

IS WRESTLING A HIGH-RISK SPORT?

In a counterintuitive twist, the “world’s oldest sport” can be safer than many other sports and activities

By Thomas P. Houck

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the NCAA and many athletic governing bodies categorized sports into three levels of risk: low, moderate, and high. In this new era of social distancing, sports such as wrestling, basketball, cheer, field hockey, soccer, volleyball and lacrosse received the most onerous rating. The logic was simple: physical contact and close proximity to others is “high risk.” Unfortunately, the analysis didn’t go much deeper.

Of course, it’s debatable if such activities actually represent “high risk” for young persons. It probably would have been more accurate to conclude they pose a higher risk than other sports. But even so, an obvious question is whether such disparate sports should be lumped together. Is it possible some are less risky and should be viewed in a different light?

After careful analysis, it’s clear that wrestling is unique and can be conducted more safely than other popular sports. This counterintuitive conclusion may be surprising at first, but it’s easy to understand. Although wrestling features extensive physical contact, other critical considerations significantly reduce risk.

This conclusion is reached by objectively assessing risk in two major ways (see attached chart). First, what is the physical proximity of teammates and opponents during competition? How well can social distancing be maintained?

Second, how many persons would face exposure from an asymptomatic athlete? In other words, what is the risk of an outbreak involving large numbers of people?

It’s the second risk factor that is extremely favorable for wrestling since it’s the only individual sport on the list. In a dual meet, for example, a wrestler comes in contact with just one person. Even if he/she warms up with a teammate (which isn’t even essential), the potential spread from an asymptomatic person is extremely limited. This is in stark contrast to the other sports.

In addition, since public health officials continue to advocate enhanced cleaning and handwashing, it seems evident the virus can be transmitted by touching balls, equipment, or playing surfaces. Once again, wrestling is unique because there are no balls or equipment. Even mats can be cleaned after each match (try doing that on artificial turf!).

Finally, wrestlers are well-known for being in great physical shape (i.e., presumably less susceptible to virus effects than the general population) and have a long history of emphasizing hygiene and cleanliness, two critical factors in minimizing the spread of COVID-19.

For these compelling reasons, wrestling should not be broadly grouped with other “high-risk” sports when considering how and when youth athletes practice and compete. This isn’t to suggest wrestling programs return to “business as usual.” Changes should be made to practice routines and competitive events. But by applying both innovative and common sense approaches, coaches and event organizers are definitely able to run responsible events that minimize risk and exposure.

Comments on the Sports Risk Matrix Ratings

Physical Contact:

- 3 Field hockey, soccer, and lacrosse received “3” ratings because there is predominantly incidental contact on a large playing field. Volleyball also receives a “3” as players are in closer proximity but rarely make contact with each other. Teams presumably could have group meetings in a socially distanced manner on the sideline.
- 4 Basketball players are often extremely close to each another and even make contact on a relatively small court. Football has more physical contact (e.g., tackling, blocking) but players have a modest degree of protection from pads, helmets, etc. Social distancing for group chats or huddles also seem more problematic for these sports.
- 5 Cheer and wrestling have the most physical contact without protection, although wrestlers can wear face masks (e.g., commonly used when dealing with a facial injury such as a broken nose).

Exposure to Other Athletes:

- 1 Only wrestling is able to limit exposure to a very small group of persons, even just one athlete.
- 2 No sports were rated as a 2.
- 3 Cheer and volleyball do not interact with persons on the opposing teams. Thus exposure is limited to a modest number of teammates.
- 4 Field hockey, lacrosse and soccer share similar attributes, including the number of players on the field and roster size. Unlike cheer and volleyball, these athletes can make contact with opposing teams. The same holds with basketball, although the number of players involved is smaller.
- 5 Football has the most athletes on a roster, and there is direct physical contact with the opposing team.