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Restoring Greco-Roman Wrestling: Some Research and Philosophy

Milorad Dokmanac,¹ David G. Curby,² and Momir Petkovic³

ABSTRACT. To make a contribution to the improvement of Greco-Roman wrestling, an effort was initiated to identify some causes for the decline in the technical level and scoring in Greco-Roman wrestling over the past 10 years. This analysis aimed to demonstrate how this preventative style of wrestling (holding fingers/wrists in a standing position) has a negative effect on the execution of self-focused, action-oriented wrestling techniques in the Greco-Roman style. To demonstrate the significant effect of holding fingers/wrists has on a wrestling match, an analysis of all medal matches of the 2015 World Wrestling Championships in Las Vegas, Nevada, was performed and quantified. The time parameters measured in each match were the total time of the match, total time in the standing position, and total time in par terre position. Wrestling in the standing position was further specified as time spent in normal contact, time without contact, and contact made by holding fingers/wrists. The amount of match time spent without contact, plus contact made by holding fingers/wrists is defined as *obstructive/preventative wrestling*. Wrestling in the standing position is the focus of this study and comprises 86% and 84% of the entire match time for the gold and bronze medal matches, respectively, with the balance being wrestled in the par terre position. From these data are derived the percent of time in standing spent in obstructive/preventative wrestling actions of grasping and locking of fingers and wrists, as well as time without contact. Means of 78% and 72% were found for gold and bronze medals, respectively. On the basis of these data, it is evident how much time is spent where there is no possibility to perform wrestling techniques, because the wrestlers are holding fingers or are completely separated without close contact in the wrestling standing position.

Keywords: coach education, rules, scoring analysis

To improve Greco-Roman wrestling, we initiated an effort to identify some causes for the decline in the technical level and scoring in Greco-Roman wrestling over the past 10 years (Tünnemann, 2014). A major problem is the systematic destruction of aggressive, self-focused point scoring. This negative effect is demonstrated through the execution of low-scoring wrestling tactics; strategies are taught by coaches, enacted by wrestlers, and officiated by judges.

The numerous changes to the rules of Greco-Roman wrestling that have been made have not helped; rather, they have

moved the sport in the wrong direction. For many years, wrestling has tried to solve problems with a patching approach. The result has been a series of bandages applied here and there, so that no one can hardly recognize the sport. Sometimes changes to the rules were made twice in one year. During these times, even our former Olympic and World champions did not understand the rules of Greco-Roman wrestling and what they saw while watching a bout. During the period when the rules called for the victor to win two out of three periods, the victor was often determined by the choice of position awarded by the draw of either the red or blue ball (Curby, 2009).

The object of the sport is to score technical points and ultimately, get the pin, but the rules have created a defense-oriented sport. Greco-Roman wrestling has lost the variety of takedowns with throws. Rules not only play a key role in bringing out the value of wrestling, but they also set the training structure. To give a typical example from recent Greco-Roman style wrestling, is to fight in the standing position, to create the appearance of aggressiveness while refraining from risk, and

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aiming to have the opponent called for passivity in order to score by gut-wrenching the opponent on the mat. This approach results in a shallow and sterile wrestling. Wrestling coaches cannot continue to base the training of wrestlers on the weakest link in the rules by adopting the least risky and unattractive techniques/tactics, which results in passive wrestling.

This defensive style prevents the full presentation of wrestling techniques, which is in direct correlation with lower scoring of technical points per minute of the wrestling match. In the not-too-distant past, the stance was more upright, and wrestlers worked toward a lock. Wrestlers are now reluctant to secure a lock, which is at the heart of many of our most dynamic takedowns. During the past 10 years, we have seen the application of what Professor Tünnemann calls the “force-oriented combat strategy” that makes use of a brawling-oriented position that blocks the opponents and restricts activity, where attacks are carried out with low risk technique and a repertoire of strong pummeling (but no locking). A key factor that must be addressed can be observed in the stance of the wrestlers, and in particular, the angle between the torso and the legs seen at the hips. This used to be a distinguishing characteristic between Greco-Roman and freestyle wrestling. We have seen a steady movement away from an almost upright stance of 180°, and the distance between the hips of the wrestlers ranges from 0 (approximately 25 cm) to a stance that is almost bent over to a 90° angle, and the hips are almost a meter apart. The distance between the hips of the wrestlers has increased and made scoring more difficult. Today, it is often hard to tell the difference between the two disciplines of freestyle and Greco-Roman.

In training and competition, defense in the bottom position dominates as a victory strategy—even in the junior-age division. High-risk attack actions have been lost and technical versatility, dynamics, and flexibility were abandoned in favor of a less attractive standard. For recent Olympic gold medals or world titles, the stable defense in the par terre position was crucial. As a result of lower technical points being scored, judges have now been given the role of deciding the winner of the match rather than the wrestlers competing. This concentration on stopping an opponent from scoring, rather than aggressively pursuing individual opportunities for technical action, is demonstrated primarily by a wrestler continually holding fingers or wrists in the standing position and by lowering the position of the head. From here on, this is described as *obstructive* or *preventative* wrestling. In freestyle wrestling, it is still possible to attack the legs or even use the legs to attack while fingers or wrists are being held, but with many of the techniques used in Greco-Roman a free hand must be available as the hands and arms are the sole components in the execution of techniques. This analysis aimed to demonstrate how this preventative style of wrestling (holding fingers/wrists in a standing position) has a negative effect on the execution of self-focused, action-oriented wrestling techniques in the Greco-Roman style.

METHOD

The basic method that was applied in this analysis consists of measuring the time in seconds of various positions from videotape made available through the website of United World Wrestling. To demonstrate the significant effect of holding fingers/wrists has on a wrestling match, an analysis of all medal matches of the 2015 World Wrestling Championships in Las Vegas, Nevada, was performed and quantified. The time parameters measured in each match were the total time of the match, total time in the standing position, and total time in par terre position. Wrestling in the standing position was further specified as time spent in normal contact, time without contact, and contact made by holding fingers/wrists. The amount of match time spent without contact, plus contact made by holding fingers/wrists is defined as *obstructive/preventative wrestling*. Obstructive/preventative wrestling will be expressed as the percentage of time in the standing position where the wrestlers grasped fingers and wrists and also did not make contact.

RESULTS

The times for all parameters for all medal matches are listed in [Table 1](#). Wrestling in the standing position is the focus of this study and comprises 86% and 84% of the entire match time for the gold and bronze medal matches, respectively, with the balance being wrestled in the par terre position. From these data are derived the percentage of time in standing spent in obstructive/preventative wrestling actions of grasping and locking of fingers and wrists, as well as time without contact (see [Table 2](#)). Means of 78% and 72% were found for gold and bronze medals, respectively. On the basis of these data, it is evident how much time is spent where there is no possibility to perform wrestling techniques, because the wrestlers are holding fingers or are completely separated without close contact in the wrestling standing position. In five of the eight gold medal matches, there was 90% or more of standing position time using obstructive/preventative wrestling. From the 24 medal matches, only 6 had 50% or less of standing position time being used for normal contact. [Figure 1](#) depicts the percentage of time in obstructive/preventative wrestling by weight class for all medal matches, with an overall mean of 74%.

[Table 3](#) provides scoring data demonstrating that 83% of match time has no technical points scored as a result of preventative wrestling (holding fingers/wrists/blocking with the head). Consequently, this leaves only 17% of the match time (on average 52 s) to execute scoring techniques in the standing position. Only six technical points were scored from the standing position in the combined eight finals matches (one point was surrendered to a challenge). Those six points contributed to being only 18% of the total technical points scored in the finals matches. While 30% of the points awarded were derived from cautions, wherein a wrestler who did not attempt a technical

TABLE 1 Times in Selected Positions from all Medal Matches From Greco-Roman World Championships, 2015

Weight class/kg	Time in standing position (s)				Total Time in Standing	Time in par terre position (s)	Total match time (s)
	Holding fingers	No contact	Normal contact				
Gold medal matches							
59 kg	19	2	1	22	10	32	
66 kg	266	35	16	317	43	360	
71 kg	273	21	10	304	56	360	
75 kg	280	22	4	306	54	360	
80 kg	139	11	151	301	59	360	
85 kg	126	15	184	325	35	360	
98 kg	287	12	14	313	47	360	
130 kg	119	26	152	297	63	360	
Mean	188	18	66	273	46	319	
Bronze medal matches							
59 kg 1	42	7	18	67	44	111	
59 kg 2	82	16	50	148	20	168	
66 kg 1	255	28	32	315	45	360	
66 kg 2	235	31	34	300	60	360	
71 kg 1	230	28	59	317	43	360	
71 kg 2	189	73	51	313	47	360	
75 kg 1	243	39	35	317	43	360	
75 kg 2	100	30	168	298	62	360	
80 kg 1	29	3	74	106	43	149	
80 kg 2	207	41	55	303	57	360	
85 kg 1	249	19	30	298	62	360	
85 kg 2	257	19	16	292	68	360	
98 kg 1	160	14	104	278	82	360	
98 kg 2	272	35	21	328	32	360	
130 kg 1	59	14	240	313	47	360	
130 kg 2	36	2	25	63	12	75	
Mean	165	25	63	254	48	301	

action was rewarded with one point. These data are detrimental to the sport of Greco-Roman wrestling. The average number of technical points per minute of the match is 1.15. In three of the eight finals matches the average was less than 1.0 technical point per minute.

The data in these tables and figure illustrate how the style of Greco-Roman wrestling now concentrates on trying to prevent an opponent from scoring rather than the wrestler focusing on what he can actively do to score points, offensively and counteroffensively.

The match for the third-fifth place in the 130 kg class (Makhov–Russia; Smith–United States) can be used as true example of how one can develop Greco-Roman wrestling in a positive way if there is enough time spent without obstructive/preventative wrestling. In this match, there is enough time to prepare and perform wrestling techniques. In this particular match, it is evident that only 23.32% of the time was spent in obstruction/preventative wrestling (73 s) in the rest of the time (240 s), these wrestlers are not holding fingers, but performed wrestling techniques for a total of 18 technical points. In the eight gold medal matches, there was a total of 42 technical points, or an average of 5.25 points per match, and 78% of standing was spent in obstructive/preventative wrestling. Compare this to 130 kg match

with 18 points and only 23% of the time spent grasping hands in preventative wrestling.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of these data, it can be concluded that low scoring from the standing position is to be expected when only 21% of the total match time is available for these techniques to be performed. We recommend that keeping the fingers and wrists be restricted and that holding fingers and wrist for more than 1–2 s in the standing position is a rule violation. In the event that a wrestler violates this rule, the first case is followed by a warning (attention); by repeating this rule violation, a point can be given for the prevention of the wrestling (passivity and one technical point to the opponent, without caution) and each time a wrestler violates this rule. Officials should be educated on the nature of the sport—throws from feet to back to score takedowns and on eliminating the negative tactics that prevent these technical aspects from occurring. This approach encourages chest-to-chest wrestling with both wrestlers' keeping their heads up, and discourages the grabbing of fingers; pushing away from opponents to avoid contact; and blocking with shoulders, forearms, and elbows. By teaching coaches and

TABLE 2 Percentage of time in selected positions from standing all medal matches from Greco-Roman World Championships, 2015

Weight class/kg	Time in standing position (s)			
	Holding fingers	No contact	Normal contact	% of standing spent in obstructive/preventative wrestling
Gold medal matches				
59 kg	86	9	5	95
66 kg	84	11	5	95
71 kg	90	7	3	97
75 kg	92	7	1	99
80 kg	46	4	50	50
85 kg	39	5	57	43
98 kg	92	4	5	96
130 kg	40	9	51	49
Mean	71	7	22	78
Bronze medal matches				
59 kg 1	63	10	27	73
59 kg 2	55	11	34	66
66 kg 1	81	9	10	90
66 kg 2	78	10	11	89
71 kg 1	73	9	19	81
71 kg 2	60	23	16	84
75 kg 1	77	12	11	89
75 kg 2	34	10	56	44
80 kg 1	27	3	70	30
80 kg 2	68	14	18	82
85 kg 1	84	6	10	90
85 kg 2	88	7	5	95
98 kg 1	58	5	37	63
98 kg 2	83	11	6	94
130 kg 1	19	4	77	23
130 kg 2	57	3	40	60
Mean	63	9	28	72

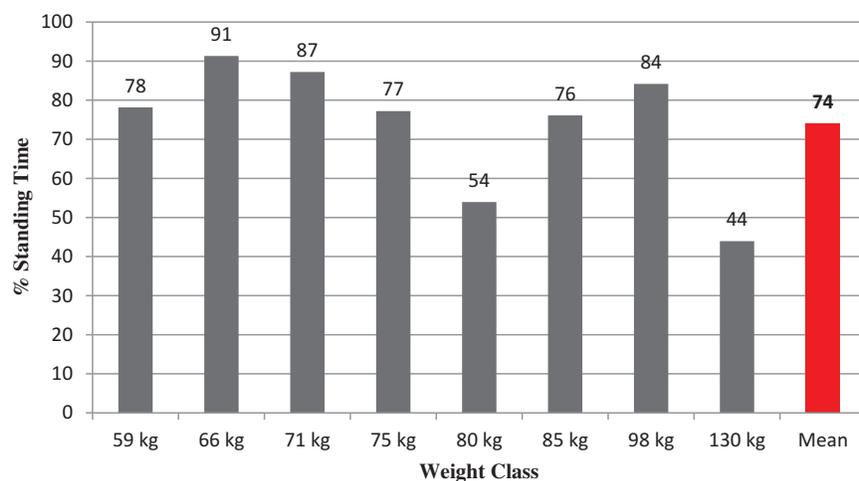


FIGURE 1 Percentage of time in obstructive/preventative wrestling in standing position from Las Vegas World Championship medal matches.

TABLE 3 Points Scored in Medal Matches of World Championships

<i>Weight class/kg</i>	<i>Points standing position</i>	<i>Points cautions standing position</i>	<i>Points par terre position</i>	<i>Total points</i>	<i>Total time (s)</i>	<i>Points/min</i>
Gold medal matches						
59 kg	2		6	8	32	16
66 kg	2		4	6	360	1.00
71 kg			10	10	360	1.67
75 kg			6	6	360	1.00
80 kg		2		2	360	0.33
85 kg	4		2	6	360	1.00
98 kg	1		2	3	360	0.50
130 kg		1		1	360	0.17
Total points	9	3	30	42	Gold medal mean	0.99
% total points	21	7	71	100		
Bronze medal matches						
59 kg 1			8	8	111	4.21
59 kg 2	1		8	9	168	3.21
66 kg 1	1	1	6	8	360	1.33
66 kg 2			4	4	360	0.67
71 kg 1		1	2	3	360	0.50
71 kg 2	3	1		4	360	0.67
75 kg 1		1		1	360	0.17
75 kg 2			2	2	360	0.33
80 kg 1			8	8	149	3.20
80 kg 2			2	2	360	0.33
85 kg 1	1	2		3	360	0.50
85 kg 2	3	1	2	6	360	1.00
98 kg 1	4		2	6	360	1.00
98 kg 2	5	1	2	8	360	1.33
130 kg 1	12		6	18	360	3.00
130 kg 2	4			4	75	3.08
Total points	34	8	52	94	Medal match mean	1.17
% total points	36	9	55	100		

wrestlers proper technique and tactical skills, officials will recognize the true intent of the wrestlers and better understand how to encourage and enforce the proper rules of Greco-Roman wrestling.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COACH AND WRESTLING PROFESSIONAL

Greco-Roman wrestling is facing a major challenge, and it must begin with a philosophy of coaching to protect and save the sport, by making it interesting, attractive, and easier to understand. Coaches must develop the next generation of champions who will build their wrestling on a foundation of throws and wrestling skills. Teach them how to wrestle. The physical combat wrestling style must not be aimed at making it look like aggression but be aimed at scoring technical points.

Coaches need to train wrestlers to use the numerous winning techniques and tactics of Greco-Roman style where the goal is to fight to establish a lock, which results in the beautiful technical actions of the sport—the souple, arm spin, hip-head-lock, salto, and so forth. This calls for correct understanding and interpretation of the new rules by trainers and wrestlers.

It is important to base the physical and technical/tactics training on the physical and psychological framework determined by the new rules and to follow scientific principles to achieve the desired results.

We have to send a very strong message to the coaches, athletes, referees, and spectators that the goal is to score technical points. Wrestling is about executing techniques to demonstrate superiority and ultimately determine the winner. This makes the sport more interesting, rather than only trying to influence the referees and get a wrestler put down in par terre position. In that case, the referee determines the winner. It is very important for the sport to raise the level of technical skills so that the wrestlers take risks and determine the winners. The Greco-Roman wrestling stance should be as follows: head up, body straight, very little space between wrestlers. When this stance occurs, the chance to execute a technique is much higher.

There should be no more blocking with the head, shoulders, hands, and forearms, or grabbing of fingers or wrists of the opponent. There should be no more pushing away or fleeing the hold to avoid contact. A wrestler should be awarded for taking the risk to score points and not only use defensive actions. Simple pushouts remove wrestling skills from the sport. In the younger age groups of cadets and juniors, it is important that they develop an offensive mentality. Pushouts and wrestling for

forced par terre create a defensive mentality and have no place in youth's development. Elimination of forced position (par terre) and push outs must be considered. The scoring must take place in the standing position. Make the wrestlers earn the chance for scoring in par terre because of their offensive takedown technique.

Last, we recommend joint seminars with both coaches and referees, in classrooms and, also on the wrestling mat. We should consider having referees specialize in Greco-Roman wrestling, with the goal that they would understand the sport much better. Some referees do not actually understand the subtleties of Greco-Roman wrestling and can incorrectly interpret actions that are used to simulate attack or offense. It is

because of this that joint seminars can be so valuable—having the referee actually see and feel these differences.

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