When the season plan is in place, you begin focusing on individual practice sessions. The practices you develop should be consistent with your objectives and time of the season. For example, during mid-season, my team has winter break and few or no matches, so practices become the wrestlers' number one priority. The team goes back to work on fundamentals, and I adjust the training to correct problems I've seen in the first four to six weeks of competition.

In high school, you have a shorter break, but I recommend doing much the same thing. Schedule fewer or no opponents during this time so you can adjust your training and practice schedule. Maybe you need to make line-up changes, allow injured athletes to rest and rehabilitate, or develop a more positive attitude. With careful planning and wise use of this valuable time period, you can get the edge needed to achieve great things in the second half of the season and during post-season, when it really counts.

**EARLY SEASON PRACTICES**

The first two or three days of practice should be learning experiences, more so for coaches than for athletes. Most coaches don't realize this fact and take control right away, trying to teach their wrestlers too many things in too little time. What coaches should do during the first few practice sessions is supervise and observe, not try to teach.

Through close observation and proper evaluation of wrestlers at this time, you can make better decisions for individuals and the entire team. I recommend spending this time filling each weight class and dividing up your team into smaller groups according to individual needs. For example, certain wrestlers may be great in the standing position, but need some help with their technique in the bottom position. Your initial observation will also help you determine which wrestlers have little or no experience so that you can help them stay injury-free and put them with other wrestlers against whom they can have some success.

If available, assistant coaches can be assigned to each of the groups to provide maximum individual instruction. I use a curtain to partition the groups from one another and for some privacy whenever the team has to share the facility with another group. You also can use a curtain to isolate individuals or activities that could be distracting to others.

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**Dan Gable** stands as one of the United States’ greatest collegiate and Olympic champions. As head wrestling coach at the University of Iowa from 1977 to 1997, Gable won the Big 10 Conference Championship in each of his 21 seasons. He also won an unprecedented 15 NCAA Wrestling Championships, including nine straight from 1978 to 1986.

As coach of the 1984 Olympic wrestling team, Gable led the United States to seven gold medals and two silvers and was named “best coach.” An Olympic wrestler himself in 1972, Gable dominated the field, going unscored upon in six matches to take the gold.

Now serving as assistant to the athletic director at the University of Iowa, Gable has been inducted into both the Olympic Hall of Fame and the National Wrestling Hall of Fame, and in 1996 he was listed as one of the top 100 U.S. Olympians of all time.
The initial analysis of the team should include evaluation of these seven essential ingredients of good wrestling:

- Standing wrestling
- Underneath wrestling as well as coming out and keeping the opponent's legs out
- Strength
- General conditioning
- Flexibility
- Nutrition
- Attitude

I make a chart and rate each wrestler on these attributes and then combine the information for a composite look at the team. Remember, these are minimum characteristics for wrestling, a starting point. If your team has some deficiencies, it's best to learn about them at the outset, so you can correct them as quickly as possible.

Standing Wrestling

In standing wrestling, leg attacks are by far the most common and most successful for winning wrestling. Two of Iowa's all-time greats, Jim Zalesky and Rico Chiapparelli, came into the program with heart and the desire to be great. They both had great scoring tactics; however, many of their skills were from the defensive position. Although they had somewhere success, it wasn't enough to set them apart from many of the nation's best. They both worked extremely hard and developed offensive leg attacks that were dependable in tough situations, which consequently put them with the elite of wrestling.

Along with the offensive leg attacks comes the defense tactic of keeping people off your legs. A wrestler does so by having good hand control, head and shoulder positioning, and blocking skills. A wrestler with a good stance and good motion can perform these skills. By doing so correctly, a wrestler will score, usually with go-betwixts or snapdowns. These tactics allow for a constant ability to score whether it be offensive and/or defensive.

Underneath Wrestling

The second category, the underneath position, needs to be mastered also. Oftentimes, a dominant wrestler could have this area as his weakness simply because he might not often end up in this position. As coaches, we need to save some part of every practice for this area. I sometimes find this area is a problem for my team because I coach to dominate and usually that means the offensive takedown area and top position.

The best technique to master in the bottom position is the stand-up done with correct hand control. Keeping one's opponent's legs out of yours is the best skill to use while standing up. Sit-outs, switches, and rolls are also easy techniques to learn to be able to help the down position. A combination of all of these tremendously aids your escaping ability. The sit-out with good hand control is probably the easiest escape to learn. Wrestlers must also know how to remove opponents' legs from theirs and/or escape from opponents' legs when the opponents have a firm grasp. Not giving your opponent anything to work with is the best solution most of the time.

In regards to learning how to escape, a great example in Iowa wrestling was Bruce Kinsel. Bruce was one of Iowa's hardest workers. His workouts were legendary, and his intensity and conditioning were phenomenal. The one problem was his underneath position, and the rules at this time put you in the bottom position for either the second or third period. Against the really good wrestlers he sometimes would get ridden for the whole period, therefore, neutralizing his intensity and conditioning.

Coach J. Robinson perfected a sit-out for Bruce, so no one could ride him. All his hard work was finally able to pay off for him; his winning percentage jumped greatly with the development of a single skill. Once his escape was perfected, he finished first in the nation, winning the Most Falls trophy and the Most Outstanding Wrestler award his senior year. He pinned everyone in the Big Ten and NCAA Championships his senior year.

A combination hip-heist movement from underneath is the skill that needs to be perfected in escaping. This skill also is extremely helpful from a defensive position on takeowns as well. When used after the initial counter, it becomes an offensive scoring maneuver. Like a good takedown, the best escape/reversal to use is the one that works.

Next Issue: Strength

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