These are the one or two point matches that make even the best of us tense. It is, however, up to the coach to prepare wrestlers for these kind of matches, and if he does an effective job his wrestlers should triumph most of the time. Here are my general instructions to my wrestlers when the score is close:

- **Keep your mouth shut and look over at every break (referee's whistle) for coaching help.**
- **Stay focused on basic techniques and push your opponent into making a position mistake.**
- **Force your opponent into a position where he is basically unfamiliar (refer back to a scouting report, if possible).**
- **In the neutral position, if you can't get your opponent opened up for a takedown get him called for stalling.**
- **On top on the mat, be ready to kick him out and attempt an immediate takedown.**
- **Never waste energy chasing, lunging, or worrying--just be persistent.**

When your wrestler is in a match against an opponent who maintains a solid, albeit defensive position at all times, especially in the neutral position, a last resort strategy is to stall him out. Here, your wrestler attempts to convince the referee to warn and then penalize his opponent for stalling. This can be done only when the opponent is in the neutral or bottom position, and some acting may be involved.

In the neutral position the official has to see the opponent backing up or blocking. Therefore, teach your wrestlers to stay in a solid stance and push their opponent across the mat. Don't misunderstand. They should never charge or chase their opponent; instead, they should make contact, preferably with an inside control tie up, and shove their opponent backwards. They may even take half-shots to imitate aggressiveness and make the opponent sprawl or back up some more. Remind your wrestlers not to lunge or take full shots because this type of action could be easily countered by an experienced wrestler and at best end up as a stalemate. Your wrestler must keep pressuring into his opponent without making a position mistake or getting caught himself in a takedown attempt.

If the opponent is on the bottom, he can be called for stalling if he makes no honest attempt to escape from or reverse the top wrestler. To stall him out here, your wrestler, if he cannot turn him for nearfall points, will have to rotate from side to side repeatedly and make exaggerated gestures as if looking for an opening for a pin hold. It is hoped the official will interpret your wrestler's lack of success on top as a sign that the bottom man is clamming up and not really trying for an escape or reversal and call him for stalling. Of course, your wrestler also has the option of kicking him out and going takedowns with his opponent.

Officials are not mind readers; they cannot know for certain that your wrestler is only pretending to be offensive. The objective is to get the official's attention on the opponent and to encourage the referee to call him for stalling. Avoid as much as possible shouting out and demanding the referee call stalling because he may resent you officiating from the sideline and be more attentive to you than the action on the mat. Again, trying to get an opponent called for stalling is most often a last resort strategy in the neutral and top positions when other offensive maneuvers have failed. Like other strategies, this requires much effort and determination on the part of your wrestler.

Also at many dual meets and tournaments fan noise can be so loud that verbal instructions to your wrestlers often go unheard and unheeded. This is the main reason that in any close match, my comments are always brief and calm. I also recommend you use signals.

I use my hands as much as possible instead of my voice since no crowd can ever drown out the message I deliver that way. For example, both thumbs up means, "You're doing fine, keep trying the same technique." Lifting and dropping my hands palm down toward the mat means "Ride him and look for the pin." A tap on my leg and then my neck tells my wrestler to ride with the legs and use the power half. Extending one arm forward repeatedly with a flat palm down means I want my wrestler to shoot or attack the legs. Grabbing my ankle suggests my wrestler should do the same to his opponent on the bottom.

If I do shout it often is only to remind them of the score, the remaining time ("Short time"), or their proximity to the boundary. I want them focused on the opponent, not any yelling from me or the fans. I think this shift away from a dependency on me to guide them through each step of a match gives them confidence through any match.

You can develop your own signals or imitate mine. I know a coach who calls out numbers to indicate the techniques he wants his wrestlers to use in match--for example, #1 refers to a single leg attack while #2 means they should attempt a double leg. His thinking is that his wrestlers' opponents won't know what to expect. Whatever signals or verbal cues you choose, be sure you preview them frequently at practice prior to any competition.

There is no guarantee that by following these actions your wrestlers will win every close bout, but they will always be competitive in their matches. The keys for them are to avoid panicking, to stay focused on using proper technique, to listen for coaching, and to be persistent and on the attack. If they do all of this, they will enjoy success more often in a close match.

*Keith Manos has authored 3 books; "101 Ways to Motivate Athletes," "101 Wrestling Drills and Games," and "101 Strategies for Coaching Winning Wrestling." These books can be purchased at www.coacheschoice.com.*