

# A high school wrestling evolution: Out with vomiting, in with hydration

There's a growing emphasis on feeling good rather than losing large amounts of weight

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January 26, 2024 at 12:58 p.m. EST

When Damascus wrestlers have questions about cutting weight, they often look to Gabe Hernandez for answers. He is a leader on the team and has weight management down to a science.

In previous years, an expected response may have been one of the many extreme tactics wrestlers have employed to quickly shed water weight, such as wearing insulating plastic suits while working out or using laxatives and diuretics to force vomiting.

But Hernandez rejects these techniques, instead telling his peers to make sure they're staying in the gym, taking care of their body and, most importantly, feeling good. His process showcases the sport's movement — particularly at the high school level — to distance itself from the dangers of rapid weight loss toward a more comprehensive approach that favors the health of the wrestlers.

“At our school, we don’t really condone that,” Hernandez said. “I feel like doing all that stuff is just unnecessary.”

Hernandez, a junior who carries himself in the offseason at 150 pounds but wrestles at 140, has been cutting weight since he got to Damascus, previously all the way to 126 pounds. When he had to drop more weight, however, Hernandez never starved himself or resorted to intense dehydration — he instead took care of his diet and got back in the gym after practice for extra cardio. Those habits not only require a sharp focus and work ethic, exactly what coaches hope to instill in their wrestlers, but are also much safer than the unsustainable methods some have taken up.

“I just feel like if people actually want to put that work in and want to see the transition in their bodies and how they feel and how they look, they should,” said Hernandez, who also plays football and baseball. “I feel like everybody should just put that work in to the point where they don’t have to question it and they can just see the difference.”

The National Federation of State High School Associations mandates wrestlers across the nation undergo preseason tests to ascertain the lowest weight at which they are permitted to compete. Male wrestlers are not allowed to participate at lower than 7 percent body fat, and female wrestlers must adhere to a minimum of 12 percent. Hydration levels are also examined with urine-specific gravity tests. Lastly, wrestlers aren’t permitted to lose more than 1.5 percent of their body weight in a week.

“I think the state, and also just we as coaches, are really trying to teach kids how to manage their weight responsibly and get out of the hands of starvation and some of the ridiculous things that we used to do in the past to get down to a lower weight class,” McLean assistant coach Jay Lewey said.

Change takes time, though, and some continue to put themselves through arduous trials to make weight. Bryan Silva, who wrestles for Damascus at 285 pounds, remembers one of his friends dropping 10 pounds in a week, throwing on countless layers before training sessions and eating little more than the bare minimum. He also has seen wrestlers drastically limit their water and food intake ahead of preseason tests.

These habits can only lead to negative physiological and mental effects and also can make wrestling more dangerous. [A University of Wisconsin study](#), published in 2022 in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, followed 67 Division I college wrestlers over seven seasons and found that a 1 percent loss in body weight correlated with an 11 percent higher chance of injury during competition.

Dehydration comes on fast in the wrestling room. Conditioning is especially rigorous, which leads to rapid perspiration. Wrestlers often leave training sessions multiple pounds lighter than they enter after sweating profusely, which makes cutting weight slightly easier but also a balancing act.

The responsibility to uphold safety regulations falls on coaches, who work with wrestlers on a daily basis and can monitor their behavior.

St. John's Coach Matt Keel took part in an online seminar with sports nutrition experts to learn more about the realities of cutting weight. His message to the Cadets: Weight-cutting needs to be handled with care. A sheet distributed to Keel's wrestlers, which calls for continual hydration and lays out healthy eating habits, also has a checklist to monitor progress and avoid rapid losses or gains.

Weight-cutting isn't going anywhere; it will always exist because weight classes ensure competitive balance. But as the sport continues to put guardrails around the process, coaches are looking at their jobs as an opportunity to instill positive habits that can reach further than the mat.

"They'll all leave the [wrestling] room eventually," Lewey said, "so if we can help teach them and coach them to live a healthy lifestyle throughout their lives, that's really important to all of us."