



Wrestling with Weight Loss: The NCAA Wrestling Weight Management Policy

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THE ISSUES

Safety

In a span of 33 days in late 1997, three collegiate wrestlers died while engaging in a program of rapid weight loss by wearing rubber suits and exercising vigorously in hot environments. All were in the presence of coaches. The wrestlers were attempting to lose an average of 8 pounds over a three to 12 hour period AFTER dropping significant weight over the previous 2-3 months.

Wrestling Fatality Weight-Loss Patterns

Wrestler	Weight goal	Weight Loss Goal on Date of Death	Weight Loss Prev. 3 days	Weight Loss Prev. 10-13 weeks	Weight Loss Total
1	195 lbs.	15 lbs. / 12 hrs.	unknown	23 lbs.	38 lbs.
2	153 lbs.	4 lbs. / 4 hrs.	8 lbs.	13 lbs.	25 lbs.
3	153 lbs.	6 lbs. / 3 hrs.	11 lbs.	10 lbs.	27 lbs.

Competitive equity

Weight is acknowledged to be the competitive equity variable in the sport of wrestling. However, studies by Scott et al. (1994) showed that NCAA wrestlers competed at weights significantly higher than the weight class (mean 3.3 kg) and significantly different than the opponent (mean 1.5 kg).

THE RESPONSE

In 1998, The NCAA and other organizations created a joint resolution stating: "Eliminate from wrestling any and all weight control practices which could potentially risk the health of the participants."

NCAA weight management program guiding principles:

- Enhance safety and competitive equity;
- Minimize incentives for rapid weight loss;
- Emphasize competition, not weight control; and
- Implement practical, effective and enforceable guidelines.

NCAA weight management program components:

- Establish weight classes that better reflect the collegiate wrestling population;
- Establish a permanent healthy weight class early in the season with time to achieve it safely;
- Establish weigh-ins as close to the match as possible and a random draw for weight class order; and
- Eliminate the tools used to accomplish rapid dehydration.

THE EVALUATION

Concurrent research was conducted to assess the effect of the NCAA weight management program (WMP).

Study 1 measured percent body fat by skinfolds during the preseason (P), early season (E) and at the 1999 NCAA tournament (T) for 375 competitors excluding heavyweights.

$\bar{X} \pm SD$	P	E	T
BW (kg)	67.2 ± 11.3	64.6 ± 10.2	65.8 ± 10.1
%BF	10.8 ± 3.2	9.2 ± 2.4	8.9 ± 1.6

Results showed that wrestlers modified their body weight (BW) gradually over the season and the most successful wrestlers (those who made the end-of-year tournament) voluntarily chose to participate at a healthy body fat (%BF) of almost 9%, well above the minimum allowable 5%.

Study 2 examined the effect of the WMP on rapid weight gain (RWG) during the NCAA national tournament with rapid weight gain (rehydration) likely a reflection of previous rapid weight loss (RWL). Heavyweights were not included in the analysis.

Date	Subjects	Official Weigh-in (Prior to competition)	RWG Weigh-in	NCAA WMP	RWG (kg) $\bar{X} \pm SD$
1992	>600	20 hrs	1 hr prior to comp	No	3.73 ± 1.21
1998	>300	2 hrs	12 hrs post-comp	No	2.66 ± 1.37
1999	>300	2 hrs	12 hrs post-comp	Yes	0.66 ± 0.92

Results indicated that reducing the time between weigh-in and competition was a positive influence, and that a WMP coupled with a weigh-in close to competition had an even greater effect.

THE SUMMARY

The NCAA weight management program, now in its third year, has become a model program for the sport and accepted by collegiate wrestlers and coaches.

This letter is in total support of the new NCAA weigh-in format. In the past I campaigned for the night before weigh-in so that athletes could re-hydrate and re-fuel. Unfortunately this system led to abuse.

In the past we couldn't work out the day of weigh ins, guys were too busy "making weight". The weigh in room was like a hospital emergency ward. Athletes in sweats, working out, laying around overheated and exhausted.

Now we can have a real workout the day before matches. The weigh in scene is calm, cool, and relaxed. Athletes are not cutting huge amounts of weight... These rules have initiated a positive culture change in the wrestling world that is healthy and good for the athletes.

Sincerely,

Greg Strobel
Head Wrestling Coach - Lehigh University
2000 Olympic Freestyle Coach

The new weigh-in policy for college wrestling has been a major move forward for the sport of wrestling...

I feel certain that all levels of wrestling would benefit greatly if they adopted the NCAA policy on weigh-ins and making weight. Safety when making weight needs to be a priority at all levels of wrestling. The NCAA policy on weigh-ins and making weight has taken the lead and the sport of wrestling at all levels should follow their example.

Sincerely,

John W. Smith
Head Wrestling Coach
Oklahoma State University

Even with this acceptance, old weight loss habits die hard, as can be seen in the recent 2000 United States Olympic Wrestling Trials:

"Sieracki was 14-15 pounds over the weight limit a few days before the rematch. Lindland was 16 over. Both cut weight in a hurry."

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The results of the present investigation demonstrate improvements in weight management among collegiate wrestlers using the NCAA program. Similar results have been demonstrated at the high-school level. Weight management programs should be considered in all levels of the sport of wrestling.

