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# Weight Strategies for Wrestlers

By Matt Brzycki



**A**s a competitive athlete, situations arise on a regular basis with which you must cope. How would you deal with these situations?

- You receive a poor grade on your history test. That evening, you must wrestle a teammate to determine who will make the varsity line-up for the next meet.
- You are the top seed in the regional tournament. In the first round, you are defeated by an unseeded wrestler and sent to the loser's bracket where the best that you can do is place third.
- You sprain your ankle slightly in practice and it bothers you when you take a shot. The next day, you have a match against an opponent who is ranked ahead of you in the conference.
- You are in the state tournament and your third-round match is against someone who has wrestled you three times this year. You have lost all three of those matches.
- You are really exhausted after a grueling match. You have to wrestle again in an hour.
- You are favored to win the holiday tournament. In the finals, your opponent escapes at the buzzer for a 3-2 victory and you finish second.
- You are a junior who has never wrestled a varsity match. Because of an injury to a teammate, you will wrestle your first varsity match on the road against a senior from a school that is a bitter, cross-town rival.
- You are unseeded in the district tournament. You make it to the finals where you face the defending state champion who is undefeated on the season.

No doubt, all of these situations can be stressful. How you cope with these and

other situations will have an enormous impact on your success as a wrestler.

It is important to understand that all athletes feel some degree of stress at one time or another. Research has shown, though, that successful athletes use better methods of coping with stress than unsuccessful athletes.

How do successful wrestlers cope with stress and adversity? A study that was published in *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* investigated the coping strategies that were used by 20 American wrestlers (10 freestyle and 10 Greco Roman) who competed at the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, South Korea. The research was part of a larger study that was funded by a grant from USA Wrestling.

The age of the wrestlers ranged from 21 - 31. On average, they had six years of senior international wrestling experience (although some were participating for the first year and others had as many as 11 years of experience). Of the 20 wrestlers, six (30%) won medals at the 1988 Olympics. (Two were gold, one was silver and three were bronze.) Telephone interviews with the 20 wrestlers were conducted within 6 - 12 months after the 1988 Olympics. The interviewer was a former wrestler who competed internationally.

## GENERAL STRATEGIES AND THEMES

The researchers organized the coping strategies of the wrestlers into four general categories: thought control strategies, task focus strategies, emotional control strategies and behavioral-based strategies. These four categories will be discussed along with the most frequently used themes of each strategy that were noted in the study. In addition, an example of what was said by a wrestler who employed the technique will be given.

(Note: Many wrestlers used more than one strategy, sometimes in combination. Therefore, adding the numbers that are shown will amount to more than 100%.)

### Thought Control Strategies

The most used coping strategy was thought control. This strategy was used by

16 (80%) of the wrestlers. Thought control is the effort to impose order or constrain thought content. These are the most frequently used themes of thought control:

- block distractions (avoiding thoughts that were distracting, irrelevant or irritating). Example: "I focus on having tunnel vision. I eliminate anything that's going to interfere with me."
- take perspective (placing the event within a mental framework in which the wrestler felt comfortable or in control). Example: "A lot of times I just think about what other people have to deal with...and just try to put it into total perspective."
- think positively (viewing negative circumstances in a positive way or replacing negative thoughts with positive ones). Example: "I just tried to look at most everything that happens in a positive manner. Try not to doubt yourself."

### Task Focus Strategies

Another general strategy that was cited was task focus. This strategy was used by 8 (40%) of the wrestlers. Task focus is the effort to control thought on a very specific, limited spectrum. Here is the most frequently used theme of task focus:

- have a narrow, more immediate focus (concentrating on the task at hand and ignoring past performance). Example (apparently reflecting on a loss): "I just stayed positive and focused on putting it behind me and not thinking about it anymore . . . and then just started thinking about the next match."

### Emotional Control Strategies

The third strategy that was noted by the researchers was emotional control. This strategy was used by 8 (40%) of the wrestlers. Emotional control is the attempt to manage the state or activation of feelings. Here is the most frequently used theme of emotional control:

- control arousal (through breathing control, using methods of relaxation and listening to music or relaxation tapes). Example: "I tried not to get very emotional. The thing I did was to breathe as deep as I could, took like three deep breaths and just looked at my opponent and just walked back to the middle."

### Behavioral-Based Strategies

The final strategy that was cited was behavioral based. This strategy was used by 8 (40%) of the wrestlers. A behavioral-based strategy is the attempt to implement obvious behavioral responses. Here is the most frequently used theme of behavioral-based strategies:

- change/control the environment. Example: "Say it was lunchtime, 11:45, and I didn't feel like dealing with the crowd. I would have just gone downstairs...and then ate lunch later on when the crowd wasn't there instead of going over there."

Another frequent behavioral-based theme of the wrestlers was to follow a set routine that was familiar. For instance, a wrestler might use a specific warm-up routine to prepare for his matches or have a pre-planned behavior for dealing with an adverse situation.

North Dakota - 2005 National Cadet Free-Style Championships 105 pound Finals Tyler Clark (IL) decisioned Mark Weber (MI), 5-1. Photo by Wyatt Shultz.



### MEDALISTS VERSUS NON-MEDALISTS

The study also looked at the differences between medalists and non-medalists. According to the data, the main difference was that the medalists used their coping strategies automatically and unconsciously.

The researchers likened this to an athletic skill that has been learned so well that it is executed without much in the way of thought. As a result, the medalists seemed to perceive stress and/or adversity as less threatening. In addition, the medalists seemed to maintain a relatively stable (and positive) emotional level. Meanwhile, the non-medalists rode what the researchers referred to as an "emotional rollercoaster."

### APPLICATIONS FOR PHYSICAL TRAINING

Sometimes, you must cope with stressful situations in your physical training and preparation. How would you deal with these situations?

- You are supposed to lift tonight with your training partner at 6:00. There is a party at your cousin's house that starts at 8:00.
- You need to watch your caloric intake and eat healthy foods. Your best friend wants to gain weight and likes to eat junk foods.
- You try as hard as you can but can do only 8 repetitions in the lat pulldown

with the same weight that you did for 10 repetitions in your last workout. You still have 6 exercises left to do.

- You break up with your girlfriend and it is very emotional. Your pre-season strength and conditioning program is scheduled to begin that evening.
- You need to increase the muscle mass in your hips and legs during the summer to be more competitive in the upcoming season. Your training partner only wants to work his chest and biceps to look good at the beach.
- You wake up sore, stiff and tired. Your coach wants everyone on the team to go for a three-mile run that day.

Again, all of these situations can be stressful. The good news is that some of the coping strategies that are used on the wrestling mat can also be used in the weight room. For example, you should stay focused on the task at hand. Concentrate on your goals such as eating healthier or gaining muscle mass. Do not be distracted by thoughts that keep you from achieving your goals. Do not succumb to peer pressure. Do not dwell on past performance. Focus on every repetition of every set without having your mind wander.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

The researchers noted that coping is a dynamic process that involves a number of strategies, often in combination. Keep in mind that what works for one wrestler might not work for another. So, experiment with different coping strategies. Employ those that are effective and discard those that are not. And above all, use your coping strategies enough so that they become second nature.

Remember, the road to success can have numerous potholes along the way. Much of your success as a wrestler will be determined by how well you cope with those potholes.

*Editor's Note: Matt Brzycki has authored, co-authored or edited 13 books on strength and fitness including: Wrestling Strength: The Competitive Edge, Wrestling Strength: Prepare to Win and Wrestling Strength: Dare to Excel. The three wrestling books are available at all major bookstores or through Cardinal Publishers Group (800-296-0481).*