakeholders (parents). Dealing with the parents of your athletes can be an important and challenging aspect of coaching. Here are some tips for building positive relationships with parents:

1. Set clear rules of when and how you address parents, with concerns, developing these skills are as import and any, I have seen great wrestling coaches stumble and fail without managing parents correctly.
2. Communication: Regularly communicate with parents about their child's progress, expectations, and any concerns.
3. Openness: Be open and transparent in your dealings with parents and be willing to listen to their feedback and concerns.

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4. Respect: Treat parents with respect and be understanding of their perspective and concerns.
5. Clarity: Be clear about your expectations, rules, and policies, and communicate these clearly to parents.
6. Fairness: Be fair and impartial in your dealings with parents and avoid showing favoritism.
7. Support: Provide support and resources to parents and be understanding of their role in their child's athletic development.
8. Confidentiality: Maintain confidentiality when appropriate and respect the privacy of athletes and their families.
9. Athletic directors can help don't forget they always have advice and rules to dealing with parents.
10. Parents make and break teams, make them an integral part of your wrestling family and rewards await.

By building positive relationships with the parents of your athletes, coaches can create a supportive and effective environment for athletes to develop and succeed.

Lastly, what all coaches ultimately want is a winning culture that stands the test of time, it takes long hours of work (work you will love) just remember building a winning culture involves creating an environment that fosters success and motivation among athletes. By fostering a positive and supportive environment, setting clear goals, and emphasizing teamwork and hard work, coaches can help build a winning culture that motivates and inspires athletes to achieve their best.