

FEATURE: Coaching Youth Wrestling, by Ken Chertow
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I have been working with young wrestlers throughout my competitive and coaching career. During high school, I would stay after practice to work with our kids program. I encourage youth coaches to invite the varsity wrestlers to work with your local kids program. When training young wrestlers, the more feedback they receive the better off they will be. The varsity wrestlers can serve as role models for the younger wrestlers and will also benefit from helping the kids. Also, encourage the youth wrestlers to attend varsity matches and vice-versa. Perhaps even develop a big brother program.

Every summer during college, I ran my own day camps, worked at Penn State Camps and took a team to Junior Nationals. I worked with kids in all different age groups, and these summers proved to be very beneficial and rewarding experiences for me. I enjoyed my work with the kids tremendously and saw how much the wrestlers benefited from their time on the mats. Summer is an excellent time for skill development. The kids are not busy with school and preparing for competition. The emphasis is on skill development, learning new techniques and having fun.

I encourage you to organize open mats and day camps in your community during the summer. Send your serious wrestlers to away summer camps. Summer training camps were instrumental to my development and have played an integral role in the development of my top students. Upon graduation from Penn State, I expanded my local day camp into overnight camps. I spent my entire summer organizing workouts for kids. This was much different than being a counselor. As a counselor, you only have to supervise the kids and do some instruction. There is no planning involved. As the coach/camp director, you have to plan the workouts and technique curriculum so that it is both well organized and interesting. This is a very important facet of coaching young people. I realized there is much more to coaching than just teaching moves. You must organize your instruction in a progressive fashion, not only during the course of a workout, but throughout the season. If you do not have a systematic game plan, kids will get lost. Incorporating periods of review into your practices and repetitively drilling what you have taught is of paramount importance.

During my five years coaching collegiate wrestlers at Ohio State and Penn State, I also conducted USA Wrestling Kids Clubs. I would work with my college age wrestlers throughout the day and my youth wrestlers in the evenings. Working with both age groups on a daily basis helped me learn the differences in the ways you should train and motivate wrestlers of varying ages. To run a successful "Kids" (14 and under) program, you must treat the wrestlers differently than you would when running a college program or even a high school program. High school wrestlers fall somewhere in between depending on the program and the individuals. The following are some basic suggestions for how to get the most out of your kids program.

1. Emphasize skill development. Do not rush to teach them more techniques than they need or can remember. Drill the "Basic Skills" as outlined by USA Wrestling on a daily basis. Not only the stance, motion, etc., but also the Greco skills as outlined USA Wrestling's Greco Coaches Syllabus and some folkstyle bottom drills like hip heists and building your base. Often use games to incorporate the basic skills into your practice.

2. Shadow drill frequently. Kids need to learn to control their own bodies before they can control someone else. Plus, everyone in the room is drilling intensely, simultaneously, rather than half of the guys being partners. Shadow drilling is fun for kids and good conditioning. Kids use their imagination well. This can help you lead into teaching visualization skills. Kids are never too young to dream about becoming a champion.

3. Be enthusiastic and give positive feedback frequently. Kids need your leadership and guidance and thrive on positive feedback when they do something well. Also, give parents positive feedback if their child is doing well. They need to stay motivated as well and hearing their child is doing well gives them a big boost.

4. Encourage parents to get involved. I welcome and encourage parents to watch my practices. I also welcome them to get on the mats and help. The more personal attention your students receive, the quicker they will improve. At tournaments, I invite the parents to sit in the corner with me. This is a positive experience and sometimes I have many kids competing at one time, so the parents need to be prepared to be an asset in the corner rather than a detriment.

5. Run a tight ship, but let the kids have fun. Take your instructional phase of practice seriously but not too serious. Good teachers and coaches make their instruction interesting for the kids, so they pay attention and have fun. Incorporate stories and interesting analogies into your instruction. Carefully structure the practice so the kids benefit as much as possible, and also make time for a couple of "games" every practice. I have made up a variety of fun games that incorporate wrestling skills and conditioning into them. If the kids get through a segment of practice and do really well, we often play a game for a couple minutes as a reward before moving on to next segment.

6. Incorporate live wrestling throughout your practice. In a traditional practice most the live wrestling is done at the end of practice, and some kids programs I am familiar with do not let the kids do much live wrestling at all. Kids like to scrap and can only absorb so much instruction at once, so break up your practice with segments of live wrestling. I often let my students wrestle a live match after warming up and doing some basic skill drills. It seems to settle them down and tire them out a little, and the result is that they pay better attention when I teach. Give it a try. Live situations are also an essential training tool. They allow you to

teach important technique points between starts and the kids enjoy them because they get to wrestle.

7. Utilize videotape for instruction and motivation. Beginners need to see what it looks like when a move is executed correctly in competition, and edited highlight tapes can prove to be very motivational.

8. Teach more than just technique. Emphasize to your wrestlers the value of sportsmanship, poise, goal setting, discipline, work ethic and the other important "lessons of life". My wrestling coaches had a greater impact on my character and life than my school teachers. Instill the lessons of life in your students because they will undoubtedly help them in everything they do throughout their lives. Kids look up to you more than you will ever realize.

I left full time college coaching in 1994 to devote more of my time to working with young wrestlers. I expanded my Gold Medal Summer Camps and local Home Training Center so I could coach kids full time. I still work with wrestlers of all ages regularly, but I probably enjoy working with young wrestlers the most. I believe a big reason that I have been successful working with the little guys is that I truly enjoy being around them. I enjoy the challenge of getting kids to learn the game and develop a passion for our sport. Undoubtedly, the kids who excel when they grow up are the ones who love doing it. All work and no play at a young age, is not always a good formula for success later on. Don't get me wrong, my students and I value winning. However, skill development and fun take on equal importance.

The trick is to plan and conduct structured, reasonably intense practices, so that your students get good while still enjoying the training. Then they start to win and really enjoy the sport. Let's face it, no matter what the activity or age group, winning is more fun than losing. Our Gold Medal School Youth Program motto is " Work Hard and Have Fun on your way to #1!" Good Luck on your quest for success!!