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## A Case for Universal Mandatory Wrestling

by

Steven H. Biondolillo

In August 2020, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) made a historic decision: women's wrestling, declared the national governing body of collegiate sports, would become an official "NCAA Emerging Sport."

While the International Olympic Committee introduced women's wrestling in the 2004 Summer Games and the UFC signed its first woman fighter in 2012, the historic significance of the NCAA decision cannot be overstated. For the first time, all elementary school girls in America can imagine themselves striving officially—and receiving a college scholarship—in an activity that has forever tested, bonded, toughened, and rewarded boys. As a result, an even bolder proposal can now be imagined: mandatory wrestling for all schoolchildren.

As farfetched as it might seem, our culture's survival could depend on universal mandatory wrestling. Yes, a form of hand-to-hand combat first depicted in cave drawings could be the very activity that rescues us. How? By its almost unique ability to do two things: engender self-knowledge—and, thereby, interpersonal understanding and empathy—and strengthen youth in every imaginable way.

One needn't be a social psychologist to register the nation's troubled zeitgeist: pervasive physical, mental and emotional distress, and widespread social discord, divide and despair. The objective of universal wrestling would be to connect in body, mind and spirit each and every child with him- or herself, and with others.

Why wrestling?

Let's overlook the fact that wrestling is an instinctive activity that, in most species, develops the ability to survive and propagate. Unlike the activity in the animal kingdom, the sport of wrestling's purpose is neither to batter, break nor harm. Its objective, instead, is to gain control, and gain it only for a few seconds. As such, wrestling fosters self-control, and the ability to engage with the purpose and prize of momentary control. For *Homo sapiens*, it's difficult to imagine an activity more perfectly existential.

Notably, what wrestling teaches transcends the usual litany of sports bromides, inculcating principles applicable in all spheres of life: the advantage of beginning from a *balanced stance*; the necessity of *protecting* oneself; the ability to *set-up* circumstances to succeed; the will and courage to *act*; the discipline to *complete* anything begun; and *humility* both in success and failure.

In the Abrahamic religions, life is depicted as a condition and experience beyond human understanding, in which all of us, nevertheless, are exhorted to step forward, face unknown forces, and repair the world beginning with oneself. The biblical story of Jacob is particularly instructive: only through wrestling—and its high-touch physical, mental and emotional challenge—can one's full humanity be birthed.

Here are four illuminating wrestling proverbs:

*"Wrestling: it's 80% mental... and the rest is in your head."*

In wrestling, mental strength is more important than physical. In fact, it's an activity that favors neither body type nor temperament: small and gentle individuals are known to succeed as well as large and robust types; individuals with defensive temperaments succeed as well as those who are naturally aggressive.

*"If it's going to be, it's up to me."*

Now more than ever, the erosion of individual accountability leading to cultural collapse is a concerning prospect. One arena with little room for error, for example, is the national security provided by our Special Forces. Recruited disproportionately from the ranks of former high school and college wrestlers, they are a powerful reminder that a team is only as great as its individually accountable members.

*"Wrestling = Discipline + Desire + Determination + Ingenuity"*

That these values underpin most successful enterprise practically clinches the case for universal mandatory wrestling for schoolchildren. While traditional athletic values such as strength, speed, flexibility, and technical competence are important, they are never more valuable than these four horsemen.

*"You must earn the right to win."*

The most problematic four-letter word in our "helicopter-parent-enabled" and instant-gratification culture may be the word "earn," which smacks of... well... discipline, desire and determination, as well as disappointment, pain and failure. This proverb returns the undiluted concept of work—and all that work and achievement involve—to the center of life.

Western culture was birthed in the *gymnasia* and *palestrae* of ancient Greece. Plato—Western philosophy's seminal figure—was an accomplished wrestler. His teacher, Socrates, taught that, in the matter of physical training, no man has the right to be an amateur—wisdom from our culture's original, philosophical one-two punch, both of whom opined amply on the interconnectedness of philosophy, the arts, and athletics.

As Plato knew, the Delphic maxim, "Know thyself," has no better enabler than wrestling, which teaches about and exercises every limb, muscle and digit, as well as the mind and spirit. Since time immemorial, the imperative, "Know thyself," has been step-one in the development of empathy and, in the past 2,000+ years, the bedrock of The Golden Rule.

Once upon a time, gym class in America was considered to be the institution that helped children develop physical skills, learn teamwork, and improve self-confidence. Today, largely as a result of the pressure of standardized academic testing, gym class is under siege. Yet, it's impossible to find a single source which denies the multi-level benefit to children of reasonably rigorous physical activity during the curricular day.

The promotion of "reasonable rigor" in our nation's youth. Here are five national resources inching toward the goal:

**Beat the Streets** is the first wrestling organization whose mission is to reach schoolchildren in *urban* America through school- and community-based wrestling programs. BTS has developed a fun and safe curriculum which builds on physical activity that all children—and other mammals—do naturally. Rather than curbing and repressing a child's natural behaviors, BTS programs channel and build them.

**Wrestle Like A Girl**, founded in 2016 by a female U.S. Army combat veteran, aims to empower girls and women to become leaders in life. One needn't have binged either *Game of Thrones* or *Yellowstone* to understand the promise of this initiative.

The **National Wrestling Coaches Association's** mission is both to strengthen the nation's existing wrestling programs and create new programs at all levels. Additionally, the NWCA prepares coaches at all levels to succeed as coaches and mentors.

**USA Wrestling** and its Foundation have built a coalition of the nation's leading wrestling organizations, which recently distributed to schools far-and-wide a "Build-It-Yourself Wrestling Program" kit.

The **National Wrestling Hall of Fame and Museum** offers educational programs and materials to all comers, as well as serves the traditional function of preserving the sport's history. One of its most interesting and inspiring exhibits tells the story of the nine U.S. presidents who wrestled, including Washington, Jackson, Lincoln, Grant, Taylor, Arthur, Taft, T. Roosevelt, and Coolidge.

Last but not least, youth today are in desperate need of a meaningful rite of passage. Military service excepted, "service corps" rarely offer effective rite-of-passage experiences, because, by the time young people reach "service corps" age—between 18 and 22—too many are too-soft, solipsistic and disconnected. Wrestling in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades, before paralyzing self-consciousness sets in and the bullying begins, could prepare our youth for national service.

When, in 2013, the International Olympic Committee proposed eliminating wrestling from the Olympics, the world's nations—friends and foes alike—united to block the ill-conceived proposal. As if all humanity had bonded in preparation for an impending battle with the "hostile planet Vectron," wrestling in the Olympics was saved. Why? Because it embodies the gestalt of our human experience, is an unparalleled connector, and inculcates in participants what they need to survive, succeed and flourish.

*Steven H. Biondolillo is the president of Biondolillo Associates, Inc., a 37-year-old firm dedicated to helping nonprofit organizations build creative fundraising programs. He is a former Division 1 college wrestling coach, and in 2013 was inducted into the National Wrestling Hall of Fame as an "Outstanding American from Massachusetts." [sbiondolillo@biondolillo.com](mailto:sbiondolillo@biondolillo.com)*