Yes, it's true; shaking hands with the opposing coach at the end of an individual match has become a problem. So, what's the problem? Allow me to explain.

There have been occasional incidents where wrestlers have approached opposing coaches and while shaking hands, they taunted the coaches with "in your face" remarks in regards to beating their wrestlers. Certainly, this is very unsportsmanlike behavior which, if observed by the match official, could result in a flagrant misconduct penalty.

On the flip side, at times coaches are busy explaining to their wrestlers the mistakes they made, and do not want to be bothered shaking the winner's hand. Often they tell such wrestlers to leave them alone, giving those in attendance the impression that they are being unsportsmanlike.

Due to such problems, the powers to be at the West Virginia Secondary Schools Activities Commission (myself included) highly recommend that wrestlers do not approach the opposing coach's corner at the conclusion of a match. Keep in mind; it is a recommendation, not a mandate.

Wrestling is an ultra-demanding sport, both physically and emotionally. When emotions are high due to a "hotly-contested" match, it is best to separate both parties as quickly as possible. Walking to an opponent's corner (after winning a very close match) to shake hands, can easily cause post-match problems. This situation would not occur with the proper post-match procedure of each wrestler shaking hands. That is all that is required by the rules.

So, where did this "shaking-the-coach's-hand" procedure originate? Believe it or not, this practice started at the youth level years ago. I find this ironic, for acts of unsportsmanship are rampant at this level. Allow me to explain.

I officiated scholastic wrestling for 27 years. During those years I have witness and heard about many small-fry "horror stories" on the mats, including little kids trying to make weight wearing trash bags. The problem is 3-fold:

1. Clueless Coaches

I can't begin to list the times I saw youth league coaches vehemently arguing with the officials (myself included) about straight-forward rulebook calls. Bottom line: They don't know the rules, nor take the time to truly learn them.

2. Father Coaches

Too many men play the role of coaches only because their off-spring is participating. Most are never seen again on the pee-wee mats when their child moves up. Furthermore, you could always tell a father-coach when his son/daughter lost a close match. The majority of them would take the loss out on the official (myself included).

3. No Governing Body

There are far more sportsmanship problems at youth competitions because there is no governing body, such as of the WVSSAC (WV), PIAA (PA), OHSAA (Ohio), or the NCAA. The only governing bodies, at the majority of small-fry tournaments, are the tournament directors.

Unfortunately, many youth tourney directors are buddies with many of their pee-wee coaches, and to keep peace, side with them, regarding the officials' close calls. Let me cite one regional extreme example of some years ago.

A youth league coach lost it when one of his wrestlers lost a tough match. The coach went "ballistic" on the official, actually bumping him into the score table. Of course, the official expelled him from the tournament for a flagrant misconduct.

Well, it didn't end there. The coach went to the tournament director, who was a friend of his. Instead of the coach being asked to leave, the tournament director relieved the official of his duties for the rest of the tournament. If I would have been present, the rest of the officials would have left as well.

Please don't misunderstand me. There are many outstanding youth league coaches out there. They are the ones coaching before, during, and after their sons/daughters wrestled. They are the ones teaching solid fundamentals, not exotic moves that don't work against strong competition. They are the ones who put learning far above winning. In essence, they are the ones who have the proper perspective for coaching wrestling at the youth level.

But isn't it ironic that the sportsmanship act of shaking the hand of an opponent's coach started at the youth level. I find it to be an oxymoron.

In my opinion (based on 50 years of experience), if a wrestler sincerely wants to shake hands with an opponent's coach, he should wait until later, after everyone has calmed down and has regained their composure. I think a good time would be at the completion of the event, be it a dual meet or tournament.

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