

## **From the Gridiron to the Wrestling Mat**

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As the high school football season winds down the feelings inside most high school wrestling coaches turn to the anticipation of the upcoming season. Unfortunately, many wrestling teams at the high school level struggle for establishment. Coaches are faced with reality. To field a solid wrestling team requires 14 athletes from the mighty 103 pounder to the massive 285 pound heavyweight. Barely a wrestling coach in the country would fight against having one more body in the practice room. But, the football team in most high schools looks like a ripe orchard of prospective wrestlers to that same coach. The question is though, how can I get those football players to come out for wrestling?

In comparing the two sports the transition from football to wrestling should be a natural move for high school athletes. However, the lack of knowledge and true understanding of the sport of wrestling can be an obvious barrier for many youth. The kids in American society are more apt to know about Kurt Angle's for-show struggles in the WWF, then his epic battle to win the gold-medal in freestyle wrestling in the Olympics. If a coach wants to get football players to move from the gridiron to the wrestling mat, they need to breakdown just how closely the skills of wrestling can translate to success on the football field.

Of course, when a coach is trying to convince football players to take a shot at wrestling one of the common myths is that they'll have to lose weight. Kids who haven't wrestled will often have heard horror stories of wrestling weight cutting. Essentially, the coach should make it clear that cutting weight is not necessary. The message from the coach should be the opposite. The goal should be to make football players and wrestlers in general bigger in size, stronger in body, and stronger in mind. Wrestling's purpose is to build the stature of its competitors. To do that a participant does not need to cut weight.

Once a coach has the ear of the football team, and assures the players that wrestling is not about cutting weight, then the coach can begin to educate athletes about the skills that translate between sports. Coaches can wow high school students with names of numerous football players who improved their abilities and refined their toughness by training on a wrestling mat.

But, the deeper message to the kids should be wrestling requires total body control deepening skills that can be used in a variety of sports. Not a group of muscles in the body is overlooked. When a competitor steps on to the mat he/she takes responsibility for the development and coordination of every square inch of their body. Make yourself a wrestler and you'll learn skills and thinking that will boost your performance in every challenge, both physical and mental, that you undertake in life. Wrestling is training for life and we want you to be a part of it!

When a wrestling coach takes a look at every position played on the football field, skills that are

important on the wrestling mat leap off of the gridiron. If a football player is serious about working their way to greatness, enlighten them about the skills that the wrestling experience can help them with.

Running backs have a storied history of a wrestling connection. For example, before Ricky Williams won the Heisman Trophy for the Longhorns of Texas, he battled World Champion Stephen Neal on the wrestling mat. Surely the skills of wrestling played a part of his football success.

Envision a running back trying to blow through the line of scrimmage. The explosiveness in the legs, the jukes and fakes, the stiff arm, the body control, and the balance carry the runner for yards after contact to the end zone.

Then, transfer all of those skills on to the wrestling mat. For example a wrestler's shot when done correctly is a coiled spring exploding through an opponent, done chiefly with the legs. Undoubtedly a picture of Cary Kolat's powerful legs would be enough to convince most people that wrestling can build power.

The jukes and fakes meant to leave a tackler in the dust are very closely associated to the same level changes, and motion meant to take an opponent out of position. Speed is an asset in wrestling and football. A season on the mat will make any participant quicker and more explosive.

A running back carries the ball tucked tightly to his body. Carelessness or a weak grip often results in a fumble. Daily in wrestling, competitors build a powerful grip. The farmer grip forearms are essential for a wrestler to find success on the mat. Dan Hodge, a famed wrestler from Oklahoma, often surprised fans at wrestling tournaments by squeezing an under-ripe apple into mush with one hand. If he was a running back surely he would've had a solid grip on the pigskin.

Finally in a running back frame of mind the ability to maintain your feet and shed a tackle are amazingly similar to wrestler's ability to downblock or crossblock. Kevin Jackson, National Freestyle Coach for USA Wrestling, often shows wrestlers how to extend one leg back and off the ground and drop a hand to the mat while leaning his chest forward towards the mat. Commonly before a football game running backs warm-up practicing the exact same skill only while holding a football and switching it from arm to arm. Fighting off a tackle is done every day in wrestling; wrestlers just call it defending a takedown.

Go to the other side of the ball, and generally regarded as the fiercest player on the gridiron is the linebacker. The player that sheds off lineman, finds the ball, and lays out big hits has a reason to step on the mat as well. Ray Lewis, All-Pro Linebacker in the NFL, often credits wrestling for heightening the toughness needed to be a great linebacker.

The skills are obvious again, the ability to fight with your hands is seen in linebacking as in wrestling. The quick pursuit mirrors that of a lightning fast shot. And finally, if a linebacker truly loves hard-nosed contact, then of course he'd want to test his ferocity on the wrestling mat.

Olympic Champion Brandon Slay's ability to drop his hips and blow through his opponent resembles the powerful football tackles that he perfected playing under the lights in the football-crazed state of Texas. His shot often resembled a freight train compared to a methodical step-by-step technique. If a linebacker wants to improve his toughness wrestling will bring out the best in him.

Often offensive linemen are overlooked for the intelligence and precision required to complete their assignments. To make a play spring clear for big yardage takes the efforts of the group exploding out of their stances down in the trenches. Mentally a lineman has to assess the defense and make the proper reads. Gap or seam, linebacker or double team and what was that snap count again?

The quarterbacks call cues the explosion, and the o-lineman takes the precise steps called from his read of the defense and powerfully makes contact driving into the defender. That's what is going through the offensive lineman's head, but it is remarkable how many of those skills wrestling could help refine in a lineman turned winter-wrestler.

Football coaches are often frustrated and stymied by an Adonis of a lineman that it is a mental mush. "He just can't learn his plays or get to the right spot", might be a football coaches assessment of the lineman that should be better than he's showing.

However, if that lineman tests himself in wrestling he'll learn the abilities to assess and attack during his wrestling campaign. Athletes on the mat develop "mat-awareness", that really is the ability to recognize and remember the actions needed to attack or counter from a specific position. A wrestling scramble is a live-Rubik's-cube, requiring quick perception and adjustment in a close contact setting. Neither sport should be overlooked for the thoughtfulness it requires.

Once the snap is taken a lineman's footwork is supposed to have precision to attack a proper angle. Similarly, the shooting and defensive skills in wrestling develop precise footwork and the focus of attacking at the right angle. Once an athlete learns where to put his feet, speed is the next essential element. Speed, strength, and explosiveness are constantly called upon on the wrestling mat. A high school football coach should want his linemen to work daily on these skills. There is no better place to get training for the next football campaign for an offensive lineman than challenging himself on the wrestling mat.

Whether the player is a massive lineman or speedy d-back there are skills on the gridiron that can be improved by participating in wrestling. Seeing and relating the daily development of those skills is a good way to recruit more kids to wrestling.

Wrestling coaches often ask football players to try out wrestling. A similar reply is often forthcoming; "I'm going to lift to get big for football" is the all-too-familiar response. Coaches know that there are many more skills needed in football to be successful than just raw power. Every football player has a variety of skills that they need to refine in order to be a top rated player. The agility, the level change, the motion from a powerful stance, the assessment skills, and fierceness in close contact are just a few

of the transferable skills from the wrestling mat to the football field. A player that just wants to focus on getting stronger will unwittingly overlook all of the other skills needed to excel for the next season.

A coach who can breakdown football skills and note how they are used in wrestling has a better chance at gaining access to more potential wrestlers. If a player wants to refine his skills so that they are more successful on the football field, then by all means encourage them to take it to the mat.

Instead of proffering wrestling as an intimidating sport, coaches should encourage prospective participants to view wrestling as an essential key to greater physical and mental development. The skills transfer perfectly between the sports and most wrestling coaches already know that wrestling can be a positive life altering experience. Good luck in bringing more athletes into the wrestling community. After all, wrestling is training for life.