Wrestling weighs-in



Jonathan Hudon /*The Brunswickan*

The UNB wrestling team competed in its first meet this month, and new athletes got a taste of AUS competition. Wrestling, according to coach Don Ryan, takes "heart," but wht else do competitors have to acquire if they want to win? The Brunswickan investigated the age-old practice of weight cutting to see how wrestlers are getting and keeping their edge.

Dropping a weight class potentially unhealthy

by Brett North

Last week the UNB Varsity Reds wrestling team hosted an Open Tournament at the Lady Beaverbrook Gym, giving teams from the East and from Montreal a chance to compete against one another and to feel out the competition. The wrestling team trains year round, using "open" tournaments as preparation for the bigger ones. Mid-February will be the team's true test when they wrestle in the Canadian Interuniversity Sport Qualifying Tournament.

Head Coach Don Ryan expressed dissatisfaction with the athletes' performance at the weekend's open tournament. "The kids made some mental errors... but overall we did OK." Wrestling produces a universal athlete, bestowing a physical edge that helps in any competition. Each competitor has "similar technique, similar weight training, similar strategies," says Coach Ryan. "It comes down to heart... If they want to be an Atlantic-level athlete, they have to have heart."

While heart may be the edge UNB wrestlers plan to use, the sport has a notorious history of coaches and athletes going to dangerous lengths in search of an edge. Wrestling is one the few sports that gives athletes of all sizes the ability to compete. Each athlete is placed in a weight class according to his or her size and competes against those athletes in the same class. At the university level, there are ten weight classes for each gender. This arrangement gives the sport appeal but not without vicious consequences. The vice? Weighing-in. Most of the wrestling world operates under the belief that a good wrestler must cut weight. One UNB wrestler summarizes the weigh-in "as a way to take cheating out of the sport." He adds, "The formula is to cut the most amount of weight but to still feel comfortable wrestling."

According to Dr. Brian W. Smith, who presented a paper on the subject at the Atlantic Coast Sports Science Conference, there are three main reasons for weight-cutting. First is the belief in the sport that cutting weight gives a competitive edge to the athlete since he or she will be able to compete in a lower weight class. Second, "it is a traditional rite of the sport with weight loss techniques passed down from generation to generation." And thirdly, if there are more than two wrestlers on the same team in the same weight class, then the coach will need to shuffle the lineup. One wrestler explains, "Wrestling is an individual sport, and a team effort so there is sometimes a push from the coach to get someone in a certain weight class for the benefit of the team."

According to Dr. Smith, research has not shown that an athlete's performance improves after weight-cutting. Several within the wrestling culture would debate this finding. The importance of weight categories is undeniable. One UNB wrestler points to Daniel Igali, Canada's first men's world wrestling champion, who visited the UNB wrestling team last year. "He was at the top of his weight class in the 69 kilo division. After the international rules changed he was forced to wrestle at 74 kilo and his performance suffered."

A couple of wrestlers at UNB are in the midst of a weight-cut to prepare for CIS. One wrestler explains, "I sit at 57 kilograms and my weight at CIS should be 51 kilograms." To achieve this, there is a lot of running and healthy, high protein meals. When asked if she minds, she replies, "I do not mind doing it because I wrestle at a weight depending on my competition. I don't eat candy or cookies because every calorie counts. At the end I'll cut about one to two kilograms of just water weight from the sauna and not drinking water the day of weigh-ins."

The build up to the weigh-in depends on how much weight you need to cut. "You drink lots of coffee because it's a diureteic and it eases hunger pain. You eat lots of proteins and avoid carbs," explains one athlete. "The closer you get to the weigh-in the less you eat. After the weigh-in you try and replenish electrolytes by drinking Gatorade." One veteran explains, "A rookie mistake is binging right after, but because your body has been starved the food goes right through you."

The American College of Sports and Medicine, ACSM, released an updated position on weight loss in wrestling in 1996. Despite the papers' restored scrutiny on weight loss practices, tragedy struck one year later when three collegiate wresters died over a one month time frame. The Center for Disease Control concluded that the wrestlers were attempting to lose one to two pounds per hour after having lost 21 pounds over a 10-13 week span. All three wrestlers were wearing rubber suits and exercising in overheated conditions.

Since the tragedy, practical changes were made to eliminate the incentive for weight loss and to refocus the sport on competition rather than weight control. These included establishing a permanent healthy weight class early in the season and scheduling weigh-ins before and after practice. There was an initiative to prohibit laxatives, emetic, diuretics, self-induced vomiting, excessive food and fluid restriction, and spitting, as well as hot rooms, saunas and steam rooms. Also, initiative was taken to make weigh-ins as close to the competitors' match as possible. This, it is believed, would give less incentive for rapid weight loss, because the competitor would have no recovery time if rapid weight loss were attempted.

Several of the top-down changes remain debated suggestions at the grass roots level of the sport. One athlete at UNB explains the changes he has encountered over his long wrestling career. Some are the exact opposite of the ACSM's recommendations. "You used to have to weigh-in three hours before your match. Now there is a 12-hour gap... intended to prevent injuries and make the body healthier." Despite the gap, the athletes feel the consequences of the cut. "Even if you weigh-in at night you still wake up the next morning feeling like crap... if you can sleep at all; your body is starved, so like anorexics, you are normally restless at night. You want to avoid the sauna as much as possible because it drains energy, but if you are close enough and tired enough from the last couple days of cutting weight, the last two, three, four pounds are normally cut from a sauna suit."

If athletes are starving themselves,

> "I got used to feeling guilty about eating..."

why is weigh-cutting acceptable, while the mental illness of starving oneself is a disease? One athlete explains, "It is not a mental illness. It is just a way to make a weight class... It is short term and it is not a body image thing." According to this UNB athlete, "we only cut for big tournaments and the veterans help the rookies out by giving them tips and stuff."

A nutritionist comes and talks to the team and advises on the dangers of weight-cutting. At the same time, explains one athlete, "They know you're going to do it, so they show us the safest possible way." One male veteran emphasizes, "You wouldn't do an extreme weight-cut to someone who is new. It really only happens under two main conditions -- either someone is trying to make up for training that they didn't do, or you have a crazy coach." He continues, "For guys, it is all mental; if you have a positive outlook on it, then you do the weight thing and you realize it's just part of the sport."

Other athletes have a different perspective. One describes her introduction to the sport at age 16. Asked to cut down from 133 pounds to 122, she explains the resulting troubles: "I'd feel guilty... A few times after I ate too much, I threw it up because I knew I wasn't supposed to eat that much." While achieving her weight goal, she was also developing an eating disorder. "After being so small and so hungry," she explains, "I'd totally binge after weigh-ins... I got used to feeling guilty about eating." The problem spiralled. "I couldn't handle gaining back the weight I lost, and I kept eating too much and throwing it all up." The athlete describes the problem as something she carried with her for a long time despite her current coach's delicacy with the matter. With her history, her current coach does not pressure her to cut weight. However, the wrestler explains, "I still have a bit of a fear of gaining weight."

Many wrestlers agree that you can be healthy if you know in advance where your body has to be and at what time in the season it has to be there. Also, most agree that some healthy change has occurred over the years. "You hear rumours about the ol' days and what athletes use to do to cut weight," explains one UNB wrestler. "The stories about the Russian athletes are always the craziest, [such as] taking blood out of their bodies before weigh-in and then putting it back in, in time for competition." He continues, "If they are old wives' tales, it doesn't really matter... It makes them look tough and gives them an edge... That is all wrestling really is... getting a mental edge."

What's on this week

Hockey (W)
UNB @ STU. Thurs @ 7 pm.
U de M @ UNB. Sat @ 3 pm.

Hockey (M)
UNB @ St.FX. Fri @ 7 pm.
UNB @ DAL. Sat @ 7 pm.

Volleyball (W)
MUN @ UNB. Fri @ 7pm.
MUN @ UNB. Sat @ 1 pm.

Volleyball (M)
UNB @ DAL. Fri @ 7 pm.

Swimming
AUS. Fri @ 7 pm.
AUS. Sat @ 2 pm.
AUS. Sun @ 2 pm.

Basketball (W)
CBU @ UNB. Sat @ 6 pm.
SMU @ UNB. Sun @ 2 pm.

Basketball (M)
CBU @ UNB. Sat @ 8 pm.

Game Results

Men's Basketball



UNB 69 - DAL 51
"We got lots of good effort from everybody."
- Coach Thom Gillespie

Women's Basketball



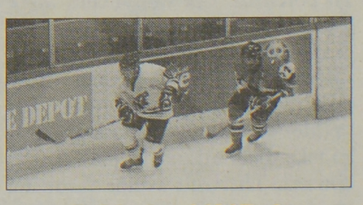
UNB 71 - DAL 64
"Any win is important right now, but beating the first place team feels great!"
- Coach Jeff Speedy

Men's Hockey



UNB 2 - StFX 1
UNB 3 - DAL 4
Tigers upset raging Reds

Women's Hockey



DAL 2 - UNB 0
StFX 3 - UNB 1
Frigid weekend for lady Reds

Men's Volleyball



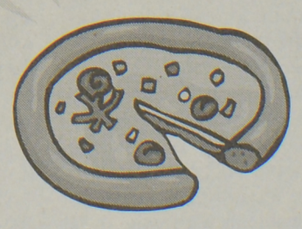
MUN 0 - UNB 3
MUN 0 - UNB 3
DAL 3 - UNB 0

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