

The Emergence of Folkstyle Wrestling after World War II

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INTRODUCTION

During the WWII years, many wrestling programs across the United States were disbanded because their collegiate and scholastic coaches were off to do battle. Upon returning home after the conflict, wrestling mentors reinstated their mat programs. In fact, they also implemented numerous strategies to promote the creation of wrestling in other colleges and local school districts.

I would have loved to interview these former wrestling luminaries, but their mat legacies can only be found in old college and high school yearbooks as they have all passed on.

Fortunately, I was blessed with the honor of being influenced as a youngster by such former masters of the mats. As a native of Pennsylvania, I will use the Keystone State as a microcosm of how Folkstyle wrestling grew throughout the nation following WWII.

WRESTLING ICONS AND THEIR WORKS

The Pennsylvania pioneers of post-war development of wrestling included a plethora of college and scholastic wrestling coaches. To mention just a few, there were legendary collegiate and high school innovators across the state the likes

of: Rex Peery (Pitt), Charlie Speidel (Penn State), Russ Houk (Bloomsburg University), Gerald Leeman (Lehigh), Ted Rupp (Franklin & Marshall), Hubert “Hub” Jack (Lock Haven University), Art Weiss (Clearfield HS), Red Campbell (Phillipsburg HS), Stan Mousetis (Washington HS), Charles Savage (Mt. Carmel HS), Frank Volcano, Sr. (Chartiers-Houston HS), John Maitland (Easton), and Mal Paul & Lyman “Beans” Weaver (Shamokin HS), who reintroduced the mat sport throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

First, these individuals had to persuade school administrators the need to offer or reinstate wrestling. To do so, they used grassroot tactics, getting the parents involved in the process by scheduling a ‘Parents’ Night’ to explain the positive physical, mental, and emotional attributes that wrestling would instill upon their children. After gaining the parents’ allegiance, these coaches had them attend school board meetings, supporting the coaches in requesting that wrestling be a part of their extra-curricular programs.

College and high school coaches, alike, incorporated an “Introduction to Wrestling” segment in their physical education classes as part of their recruitment strategy. Many high school coaches also conducted “School Assemblies,” exposing the student body to the values of wrestling. In fact, they convinced many football coaches how wrestling would further benefit their players’ athletic agility, especially the linemen.

Likewise, they had instructional wrestling demonstrations during the halftime of

basketball games in an effort to gain more spectator interest.

To educate the news media, both college and scholastic coaches invited local sports editors to witness their practices, writing “coach-and-wrestler” interview articles, which included photos of the wrestlers during their workouts.

In an effort to gain more student-involvement, high school coaches initiated elementary and junior high wrestling programs. To keep these wrestlers’ enthusiasm at a premium, coaches would direct intramural tournaments at the conclusion of the season, often sponsored by school clubs or community organizations (e.g., FFA Club, Lions’ Club, etc.).

At my high school during the 1950s, the Key Club put on such competitions, awarding medals to the champions and runners-up. In fact, high school wrestlers served as officials and spent time communing with the neophyte participants. This was another plus because now the younger wrestlers had wrestling “heroes” to cheer for at high school dual meets, which were prominent in those days.

Scholastic coaches were also very aware of the important role that junior varsity wrestlers played in the success of their mat programs. (As they say, champions are made in the practice room.) There was always a junior varsity dual prior to the varsity meet. At my high school, the town’s Optimist Club sponsored a junior varsity wrestling tournament for area schools.

Working hand-in-hand, numerous scholastic wrestling coaches would have area college mentors and their “star” matmen as guest clinicians at their practices and/or

speakers at their end-of-the-year wrestling banquets.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, many of Pennsylvania's scholastic wrestling coaches, whose programs were then well-established, even conducted wrestling clinics for rival high schools beginning mat programs. I was actually a demonstration-wrestler at a number of these inter-school clinics. Ironically, some of those same schools defeated my high school alma mater in later years. But that was fine: "The better the competition, the better the wrestler."

During this time period, college coaches began to initiate summer wrestling camps all across the country. I was one of those adolescents attending such instructional week-long clinics. The camp sessions were not only very informative, but I was also exposed to some of the greatest minds in the mat sport: Ed Peery, Leroy Alitz, Gerald "The Germ" Leeman, Henry Wittenberg, etc. They made me feel proud to be a wrestler, listening to their inspirational stories of individual determination and perseverance to be the best.

Boy, was I ready to rumble!

CONCLUSION

Yes, there were so many former giants in wrestling throughout the nation who gave so much of themselves to revitalize Folkstyle wrestling after WWII. In recent years, we have had to deal with the HIV and Herpes outbreaks, but we faced those health challenges head on and wisely found prophylactic ways to combat them,

keeping the mat sport alive and well. Now, we are confronted by a far more lethal enemy: Covid-19.

Since wrestling is such a close-contact sport, there is a very real possibility that the powers-to-be in many states will postpone or even prohibit wrestling this year. Still, we will succeed as we have done during hard times in the past. We will persevere and move forward. Folkstyle wrestling will survive and we will, again, weather the storm – TOGETHER!

(Author Biography: Dr. Bill Welker is one of the foremost authorities regarding Folkstyle wrestling, compiling more than 60 years of experience. A former Pennsylvania state champion and award-winning coach, official, and wrestling sportswriter, Welker was selected as a “Master of Wrestling” by *Wrestling USA Magazine* in 2008. He served as the West Virginia Secondary School Activities Commission Wrestling Rules Interpreter, Clinician, and Supervisor of State Tournament Officials for 28 years and was a member of the NFHS National Wrestling Rules Committee from 2012 until 2015.)