

Training to Scramble and Explode

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One of the most exciting matches I've seen in the past few years was the 84-kilogram finals match at the 2002 Freestyle World Championships, between Yoel Romero of Cuba and Adam Saitiev of Russia. Both were world champions in 1999, and Saitiev had pinned Romero in the Olympic finals in 2000. The table was set for a real barnburner, and the wrestlers did not disappoint. Deadlocked at 3 after regulation, they headed for overtime. First one to score wins the world championship.

The overtime lasted only 14 seconds. But what a 14 seconds it was! The two got entangled in a wild scramble. It seemed certain one would score. Then it seemed certain the other would score. Finally the whistle blew with Romero on top, and it looked as though he had won it. But the officials went back and looked at the tape. They decided that Saitiev had actually scored a point earlier in the scramble, and he was awarded the gold medal.

What made this match so exciting? It was partly the match-up of two great competitors going head-to-head. It was partly the fact that it went to overtime. The controversial finish might have been a factor, too. But I think it was mostly because explosive, scrambling wrestling is the most exciting thing to watch in any sport.

Every wrestler develops his own style. Some are slow and controlled. They may think about each new position they want and avoid all others. Other wrestlers prefer to scramble. The faster the pace and the more positions they can get into, the better they like it. As a competitor, I often liked the second approach – the scrambling and exploding way (and as a spectator, I almost always prefer it). I found that there were specific training methods that would increase my ability to win with this style:

1. Drilling

Scrambling can be learned through drilling of wrestling moves. The normal way to drill is to do five doubles, five singles, five fireman's carries, etc. Instead, fake one and finish with a second or third move. We do a "give and take" drill in which one man sets up and penetrates to his move – then retreats. On his way out, the other man attacks with a move of his own. There is constant motion and adjusting by both men. Cooperation between partners is needed for this drill to work.

2. Wrestling

Scrambling should also be considered while wrestling hard. A bigger man who trains with someone smaller and quicker will find he needs to keep moving and adjusting in order to face his opponent and protect his legs. Personally, I never liked wrestling with the lighter weight wrestler, but they helped me greatly. They were too hard to get a hold of. They kept me moving. While I was in college at Iowa State, Dan Gable was often my workout partner. I weighed 50 pounds more than he did, yet his constant motion kept me moving and never permitted me to stand still. It was scramble or get beat.

- A man your size or larger who is a real competitor is also good. If he is always willing to go "one more" takedown and fights like a tiger, you have a good training partner. Push him and ask him to push you. My brother John was this for me. I had to be sharp and fight back or he would eat me alive. John really taught me to scramble.
- Don't ever permit a stalemate in practice. Adjust and try something, even if it fails. You will get used to more positions that way, which will improve your scrambling skills. Also, a warm room will encourage the athletes by keeping their muscles and joints loose and warm, making them more eager to explode and scramble.

3. Weightlifting

You need strength to execute your best moves. Therefore, wrestlers often work out in the weight room. Is it possible to learn scrambling and exploding while lifting? YES!

- Explode with the weight. Snap it up as much as possible. Slow power is fine when going for maximum, but when lifting lighter weights for more reps, you should almost be throwing the weight.
- Do several quick reps with light weight. After you lift heavy on an exercise, finish with a set of 12-20 reps in which you explode repeatedly until you are so exhausted you can't do another rep. This will give you the endurance and discipline to explode in the last period of a match.

4. Running

Running is probably the easiest way to train for scrambling and exploding. I suggest doing sprints in the gym or hallway (or the longest indoor space you can find) after a hard wrestling practice. Do 5-10 fifty-yard sprints. Walk fast between each (don't jog). Train your body to go from a walk to a full sprint in a few steps.

Another way to use running to get in scrambling/exploding shape is to run a mile as a second workout (start easy and finish hard). Then do your sprints, cool down, shower, and be back to class in less than an hour. The workout itself takes 20 minutes or less, but doesn't that simulate a match? Do this 2-4 times in a day, and you have prepared yourself for a tournament. While in college, on a free Saturday before major tournaments, I would do this run before all three of my meals and again before going to bed. The next week's tournament seemed like a vacation.

In conclusion, most fans like an explosive, active style of wrestling. Athletes need to be well prepared to compete that way. Each aspect of our training should be planned to develop that style. Drill in series, scramble in wrestling, lift many explosive reps, and run with intensity. These training methods can help you and your team become exciting, aggressive wrestlers... and that's a wrestling style that will always put people in the bleachers.