

# ...on the Ultimate Sacrifice Sport

By Dr. Bill Welker

**W**hat I'm about to share with you are factual events that only wrestlers will truly understand. It is the story of my personal sacrifices as a high school wrestler in Pennsylvania which is only a microcosm of what all committed matmen in my day experienced.

As a wrestler, I never thought about the "time sacrifice" I made during my four years as a high school student-athlete. In my day, the school year began after Labor Day and ended before Memorial Day. That equates to nine months. Our wrestling season started at the beginning of November and concluded at the end of March. That's five months of the school year. So, what's the point? Well, over a four-year period, my fellow wrestlers and I spent 20 months of training and competing. Thus, we had only 16 months in those four scholastic years to relax and enjoy – less than half of our formative high school days.

But there were other personal sacrifices as well!

As every devoted wrestler of my day, to be in top condition, we had to watch our weight. It was the belief of that time that to be in the best physical condition possible a wrestler had to lose as much weight as possible. In the 60s we didn't know any better and coaches had no medical research on proper dieting. So, we utilized any and all dietary methods to make weight. Again, we didn't know any better. It was the culture of wrestling back then. Today, this is no longer the case; everyone is now educated (coaches, parents, and wrestlers) on proper nutritional eating habits.

## **Back to the past**

It couldn't have been a worse time of year to watch our weight; we also had to endure "enjoyment" sacrifices. While our fellow classmates celebrated those Thanksgiving meals, we had to eat lightly to maintain our weight. Then there was the holiday season. If you never wrestled, you would never know or even understand what we had to sacrifice and endure.

We had to practice (and, of course, watch our weight) between Christmas and New Year with a tournament in between, while other athletes and students were enjoying the festivities and the luscious food that is associated with that time of year.

In February, Valentine's Day was another bummer when it came to calorie-ridden chocolate delights for us wrestlers. But we again endured.

If you haven't noticed, I have yet to mention the grueling part of wrestling – competition – week in and week out. After six weeks of honing our wrestling skills and conditioning ourselves for a sport that requires physical training far beyond any other scholastic sport, we spent the next three and a half months competing.

The road to states was a four-week elimination process. Unlike today's matmen, who could move to the next level if they placed high enough, we had to win every match (absolutely no losses) if we wanted to be crowned a state champion at Penn State's Rec Hall.

Of all the scholastic sports of which many athletes compete in today, none will ever compare to the extreme physical conditioning that dedicated wrestlers display to succeed in the mat sport.

I challenge anyone to prove me wrong that wrestling is the most strenuous scholastic sport. Should you try to do so, you better do your homework, because I have for over 50 years.

## **... on Yesterday's vs. Today's State Champions**

Since the mid-1970s, there has been a minor debate amongst wrestling patrons regarding past and present state champs. In Ohio, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania, there has been the question, "Were our champions before states were broken into divisions (based on school-size) more worthy to boast their achievements than our present state champs?" Let's take a look at both situations.

## **The One Division, No Loss, State Champions**

To begin with, these champions could not lose at any stage of the elimination process. Runner-ups and top place winners did not advance. One loss and you were history. It was like second place in a gun fight.

Many also argue that there was much more pressure on the wrestlers to win -- every match -- from sectionals to

states. And they have a point.

Again, the reality of competition was quite simple, you couldn't relax for a second, or you were dead as far as winning the coveted prize. If you fell short at any level, you could go home and eat all you wanted -- because the party was over. I know; it was the format that I had to deal with as a competitor of those days.

## The Multi-Division, Loss-Forgiving, State Champions

Advocates of this set-up have some very convincing arguments as well. First of all, and I have to agree - how many times have the best two wrestlers in the state come from the same local area. Shouldn't the loser be allowed to continue? Good point.

Furthermore, with the state elimination process being broken down into school-size divisions, it gives wrestlers from much smaller schools the opportunity to also become state champions. This is another reasonable assumption.

Finally, by taking all place winners to states, far more participants are given the opportunity to still become state champions.

Personally, and I am definitely biased, the original format suited me just fine. When I won states during the dark ages, if I would have known there was another state champ at my weight class, I would have graciously approached him and said, "Ya wanna wrestle?"

One veteran mat enthusiast made a very excellent observation. He told me, "Bill, when you wrestled it was much tougher to get to states. Now, with many more wrestlers at the state competition, it's tougher to win states."

The debate goes on.

## Wrestling Words of Wisdom

*"The actions of men are the best interpreters of their thoughts."*

- John Locke

*Dr. Bill Welker a former Pennsylvania State Champion, is a nationally recognized authority on amateur wrestling who has published hundreds of articles and two best-selling books (The Wrestling Drill Book, 1st & 2nd Editions) on the subject in which 1000s of copies have been sold nationwide. His drill book can be purchased at [www.Amazon.com](http://www.Amazon.com) or [www.HumanKinetics.com](http://www.HumanKinetics.com).*

