

RETURNING to WRESTLING

***An Advocacy Guide for Coaches
to Return to Wrestling During COVID-19***



***A Resource Provided by the
National Wrestling Coaches Association
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BACKGROUND

From January 21 through February 23, 2020, U.S. public health agencies detected 14 U.S. cases of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), all related to travel from China (CDC, MMWR June 5, 2020). The first nontravel-related U.S. case was confirmed on February 26 in a California resident who had become ill on February 13. Two days later, on February 28, a second nontravel-related case was confirmed in the state of Washington. On March 11, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global health pandemic. On March 13, President Trump declared a national emergency in the United States. By that time many sports organizations from professional to collegiate to high school to many others cancelled their training and competitive seasons. By June 21, nearly two million positive cases and over 91,000 deaths were recorded (CDC COVID-19 Tracker). Of these cases, 414,000 were identified for ages 5-29 (21% of all cases) and 416 deaths were recorded (0.4% of all deaths).

Since March 2020, the federal and state governments have implemented emergency orders that have affected all sports and how student-athletes will learn, train, and compete. Wrestling is one of the sports deeply affected by emergency order and decisions made by its governing organizations. Nonetheless, as states begin to fully reopen and sports begin to restart, it will be important for wrestling programs to begin planning to do the same. The pending actions to reopen by local and state governments and subsequent guidelines that affect sports present a need for interscholastic and collegiate wrestling coaches to understand how to safely return to wrestling practice and competition for the upcoming 2020-2021 season and beyond. This is why over the past several months, the National Wrestling Coaches Association (NWCA) has engaged a wide range of stakeholders to understand how to safely return to wrestling.

First, it is important to recognize that current guidelines have been provided by the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS), National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), USA Wrestling (USA Wrestling) and the Athletic Amateur Union (AAU). In the conversations NWCA has had with its members, key stakeholders, and a panel of experts about these guidelines, it was identified that further guidance was needed to assist coaches in advocating and planning for a return to wrestling. This need was the impetus for creating this resource guide for coaches to advocate for wrestling to return to wrestling with appropriate accommodations for improved screening and testing, personal hygiene practices, training and competition environment sanitation, and other factors to reduce risk and enable wrestling to safely restart.

Given the dynamic nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, what we know and what we will learn over time, it is reasonable to assume that these guidelines will evolve as further research, data and resources become available. Nonetheless, it is important to clarify that these guidelines focus on enabling coaches to become highly informed advocates for wrestling to restart. Therefore, this document is complementary to other similar resources and it supplements those documents with the provision of guidelines and a call-to-action that wrestling coaches must engage key stakeholders, especially elected officials, to work toward preserving wrestling for the upcoming season and support the opportunity of over 250,000 high school and 11,000 collegiate wrestlers to remain active and competitive in a highly beneficial sport.

EXISTING GUIDANCE

All current guidelines provided by NFHS, NCAA, USA Wrestling and the AAU are principally based on state and local public health recommendations and mandates and these can be found on your state and local government website.

In most cases, state or local public health departments inform and guide the reopening process including sport specific restarting rules. In other states it might be determined by governing organizations. Generally, these organizations have attempted to stratify sports according to risk categories based on training needs, participation interaction and competition requirements and have provided rules and guidelines for their restarting. This is the critical part of the reopening process where wrestling coaches need to assert themselves to provide input and feedback on what is most appropriate for wrestling.

It is important to emphasize that these rules and guidelines are based on the latest scientific and medical understanding of COVID-19 and how it can be transmitted. However, they are not necessarily derived from outcomes data obtained from each respective sport and participation in it, but are based on what is presently known to reduce risk and minimize spread of the Coronavirus in the general population.

Often, as we have seen in other sports, the application of public health practices such as physical distancing, facial covering, and amending rules to eliminate contact have impacted the training and competitive environments for most, if not all sports. Therefore, it is important to recognize the need for practical application of prevention strategies to reduce the spread of COVID-19 among wrestling activities, but at the same time supporting the opportunity for wrestling to be conducted within the parameters of its traditional rules.

PLANNING FOR A RETURN TO WRESTLING

Wrestling, as is true of any sport, cannot eliminate risk from the training and competitive environment. The focus for everyone involved in athletics is to manage risk and reduce known factors that increase exposure to risks. There are several strategies that can be implemented to reduce risk to the wrestler and to make the wrestling environment as safe as possible.

Nonetheless, the ultimate authority related to COVID-19 will be local and state health departments and governing organizations. In accordance with [federal guidelines](#), a Return to Wrestling plan assumes that local and state criteria have been satisfied. Therefore, it is critically important for coaches to communicate with these regulatory entities in advocating for sensible rules that minimize risk but also enable wrestling to be reasonably restarted in a manner that honors traditional participation.

Prevention has always been paramount to wrestling programs at all levels and proper protocols have historically been a part of a comprehensive training and competition plan. Among high school and college sports, wrestling has implemented rigorous prevention and control measures to reduce risk of common sports infections such as Ringworm, Impetigo, Herpes Gladiatorum, Scabies and MRSA.

In the age of COVID-19, a Return to Wrestling plan should focus on the guidelines already developed by the respective wrestling governing organizations. In general, guidelines should focus on the following areas: **Screening and Assessment; Promoting Behaviors that Reduce Spread; and Maintaining Healthy Environments.** In keeping with existing guidelines, wrestling should consider implementing appropriate policies and procedures to include but not limited to the following issues:

1. Daily Screening of Symptoms
2. Daily Noncontact Infrared Temperature Scan (prior to training and competing)
3. Daily Blood Oxygen Scan with Oximeter (prior to training and competing)
4. Frequent Coronavirus Testing (as resources allow)
5. Enhanced Training and Competition Facility Sanitation Practices
6. Enhanced Personal Hygiene Measures and Practices
7. Contact Tracing in Partnership with Local and State Health Departments

The implementation of the above core principles will allow COVID-19 risk to be managed in the wrestling environment, thus increasing the likelihood of wrestling being favorably reviewed and restarted. This is another opportunity for coaches to provide feedback. Coaches should talk with local and state public health officials to discuss what the government is considering recommending and mandating for wrestling and ask if input can be provided in that process.

Coaches should carefully review the existing guidelines provided by the NCAA, NFHS, USA Wrestling and AAU and determine if any guidelines are lacking to enhance training and competition. If so, provide evidence to support that conclusion while ensuring any new recommendations will need to support the health and safety of each wrestler.

RETURNING TO WRESTLING - PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

In general, guidelines that are considered for implementation at a minimum should adhere to the existing standards adopted by the following organization categories:

1. CDC and Other Federal Government Recommendations
2. State, County and Local Municipality Regulations
3. NCAA, NFHS, USA Wrestling and Other National Governing Organization Requirements
4. Local Institution Policy
5. Facility and Venue Protocols

The existing training and competition guidelines largely focus on the following areas:

1. Screening and Assessment
2. Promoting Behaviors that Reduce Spread
3. Maintaining Healthy Environments
4. Competition Considerations
5. Contact Tracing as managed by Local and State Health Departments

In addition to the existing guidelines it is recommended for coaches to collaborate with their administration and medical staff to explore the following recommendations that would be implemented for anyone involved with the wrestling program:

Screening and Assessment

1. Test for coronavirus within three days prior to entering the training environment.
2. Daily screening of signs or symptoms of COVID-19 and over the past 14 days.
3. Daily screening that no close sustained contact occurred with anyone who is sick or that may have been exposed to COVID-19 and over the past 14 days.
4. Daily measurement of body temperature: Temperature measurement is widely used as an immediate test to determine if someone may be infected with COVID-19. This approach to temperature monitoring is not sufficient because COVID-19 can be transmitted before a fever develops. This assessment can be performed via a digital thermometer at the forehead.
5. Daily measurement of blood oxygen level (SpO₂): This is an emerging assessment and SpO₂ measurement <90% is seen in people with respiratory distress and illness. Resting SpO₂ <90% is found in COVID-19. This may be an improved measure versus body temperature alone. This assessment is performed via an infrared laser blood oximeter at the fingertip.
6. All daily measures should be recorded, monitored, and securely maintained. Any person with positive symptoms or concerning value should not be allowed to practice or compete and immediately referred to a health care provider.

Promoting Behaviors that Reduce Spread

1. Implement existing governing organization guidelines for personal hygiene and infectious disease control including using sanitizer solution and wipes to clean exposed body parts before, during and after training and competition.
2. There should be no shared athletic towels, clothing, headgear or shoes
3. Individuals should wear their own appropriate workout clothes and use clean clothes daily including sanitizing shoes and headgear before and after practice.
4. Individuals should bring their own water bottle and it should not be shared.
5. Limit individual practice group numbers within the overall team practice so that the number of wrestlers drilling with each other is reduced. Avoid switching wrestlers from one group to another group during a given practice. Additionally, restrict the number of support personnel and others coming into the practice environment to minimize risk of spread.

Maintaining Healthy Environments

1. Implement and maintain all existing recommendations for a clean and sanitized training and competition environment.
2. Clean wrestling mats and any used equipment before and after use.
3. Hand sanitizer and towelettes should be readily available in the practice and competition environments.
4. All athletic equipment should be cleaned before, during and after practices and between practices/sessions.
5. Other equipment, such as wrestling headgear, shoes, braces, knee pads should be worn by only one individual and not shared.

Competition Considerations

1. The competition environment should implement strict screening and assessment guidelines for teams with special attention to minimizing team interactions between opposing teams.
2. Only opposing individual wrestlers should come into direct contact with one another.
3. Teams should consider how the type of competition (dual, tri, quad or tournament); where those teams originate; and how competitions beyond dual meets could affect risk of spread between teams. Each team should make this determination based on existing guidelines and data specific to those teams, region, and state.
4. If more than one dual meet competition will take place on the same mat on the same day, then it would be appropriate to disinfect that mat prior to the next dual meet competition.
5. Implementation of additional COVID-19 testing requirements should be considered for competitions larger than a quad meet such as tournaments.

ADVOCACY WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS

The voice of a coach carries a lot of credibility and as such coaches must utilize their platform as a trusted leader in the community and a treasured constituent to the elected official. Most elected officials want to feel like they are making a difference in the lives of others and the communities they represent and serve. Therefore, wrestling coaches can play an important role in advocating for restarting wrestling and sports in general.

One key issue to remember is that all elected officials share some common characteristics that make the outcome of advocacy efforts more predictable. Knowing these fundamentals can dramatically improve your chances for a successful outcome.

Here are some important things to consider:

1. Elected Officials like getting to know constituents, especially coaches because of their influence in the community.
2. Elected Officials have competing demands and interest. Prepare for the meeting, have your facts and approach ready to share, and have an “ask” ready to give. You are there to advocate for the sport and the elected official is expecting something to be asked to be supported.
 - a. Be clear and concise when delivering your message and request. What is it you want them to do to enable a return to wrestling?
 - b. Emphasize how wrestling intends to safely manage risk through the COVID-19 crisis. This is where a well thought out Return to Wrestling plan will be invaluable.
3. Elected Officials have a broad constituency and they will need to know how this issue is affecting their state or district. Offering the right data or anecdote may mean the difference between their taking the requested action or not.
4. Elected Officials value reliable and useful information. Once a reliable source is found, they will most likely cultivate it. Be that source for your elected officials.
5. Elected Officials like to be thanked and remembered for their good work.

CONCLUSION

Sports at all levels from novice to professional have been under tremendous scrutiny as they restart and this is especially true for wrestling. The COVID-19 pandemic has abruptly changed the way we conduct our everyday life. With many changes occurring to other sports it is incumbent upon wrestling coaches to involve themselves in advocating for the sport to safely return to high school and collegiate athletic programs for the 2020-2021 competitive season and beyond. Use the resources in this guide to inform yourself about COVID-19 and what you can do to implement safer training and competition conditions. Time is of the essence and your call-to-action is to reach out to your elected officials at the local, state, and Congressional level and communicate the importance of restarting wrestling.

RESOURCES

Public Health Resources

- [CDC Guidelines for Open Up America Again](#)
- [CDC Coronavirus Updates](#)
- [CDC COVID-19 Data Tracker](#)
- [Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Map](#)
- [National Association of City County Health Officials](#)
- [Association of State and Territorial Health Officials](#)

Wrestling Governing Organization Resources

- [USA Wrestling: Return to the Mat Guidelines](#)
- [NCAA Coronavirus Updates and Information](#)
- [National Federation of State High School Associations: Guidelines for Opening Up High School Athletics](#)
- [AAU-American Athletic Union Coronavirus Updates](#)

Elected Official Organization Resources

- [National Governors Association – Coronavirus Updates](#)
- [National Conference of State Legislators – Resources for States](#)
- [U.S. Conference of Mayors – COVID-19 What Mayors Need to Know](#)
- [How to Contact Your Elected Official](#)

ABOUT THE NWCA

The NWCA has been serving, protecting, and promoting amateur wrestling in the educational environment since 1928. We have a long history as the “go-to” organization for coaches, administrators, parents, and wrestlers who seek resources and/or information on coaching development, establishing new programs or protecting vulnerable in the educational environment, and student-wrestler well-being.

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- Pat Popolizio, Head Coach, North Carolina State University Wrestling
- Mike Moyer, Executive Director, NWCA
- Jim Fallis, Director Legislative Affairs, NWCA
- Pat Tocci, Senior Director, NWCA

DISCLAIMER

This document should be treated as a general information resource only, rather than medical advice or a recommendation to train or compete. Reliance on any information provided here is solely at the individual’s own judgment and the National Wrestling Coaches Association recommends that coaches consult with their own respective institutions, state agencies and governing organizations before returning to wrestling.