



Strength Training -- Set Your Priorities

Over the years, I've often been asked questions like "How can I get my abs ripped?" "What can I do to get my arms bigger?" "How can I set the school record in the bench press?" Unfortunately, these questions are sometimes asked by athletes involved in a variety of sports. Questions such as these tell me that the athletes really don't have their priorities straight--they are more concerned with improving their physical appearance and weight room notoriety than improving their athletic potential. You can certainly make the argument that, "Well, if I look better then I'll feel better about myself. I'll be more confident on the mat and be a better wrestler." Maybe so but you could look like Tarzan and still wrestle like Cheetah. Remember, too, that the winner of a wrestling match is never decided by a posedown or a bench press contest.

PRIORITIES

There are two main reasons why wrestlers should lift weights: To reduce their risk of injury and to increase their potential for improved performance.

REDUCE INJURY POTENTIAL

As a wrestler, your primary purpose in lifting weights is to reduce your risk of

injury. During the 1997-98 season, data collected by the NCAA Injury Surveillance System revealed that wrestlers had a higher injury rate during practices than all but two other athletes: football players (in the spring) and female gymnasts. During actual competition, wrestlers had the highest injury rate of any athletes other than football players. Also, 39% of all injuries sustained by wrestlers were severe enough to restrict or miss participation for 7 or more days and 6.1% of all injuries required surgery.

If you get injured and cannot compete, you're not doing your team any good. Perhaps your team will lose a meet because you were unable to wrestle and had to forfeit your match. And it's not doing you any good, either, especially if you're a high school wrestler hoping to earn an athletic scholarship. Imagine a college coach showing up to watch your match and being told that you wouldn't be wrestling because you're injured. The college coach might have second thoughts about offering you a scholarship.

By increasing the strength of your muscles, bones and connective tissue, these structures can tolerate more stress; if these structures can tolerate more stress, you'll be less susceptible to injury. This doesn't mean that if you increase your strength

you'll never get hurt. Many injuries are the result of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. However, being stronger will certainly reduce your risk. In addition, stronger biological tissue will reduce the severity of any injuries that you may get and allow you to return from injury sooner.

The areas that should receive the most emphasis are the ones most likely to get injured in wrestling: the neck, shoulder and knee. Other areas of priority should be the low back, elbow and ankle.


INCREASE PERFORMANCE POTENTIAL

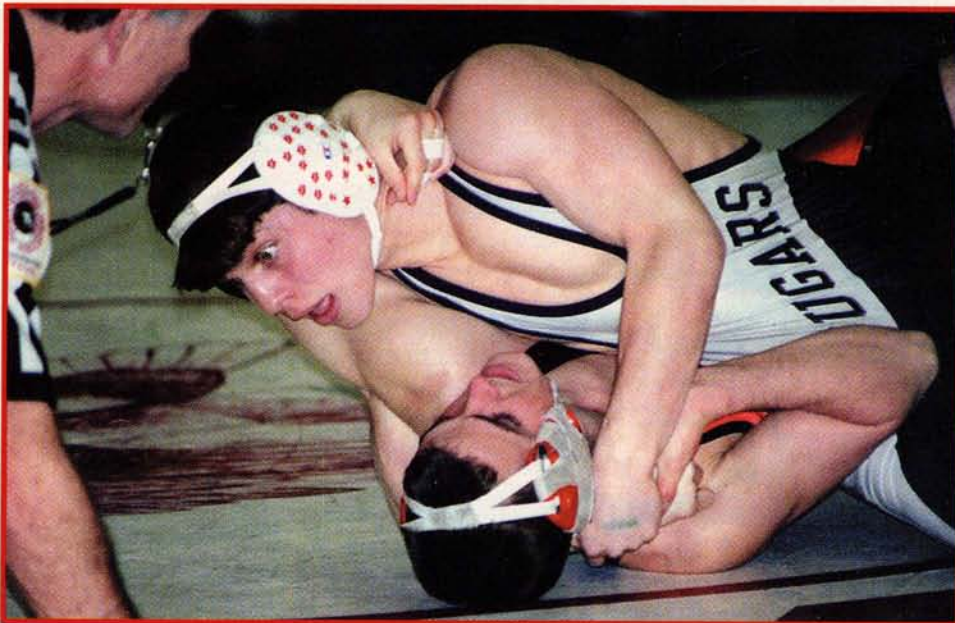
A second important reason for improving your strength is to increase your potential as an athlete. "Potential" is the key word here. If you lift weights, it doesn't mean that you'll automatically become a better wrestler. By increasing the strength of your muscles, you'll be able to produce more force. If you can produce more force, you'll have the potential to perform your techniques more efficiently -- that is, with less effort -- provided that you've practiced your wrestling skills so that you know how to apply that force in a sport-specific fashion.

When you work on your skills, you must practice them in the exact manner as you would do them on the mat. Practice makes perfect . . . but only if you practice perfect. If you practice sloppy then your skills will be sloppy.

BETTER QUESTIONS

So, questions which would indicate that you have your priorities in order as a wrestler might be "What's the best way to strengthen my neck to prevent injury?" or "What can I do to become a better conditioned wrestler?" or "How can I improve my functional strength on the mat?"

Actually, there's a simple question that you can ask yourself to determine if your priorities are straight: "Am I a wrestler who lifts weights or a weightlifter who wrestles?" 



State of Maryland High School Final's 1A-2A. 125 lb. Chad Dewees, Catoclin (top), placed third in state. He beat Kevin Sutton, Oakland Mills. Photo by Lawrence E. Fasick.