

Another Olympics is over for Wrestling

By Olympic Champion John Peterson

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The excitement is over, another Olympics is history. There were some great matches! Mindorashvili, of Georgia, pinning Russia's returning World Champion, Georgy Ketoev, at 84kg. in the semi-finals caught my attention. Actually Ketoev is a Georgian, born in Tbilisi. With a war going on back home that had to have been an interesting match up!

Athens champion, Taymazov, Uzbekistan became heavy weight champion again! He proved that he is the true champion by defeating Russian 2000 Olympic Champion David Mussulbes, now wrestling for Slovakia in the semi-finals and in the finals Russian Akhmedov, who beat last year's World Champion to make the Russian Olympic team. They all are from the same area of the Caucasus.

And what can you say about Buvaysa Saytiev? He won the World's as a 19 year old in Atlanta. He joins the all time greats by winning his third Olympic Gold to go with his 6 World titles. That tall thin body proves again that anybody can win on the mat!

Thank you Tony Black for helping us navigate through the system to be on the right mat at the right time. For those of us who are "computer challenged", you made it easier to handle. I proved that I am still a wrestling fanatic by getting up at 3:30 a.m. and 4:30 a.m. to watch some of the wrestle-backs and finals.

And how about Henry? Congratulations Henry Cejudo! Welcome to the club of Olympic champions! Thank you Terry Brands for pouring yourself into coaching in the same way you did as an athlete. Your intensity showed on the mat through Henry.

Did you catch Henry's mature answer to the question about what now? Will you wrestle in London? When asked about the future he said that he would take it one year at a time. I think that is the best way to approach our difficult sport. Four years is too long to think about training at the pace and intensity that is required to be successful. I also enjoyed his response to being referred to as the future of American wrestling. He said that he wanted Kevin Jackson to refer to him as the wrestler of the present. That mindset has paid off. He was training to do well right now not sometime in the future. Young wrestlers can learn from that. Goals can be dangerous things when they are too far off in the future. It is important to plan for the future, which helps you make wise decisions in the present.

I saw Henry wrestle three years ago in Krasnoyarsk, Russia in the Ivan Yarigan tournament. When we went to the diamond-mining city of Mirnyi Henry and his brother Angel were the only two U. S. wrestlers to win in the dual meet U.S. vs. Russia. I thought at the time that these young men were something special. We have another great brother combination. Keep going young men. Continue to push each other. Angel, let the success of your younger brother drive you to the same level of intensity. Living in the shadow of a younger brother can be a health motivation.

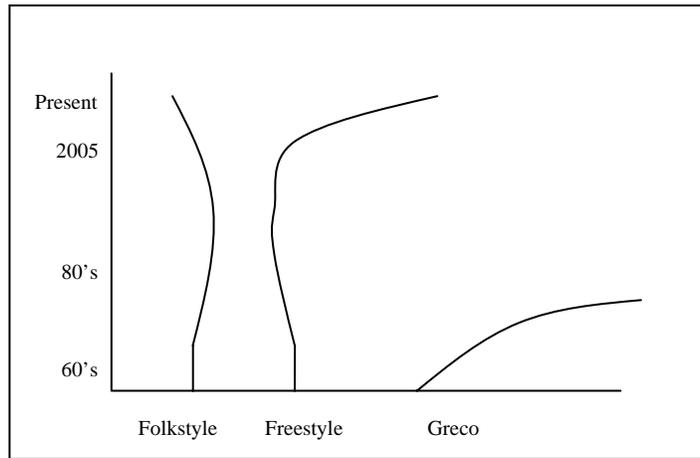
Speaking of motivation, that is an issue with U. S. wrestlers. Cael Sanderson could have been a great international wrestler but in my opinion he was too spent to make the difficult changes to spend eight or more years wrestling internationally. Our college system tends to wear our wrestlers out and their motivation for disciplined training wanes. One of the reasons I was able to be apart of our national team for ten years is that at a small NAIA school wrestling was a part time thing. Ben would have retired after wining in '72 if I had not been there to put a little pressure on. You cannot quite before your older brother! Too many of our great wrestlers seem physically or emotionally and mentally beaten down by our collegiate wrestling system. So they either never pursue international wrestling or when they do they do not seem to have the same level of fight in them.

One of the things that I appreciate about America is that when something is broken we come up with creative ways of fixing it. Our free enterprise system for years has created an environment where inventers have the incentive to think outside the box and come up with ideas that will be successful.

We do not have the best system to help our athletes be successful on the international scene, however. Let's work to fix what we can control, continue to exert pressure on the powers that control international wrestling, and remind ourselves that there will always be limitations to how much honesty and justice we can expect from FILA. We can control our own way of preparing wrestlers for the Olympics. We must always have the mentality that we will wrestle in such a way that neither the rules nor officials will affect our aggressive style. Henry showed us once again that offensive aggressive wrestling still wins matches.

On doing some fundamental things to exert pressure on FILA my hat is off to the Greco Swedish wrestler at 84kg, who gave back his bronze medal. I just happened to see his match against the Italian in the semi-finals. As

the Athens Silver medallist, he was one of the best wrestlers in the weight class. He seemed to have the match won in the third period when the referee called him for fleeing the hold or not opening up. I read that the referee was from the Italian speaking section of Switzerland. Do you smell a rat? Why am I not surprised? Then the IOC announced that they were taking away his bronze medal. They were too late! He had already given it back, which was his way of saying, “the system is broken”! Someone needs to stand up and say “enough is enough” and my hat goes off to Ara Abrahamian, for doing it where the world could take notice. He is Armenian born, which may explain some things. A headline in the major press was: “Swedish wrestler throws away medal in Olympic hissy fit.” They do not know the circumstances or realize just how corrupt international sport can be. From my perspective it was a total sham! Of course not having been there in person I could be wrong but I think not.



Back to fixing what we can. The wrestling world has a system that is broken. Other countries seem to deal with the radical changes to international wrestling better than we do. Stephen Barrett gave me some insight into that back in the 90's. Part of the reason we have a more difficult time is how we as a culture deal with problems. When we see something wrong we fix it. The eastern Europeans who dominate our sport tend to see a problem and say, “Oh well, that's life we may not like it but that is the way it is.” If we want to excel again in the international world of wrestling we must change the way we prepare wrestlers for World and Olympic competitions. Folk style and the international styles are going in different directions. We may not like it but that is reality. What will we do to help our young athletes deal with it?

The last eight years have not been very good for us. There is the age-old problem of freestyle and Greco being so different from our U. S. style. That has been true for more than fifty years. Perhaps this chart will help explain how I see the changes over the years in the wrestling world. The differences are much more of a factor for freestyle wrestlers than it was when Ben and I were competing in the '70s. I remember wrestling collegiate matches like the Midlands Tournament and using them to prepare for a trip to Russia to wrestle in the Tbilisi Tournament. I would simply think freestyle and work at exposing my opponent's back to the mat rather than thinking about controlling him. With the extreme differences in the edge of the mat rules and the takedown counters that our college wrestlers do, that is harder to do at present but I still think it is possible. College coaches can help their programs by having their wrestlers think Freestyle and Greco as they compete in our style. At Camp of Champs we expose every wrestler to international wrestling giving them an opportunity to compete in both Freestyle and Greco.

For too many years the main emphasis has been on producing NCAA champions thinking that that will automatically translate into producing Olympic champions. That may have been true in the past, but not now. Letting wrestlers go on more international trips during the collegiate season would help. Teaching more technique that is applicable to all three styles has always benefited our young men. Encourage the rules committee to make rules that compliment those of international wrestling rather than move farther away as they did with the edge of the mat rule a few years ago. How about something really radical like wrestle some dual meets with the Freestyle and Greco rules helping to educate wrestling fans about the international styles? Have a dual with some Canadian teams. Maybe introduce it slowly with Freestyle or Greco exhibition matches at ½ time. My final suggestion is for the many wrestling organizations like the NWCA, NCAA, NAIA, AAU and USA Wrestling be willing to put aside some of their disagreements and continue to use their strengths in working together for the athletes.

If changes are not made now, more and more wrestlers are going to choose to do what Henry has just succeeded in doing. They will choose not to go to college to wrestle. Then eventually we could see the development of a club system more like the European model. While in high school wrestlers will begin to focus completely on international wrestling. Having lived in Europe and having seen that system first hand, I do not want us to go down that road. Our system still works to give the largest numbers of wrestlers the opportunity to compete. No other country comes close to what we have at Fargo every year.

I am confident that we can find a way to fix our system to give our athletes a better opportunity to succeed. Let's go for it to make London more successful for U. S. wrestlers.