

Part 1: Building a Champion - The Wrestling Season

by Jon Gums - Dakota Grappler

When I started to write these articles I tend to draw inspiration from other coaches, I read articles and sometimes books by "the successful" wrestling coaches. This time I dug deep into two Olympians. First South Dakota's Randy Lewis, and then Legendary Retired Coach John Smith

Wrestling is a sport where preparation, mental toughness, and mastering the fundamentals are just as important as raw physical ability. A successful season requires not only drilling techniques but also developing the mental resilience to handle intense situations on the mat. Each match, each practice, and each moment is a chance to refine skills and prepare for the ultimate competition. Let's break down what it takes to dominate a wrestling season from start to finish.

Practice with Purpose

A wrestling season is long and demanding. From the initial conditioning in pre-season to the peak competitions near the end, every wrestler must train with a clear purpose. It's not just about drilling moves but drilling them at full speed, under pressure, and when you're fatigued. This mirrors the realities of a match, where the body is pushed to the brink, and technique must hold strong despite exhaustion.

"The will to win is important, but the will to prepare is vital." — **John Smith**, former Oklahoma State coach and six-time World/Olympic champion.

Mental Training

Mental toughness separates great wrestlers from good ones. Throughout the season, the mind must be conditioned just as intensely as the body. It's about training your mind to stay calm and confident under stress and to visualize success. There's a mental shift when stepping onto the mat, going from practice mode to competition mode. Developing that competitive mindset helps you stay focused and resilient, no matter the situation.

"You've got to believe in your preparation, and you've got to believe that what you're doing today is enough for tomorrow." — **Randy Lewis**, Olympic Champion.

Embrace a Growth Mindset

Every wrestler starts the season at a different point, but where you begin doesn't determine where you end up. The willingness to learn, adapt, and grow throughout the season is vital. Mistakes will be made, losses will happen, and obstacles will arise, but the best wrestlers learn from every experience. They replace doubt with determination, knowing that each day offers a chance to improve.

Process Over Results

Success in wrestling is about focusing on what you can control—the process. Wins and losses will come, but what matters is refining your technique, pushing through the grind, and trusting that consistent effort will yield results. A strong wrestler focuses on executing each move correctly, knowing that small, steady improvements add up to significant gains by season's end.

Mastering the Mental Game

A wrestler's thoughts are a powerful tool. In practice and competition, it's crucial to be aware of your mindset. When calm and relaxed, note what mental states lead to positive outcomes, and strive to recreate that mindset under stress. Wrestling can be a mental battle, and those who master their thoughts—especially in the toughest moments—often come out on top.

The Danger Zones

The most critical moments in a wrestling match often come when you're tired, not eating right, or frustrated. These are the "danger zones"—when mistakes are made, or when opponents are waiting for you to break. Training under these conditions helps prepare you to maintain focus, perform fundamental moves with precision, and stay mentally sharp when the pressure is highest.

Fundamentals Win Matches

No matter how advanced a wrestler becomes, the fundamentals remain crucial. Throughout the season, it's essential to reinforce basic coordination, strength, and mobility, then focus on refining core wrestling techniques like takedowns, escapes, and defense. Wrestlers who master the basics early in the season lay a solid foundation for high-level competition when the stakes are highest.

Part 2 next week I will break down these ideas a bit more.