

Athens Olympic Observations

by Ben Peterson & Ethan Bosch

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It was a definite privilege to attend the 2004 Athens Olympics. Initially, I had thought it unwise for me to spend the money. But as the time drew closer and some friends offered to assist financially, it became apparent that I could and should go. Thank God for friends who helped with the cost of plane tickets and for a friend of my brother John's, who let us use his home in Athens.

As it turned out, we could have saved even more on the wrestling tickets. At many of the events (including wrestling), people with extra tickets were selling them for less than face value. Two men from Michigan verified this as we chatted with them on the bus heading to the wrestling competition. They had flown over with no advance tickets, and had been buying most of them at reduced prices outside the gate for a variety of events. The older of the two gentlemen explained that he had been doing this for the previous four Olympic Games. In Seoul, he purchased his average ticket at about one-third the regular price. He attended a couple events each day for every day of the Games, and said that this has worked for him every time. His advice: "Determine the key events and sessions you wish to attend. Buy those in advance if you wish, and then just patiently look and ask about the other events you would desire to see. In the end you will be able to attend most of these." For the all-sport fans it sounds great, and in Athens, even the diehard wrestling fan could have saved money.

Our Greco-Roman team competed first. The athletes were in shape and worked very hard. But they weren't always working smart, and lost on technicalities and missed tactics. I was there to watch Jim Gruenwald in particular, since I'd coached him in college. He had an exciting comeback victory in his first match, but lost his second match, 3-1, giving up three points in the clinch. In the end we were thankful that he was there at all after his shoulder dislocation, operation, and six months of rehabilitation. Small consolation, when I know how much Jim wanted a medal. Rulon Gardner's bronze medal, while bittersweet for him, was very commendable to his career.

The freestyle team had a great first day, winning all but one of their matches. They were aggressive and obviously hungry to win. They continued to wrestle well on the second day, but on the third day they seemed timid and hesitant. We lost every match we wrestled that day. It reminded me that you cannot be faint-hearted if you wish to win the Olympics. The higher the level of competition, the more the athlete must go after it with almost reckless abandon. Stephen Abas and Jamill Kelly won silver medals because they started the tournament that way. Of course, the wrestling highlight for the United States was Cael Sanderson winning the gold.

The wrestling was very intense, and a great pleasure to watch. At the venue, we met a Greek man whose wife (an American) had introduced him to wrestling. He said, "TV does not do justice to wrestling. The great intensity that the athletes exhibit is much more evident on site." He loved the wrestling competition, but was very puzzled at the bracketing system and the clinch.

FILA rules are a burden to the sport. The FILA officials' statement of pride - "The system is good; it spreads the medals around" - is not true, nor is it just. The medals have not been spread around, and the system penalizes the best wrestlers when they happen to be bunched together in one pool. It isn't right that the US basketball team gets bronze with three losses, but world and Olympic champion wrestlers completely drop out of medal contention because one knocks another out in pool competition. I thought the object was to determine the best wrestlers and reward them accordingly.

The problem isn't just the bracketing system. The clinch killed active wrestling so many times. A barnburner match between a top Russian and Belarussian ended in a clinch, but we weren't sure how. Did he step on the line? Did he unlock? Was he even locked? When people who have been around wrestling their whole lives can't tell what's happening, how can we expect to attract new fans... or even keep the ones we have? I think people are attracted to the purity and intensity of our sport, and these rules rob the fans and wrestlers of those elements. I could only nod in sad agreement as Dan Gable groaned, "Just let them wrestle!"

Will the newly proposed rule changes make a difference? I sure hope so. Sometimes I wonder how long international wrestling can survive with the unjust "chance" system that FILA has put it under. Wrestlers are survivors and keep fighting back, and they continue to do so in this area also.

I am often asked what differences I see from the quality of wrestling today versus when I competed. I believe the athletes of today are more refined in their technique, but also more cautious. The wrestling of the '70s and '80s was more open, with repeated scrambles and exchanges of moves and higher scores. Today's wrestlers seem to plot and plan their scoring attempts more. In the past, we tried more shots knowing we would fail on some, but

anticipated that we would outdo our opponent more than he would us. I believe various factors have contributed to this change: more competition between nations, the wrestlers knowing each other's styles better, the shorter match length, and the change in rules not to give a point for stalling.

All in all, attending and watching the Athens Olympics was a positive experience. Of course, those athletes who won came home elated. The others were glad for the opportunity to be a part of it all, but will most likely always wonder what would have been possible if they had made some changes – usually just minor. Many matches verified something I first heard Gable say thirty-five years ago: “Anyone can beat anyone on any given day.” That statement is most definitely true at the Olympics.