TEN ESSENTIAL EXERCISES FOR WRESTLING

By Matt Brzycki

There is no magical or optimal strength-training program for wrestling. The fact is that any number of programs can be used to increase strength provided that certain parameters are met (such as using an appropriate level of intensity, attempting to make subsequent workouts more challenging, getting adequate recovery and so on).

Similarly, there are no magical or optimal exercises for wrestling. Any exercise that supplies a meaningful level of resistance can be used to increase strength. That being said, there are some exercises that are beneficial for wrestlers and, as a result, should be incorporated into their strength-training program.

THE EXERCISES

Depending upon the availability of equipment, there are a multitude of exercises that can be done in the weight room. Let's take a look at 10 exercises for wrestlers that can be extremely effective yet involve little or no equipment.

Neck Flexion

In terms of reducing the risk of catastrophic injury, it is highly recommended that wrestlers train their necks on a regular basis. The traditional way for wrestlers to strengthen their necks is to do a neck bridge or what has become known as a "wrestler's bridge." Although bridging is done on the mat in the unfortunate situation in which a wrestler gets caught on his back, it is not a good exercise for increasing the strength of the neck. The main concern is that bridging produces high compressive and shear forces in the cervical spine. (Note: Compressive force acts perpendicular to a plane; shear force acts parallel to a plane.)

Lacking a neck machine should not be a deterrent to training the neck. If a competent spotter is available, manual-resistance exercises are always a viable option. A productive exercise that can be performed with manual resistance is neck flexion.

Neck flexion works your neck flexors. To begin the exercise, lie supine on a bench and place your feet flat on the floor. Position your head over the end of the back pad, interlock your fingers and place them across your chest. A spotter should apply resistance against your chin with one hand and your forehead with the other. To do the exercise, pull your head as close to your chest as possible as the spotter applies resistance evenly throughout the full range of motion. Pause briefly in this mid-range position (your chin near your chest) and then resist as the spotter pushes your head back to the start/finish position (your chin away from your chest).

Neck Extension

Another productive exercise that can be performed with manual resistance is neck extension. This exercise also helps to achieve overall balance of the neck muscles, an important consideration for reducing the risk of injury.

Neck extension involves your neck extensors and upper trapezius. To begin the exercise, lie prone on a bench and place your hands and feet on the floor (or place your legs across the back pad). Position your head over the end of the back pad. A spotter should place one hand on your back and apply resistance against the back of your head with the other. To do the exercise, extend your head backward as far as possible as the spotter applies resistance evenly throughout the full range of motion. Pause briefly in this mid-range position (your chin away from your chest) and then resist as the spotter pushes your head back to the start/finish position (your chin near your chest).

Ball Squat

One of the best exercises that you can do is the squat since it engages such a great deal of muscle mass. But when done with a barbell, the exercise has two major drawbacks. For one thing, placing a heavy weight on the shoulders exposes the spinal column to significant compressive forces. And in doing the exercise, the knees come forward of the toes which produces a great deal of shear force in the knee joint.

An excellent alternative to the barbell squat is the ball squat. This exercise employs the same muscles without the undesirable compressive and shear forces.

The ball squat works your hips, quadriceps and hamstrings. To begin the exercise, place your heels a few feet in front of a smooth, unobstructed wall. Position a stability ball between your lower back and the wall. Spread your feet slightly wider than shoulder-width apart and point them straight ahead. Have your legs almost completely straight. Place most of your bodyweight on your heels. Position your hands on your hips. To do the exercise, lower your body under control until your upper legs are approximately parallel to the floor. Without bouncing, return to the start/finish position (your legs almost straight). To make the ball squat more challenging, you can hold onto dumbbells (one in each hand).