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OPINION PIECE

Survival of the International Federation of Associated Wrestling Styles: A Personal Retrospective

Adem Kaya¹

ABSTRACT. This paper addresses the survival story of International Federation of Associated Wrestling Styles (FILA) as well as personal reflections and experiences on reshaping the organization during the campaign for survival after the International Olympic Committee (IOC) removed wrestling from the program of the Olympic Games on February 2, 2013.

Keywords: wrestling, wrestling history, sport management, sport organization, United World Wrestling, Olympics

HISTORY OF WRESTLING

The first real traces of the development of wrestling date back to the times of the Sumerians, 5,000 years ago. For the Greeks, wrestling was a science and a divine art, and it represented the most important training for young men. Athletes wrestled naked with their bodies coated with olive oil and covered with a layer of very fine sand to protect the skin from sunlight or from cold during winter. During the ancient Olympic Games, from 708 BC, wrestling was the decisive discipline of the Pentathlon. In fact, it was the last discipline to be held—after the discus, the javelin, the long jump, and the foot race—and it determined the winner of the Pentathlon, the only crowned athlete of the Games (International Federation of Associated Wrestling Styles, 2013).

Attempts to restore the Olympic Games were numerous, but it was not until 1896 that they were reestablished by Baron Pierre de Coubertin. After the creation of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 1894, the development of new international sport federations and Olympic committees gained momentum. The first Olympic Congress took place in 1894 at La Sorbonne and decided the 10 sports that

would be part of the Olympic Program: athletics, wrestling, rowing, cycling, fencing, gymnastics, weightlifting, swimming, shooting, and tennis (International Olympic Committee, 2012).

In 1904, freestyle wrestling was first introduced at the St. Louis Games with only American wrestlers taking part. It was only at the 4th Olympic Games held in London in 1908 that competitions were organized for both styles. A hundred years after the introduction of freestyle wrestling to the Olympic Program, international wrestling entered a new era with the acknowledgement of female wrestling as an Olympic discipline on the occasion of the Athens Games in 2004. This decision was part of the policy of the IOC that aims at establishing equality in sport and legitimizing the efforts to sustain the development of female wrestling made since the end of the 1980s. Prior to adding female wrestling as an Olympic discipline at the Athens Games in 2004, the IOC decided at its centenary congress in 1996 to increase the number of women's events and the participation rates of women in decision-making positions in national and international sport organizations to 10% in 2000 and to 20% by 2005 (Skirstad, 2009).

In order to meet the IOC demand, the Federation of Associated Wrestling Styles (FILA)—a very structural and political organization—tried to make some changes that eventually did more harm than good to wrestling. Even though Olympic wrestling has been under threat over the previous decade, FILA failed to recognize the need to reshape its organization as well as the rules of wrestling. In 2002,

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the IOC commissioned a review of Olympic sports that reported wrestling had a “lack of global popularity” as well as “relatively low broadcast and press coverage.” (Woo, 2013). The problem stemmed from the public’s apparent confusion over wrestling’s two disciplines: Greco-Roman, which forbids holds below the waist, and freestyle, which allows them. The subcommittee responsible for the IOC report recommended dropping one of the disciplines from the 2008 Beijing Games, which, in the end, did not occur.

MAJOR FACTORS IN REMOVING WRESTLING FROM THE OLYMPIC GAMES

It was after the 1996 Atlanta Olympics that FILA began to make some rule changes, which made wrestling more like sumo wrestling, with wrestlers pushing each other back and forth across the mat without any attempt at more dynamic and appealing techniques. Further, FILA adopted a change to the point system that caused wrestlers and fans confusion and which proved to be difficult to adapt to. While FILA tried to use the new rules in many countries, in some countries such as Turkey and Iran, where wrestling is traditional and popular, wrestling organizations continued to use the old rules that wrestling had grown familiar with up to the 2004 Olympics. FILA, however, threatened to cancel FILA-sanctioned tournaments to be held in those countries that did not implement the new rules. Therefore, constant rule changes by an increasingly ineffective FILA and its executive board members who had largely been handpicked by former presidents Milan Ercegan (Yugoslavia, 1972–2002) and Raphael Martinetti (Switzerland, 2002–2013; Palmer, 2013). A number of the board members did not have much of a wrestling background, which caused wrestling to lose much of its global popularity between 1996 and 2012 (White-side, 2003).

In addition to the relatively low broadcast and press coverage of wrestling events, the IOC subcommittee noted that among the many problems facing FILA, there were no athletes in decision-making positions, no women’s commission, no ethics rules for technical officials, and no medical official on its executive board (ESPN Sport Service, 2013). Further, while FILA struggled with structural dilemmas, it continued with its prescribed roles and protocol in “bureaucratic” ways (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

As a result of FILA’s failures to meet the IOC subcommittee’s expectations, wrestling was removed from the Olympic Program in February 2013. This resulted in tremendous controversy and protest against the IOC members as well as the FILA members at that time. It was a shocking development for sure but the IOC, at a meeting in Moscow in May 2013, gave FILA an opportunity to be among seven sports competing for a spot to be added to the 2020 and 2024 Olympic Games. Wrestling communities, from the local to international levels, quickly got together and demanded dramatic

changes beginning with the leadership of FILA, where the organization had been so static and political (Bolman & Deal, 2008). At first, CELA (European Council of Associated Wrestling) held an emergency meeting in Istanbul on February 25, 2013, to discuss the daunting task ahead. Later, Raphael Martinetti (the former president) was criticized severely at an already-scheduled meeting of the FILA executive committee in Phuket, Thailand, in April 2013. Without making any major decisions or changes, FILA members decided to pursue alternative solutions by their next meeting on May 18 in Moscow in preparation for an IOC Executive Board meeting in St. Petersburg at the end of the month. Meanwhile, wrestling communities throughout the world launched large campaigns at the local, national, and international levels to pressure IOC members in support of wrestling.

At the FILA meeting in Russia, Raphael Martinetti was forced to resign as president and Nenad Lalovic, who had opposed the former president and created an internal campaign for sweeping changes in the organization, was elected the new president until FILA’s general assembly in September 2014. At this meeting, participants submitted their proposals and declared May as the month for a campaign to save Olympic wrestling. At the IOC meeting at the end of May 2013, wrestling was chosen along with two other sports, squash and a combined bid by baseball and softball, for the final vote on September 18, 2013, by the IOC general assembly to be added to the program for the 2020 Olympic Games.

To bring public attention back to wrestling, Iran, Russia, and the United States held exhibition dual meets on May 15 at New York’s Grand Central Station. The leaders of wrestling in the United States created a campaign website for petitions to unite wrestling communities in the world. People from Japan sent a petition to save Olympic wrestling weighing 250 kilograms to the IOC (Durham, 2013). Further, world leaders Barack Obama (president of the United States), Recep Tayyip Erdogan (prime minister of Turkey) Vladimir Putin (president of Russia), Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (president of Iran), and Tsugu Akihito (emperor of Japan) joined the campaign to support wrestling and demanded that the IOC keep wrestling in the Olympic Games. From T-shirt drives, to a large-scale overhaul of the sport’s rules and governance, community support for the reinstatement of wrestling in the Olympic Games played a key role in the sport’s six-month campaign as well.

By the time for the final decision by the IOC in September 2013, hastened by calls to modernize its leadership and energize its events, FILA had reworked its structure, giving women and athletes a role in decision-making, added two weight classes for women in the Olympic Games, and adopted rule changes to make the sport easier to understand and more fun to watch, while rewarding more aggressive wrestling. For instance, under the new rules matches consist of two 3-minute periods instead of three 2-minute periods, and scoring was cumulative over the match’s entirety, instead of best 2-out-of-3 periods as had been the case previously.

CONCLUSION

Five presenters for FILA including the newly elected president, who knows six languages, stood up in front of IOC members and made a 30-minute closed-door presentation to the IOC Executive Board on September 8, 2013. Seven months after losing its place in the Olympic Games, wrestling, which is one of the most traditional and elemental sports in the world, was reinstated for the 2020 Olympics. The IOC, which had faced a wide backlash after its decision in February, overturned a decision that many members had thought was a mistake. And now, the worldwide wrestling community looks forward to the sustainable management of wrestling by the organization of FILA in the future under the new leadership.

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