

Weight Management for Wrestling

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Introduction

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. This information is presented to help clear up misconceptions regarding wrestling and weight loss. I also hope to give some guidance to those who desire to manage their weight properly in preparation for and during the wrestling season.

History and Stigma

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. Looking further back, many remember the days that losing excessive weight was a specific practice and expectation among wrestlers. It was supposed to teach sacrifice, commitment, and the idea of "No Pain, No Gain."

Regardless of the current attitude of the majority of the wrestling community, the stigma that an unhealthy loss of weight is a requirement of wrestling among outside observers sticks. The Virginia High School League has followed national guidelines to establish rules that encourage healthy weight management among wrestlers.

Current Regulations

Preseason weight certification is accomplished with three steps. The first is determining each wrestler's body fat percentage using skin fold calipers. Next, the wrestler completes a hydration test, to insure against a dehydrated weight measurement, and the wrestler weighs in. The third step is the calculation of the wrestler's minimum wrestling weight based on 7% body fat for males and 12% for females. The wrestler may not wrestle at a weight class below his minimum weight during the season. The wrestler is also restricted from losing more than 1.5% body weight loss per week (official weigh-ins at certification, matches, and tournaments are used for this calculation). A one-pound per month growth allowance is provided to allow for the natural growth of this age group. The VHSL advises, and we have instituted, daily weigh-ins before and after practice to monitor weight-loss and dehydration.

Additionally, the National Federation of State High School Associations has adopted several other rules to guide coaches and wrestlers while managing their weight. Wrestlers are discouraged from wrestling at a weight class more than one weight class above their certified weight. This practice will normally make it

impossible to wrestle at their certified weight and follow the 1.5% weight loss rule. The use of sweat boxes, vinyl suites, diuretics or other artificial means of quick weight reduction are prohibited. There are mandatory weigh-in times shortly before the start of dual-meets and tournaments, normally an hour or two.

Aligning Weight Management with Your Goals

Although the wrestling community no longer pushes the idea of the lower the weight class the better, the certified minimum weight class is generally where a championship wrestler wants to compete. Weight certification is only part of your overall weight management plan. Every wrestler has different overall goals and their weight management plan should reflect their goals. The main thing to remember is that, no matter the goal, the wrestler **MUST DECIDE** what their weight management goal is on their own. Parents and coaches should not tolerate unhealthy weight management, grumpy attitudes, or general complaining. If you can't make the weight with a positive attitude, you shouldn't be at that weight.

New to Wrestling

Student-athletes new to the sport should be putting all of their efforts into learning the basics and enjoying the sport. Even when done correctly, managing your weight to reach 7% body fat is a long-term commitment that is very difficult for most teens. Weight management should never be the excuse for quitting or not even giving the sport a try.

Occasionally, new wrestlers will choose to manage their weight in order to get down to a certain weight class. This is normally due to feeling obligated to help the team fill an empty weight or attempting to get on the Varsity line-up as a personal goal. This will be a new experience for the parent and the wrestler, but if you follow the tips and guidelines below it is safe and will result in a better conditioned wrestler.

Multi-Sport Athlete

Excessive fat does not help performance in any sport, even football. It can hamper heat acclimatization, speed, endurance, and work efficiency. Again, weight management is not a good excuse for not giving wrestling a try. Wrestling is the best off-season workout that a multi-sport athlete can take part in.

There are times that multi-sport athletes find themselves losing weight during the wrestling season. First, wrestling has the most aerobically-intensive practices and they may see the extra pounds shed on their own. Occasionally, multi-sport athletes will choose to try and fill a spot as stated above. Finally, they may discover that they enjoy the sport and are having success, so they adjust their overall goals to include becoming one of the best in wrestling.

Best of the Best

Studies have suggested 7% to 9% is the most efficient metabolic range for male athletes. Many who have participated in wrestling for a while have already made many sacrifices in order to become a champion. Although excessive weight cutting will hamper a wrestler's success, refusing to properly

manage weight in order to wrestle at the most efficient weight class can be just as detrimental. These wrestlers will already have an idea what that weight class will be and should begin managing their weight months in advance in order to reach that weight and stay there.

To Eat or Not to Eat

Healthy weight loss requires eating a balanced diet that supplies adequate calories to support growth and daily activity and drinking enough water to maintain an appropriate state of hydration. Eating less fat (such as meat, cheese, and whole milk) and more complex carbohydrates (such as bread, no/low-sugar cereal, and pasta), along with regular aerobic activity, offers the best method for losing weight and maintaining the lower weight. Healthy teens do not need supplements or vitamins. Eating a meal that is heavy in complex carbohydrates (or carbo-loading) four to six hours before an event can significantly improve performance.

A recent study of fad diets show some fad diets contribute to weight loss, but none of them keep the weight off. Low-Carb diets encourage limiting carbohydrates and ask the body to gain the needed carbohydrates from stored fat. The result is that the body also extracts carbohydrates from muscle (which decreases muscle mass) and glycogen (carbohydrates stored in your liver).

Tips:

- Eat, but eat well. And drink lots of water.
- Learn the difference between simple carbs and complex carbs, and read the ingredients too (sugars are simple carbs)
- If you lose it slow it will stay off longer, if you lose it fast it will come right back
- If you like soda or chocolate, allow yourself one every once in awhile but cut it 36 hours before competition
- Trick Snacks – Celery, Ice Cubes, Peanut Butter (sensibly), Mustard, Egg Whites

Foods to avoid:

- Carbonated Drinks (I know this is not a food)
- Chips
- Candy
- Cake
- Ice-cream
- Fried foods
- Excessive amounts of white bread

Judy Nelson, Nutrition Coordinator for the United States Olympic Committee has developed a Ten Step Diet for Wrestlers. The list, in detail, can be found in the Training link at www.GrapplersGym.com. Here are the basics:

- 1) Switch to skim: An 8 ounce glass of skim milk has 36 fewer calories and 4.3 fewer fat grams than 2%
- 2) Lots of fruit: And the variety of fruit is an important factor
- 3) Juice over soda: Soda offers nothing of value and robs the liver of stored glycogen (energy)
- 4) Baked potatoes: Eat the skin, leave out the extras, add water, and you get an easy complex carb meal
- 5) Maintain variety and remove the junk: no one food will supply all of your needs
- 6) Lots of water: During the season you should be drinking +60 ounces of water (5 bottles) a day
- 7) The secret of egg whites: They have good protein and no fat; good protein makes you feel full longer
- 8) High fiber is important: Find a low-sugar cereal that lists at least 3 grams of fiber per serving on label
- 9) Don't rely on meat: Meat is fine, but include beans, dairy, and soy products for variety
- 10) Plan for after weigh-in: Foods with fat digest slowly; try applesauce, crackers, and cereal

What Else Should I Do or Not Do

The minimum amount of aerobic activity necessary to benefit from efficient fat loss is 30 minutes of high activity three times a week. If you are attempting to get your body to the 7% body fat level in order to be a champion, you should do something to maintain strength/conditioning that burns calories every day. Reaching your minimum weight should be planned in advance so that you are only required to lose 2 pounds a week, maximum. During the season, if you are eating good stuff and skipping the junk you should never miss a meal. If your weight is close, it is better to get an extra workout than it is to skip a meal.

Many wrestlers like to “float” water weight in order to make weight, without properly hydrating during the week. The body reacts to the amount of water it is given and will be less likely to give it up (sweat) if it isn’t receiving what it needs in the first place. Most athletic teens are normally slightly dehydrated, so I advise wrestlers to try and “hyperhydrate” during the season. The main result is that they will rarely become dehydrated and their energy level will increase as a result. The added benefit that wrestlers who do this really enjoy is the ability to “float”, or naturally lose, more weight than they may normally lose. Most kids try and cut corners at every opportunity (have you seen your son’s room lately?) Even though it can be dangerous, making weight is not an exception to this rule. Here are some things the parent and coach should monitor: ***Excessive Weight Loss*** – Don’t cheat weight certification and the wrestler will be OK. ***Rapid Weight Loss*** – Minimum weight is a long term goal that should involve an average weight loss of a pound or two a week. Make sure you monitor the average and don’t get excited over even 5 pound daily swings, which kids can naturally do depending on what they ate and their bathroom schedule. ***Weight Cycling or “Cramming for a Test”*** – This is the most common problem. Just like a kid will procrastinate with their studies and cram for a test or rely on an all-nighter to finish a report, kids will try and lose too much weight right before weigh in and then eat too much following competition. This can become a never ending cycle that makes a significant impact in academics and their overall athletic success over the season. A few other things to watch out for, most of which are illegal and all of which unhealthy and potentially fatal: The use of plastics or “sauna suites” and saunas to encourage excessive perspiration and dehydration, vomiting and spitting to lose water weight leads to bulimia, supplements that encourage weight loss rob the body of essential vitamins and electrolytes and can lead to massive health risks, such as heat stroke.

References

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