



Wrestling Matters

January 22, 2008

Protecting The Integrity Of New York State Wrestling

While commenting on the concept of State Regional Tournaments for the New York State Wrestling Championship process, some people have raised the concern that New York's better wrestlers will take advantage of this multiple-entry system by forfeiting (defaulting) once they have qualified in order to avoid the risk of injury or defeat in the championship finals and consolation finals of the qualifying tournaments. When this deliberate "tanking" occurs, they argue, sectional and regional tournaments will suffer – not to mention the very integrity of the sport, its athletes, and coaches.

New York is the only state in the nation not to have multiple entries advance from the final qualifying tournament to the state finals. Every other state has a multiple entry system so if "tanking" actually occurs it must be a widespread problem that already exists everywhere else in the country.

To help evaluate the validity of this concern, the Coaches Association (NYSWCA) looked at available information from other states to determine if this "refusal to compete" was in fact a widespread problem. Data in three states was reviewed: Michigan, Illinois and Pennsylvania. It is worth noting that when reviewing the results from these states, the time of "injury default" is not always listed making it impossible to tell if the default (forfeit) occurred during the bout or the bout was never wrestled.

Michigan's 468 schools are divided into four divisions; then further subdivided into geographic regions and then districts within regions. The top four wrestlers advance from the districts (preliminaries) to the regional tournaments where the top four then advance to the state finals tournament.

The NYSWCA reviewed two regional tournaments in each division (eight tournaments in total). There were no forfeits in the finals or the consolation finals in any of those Michigan Regional tournaments.

Michigan seeds their district tournaments, pairs their regional tournaments (first round district champ meets another district's 4th place finisher), and uses a "placement formula" for their state tournament. In Michigan, like most states, the state bracket is released after the regional qualifying tournaments.

The absence of forfeits in Michigan's case can be attributed partially to their seeding/pairing system and partially to MHSAA's "requirement to compete" rule, which says in part: "A forfeit without evidence of illness or injury will cause a wrestler to become disqualified".

Illinois has 397 wrestling schools divided into two divisions (AA and A). Both divisions have regional (preliminary in this state) tournaments with the top three advancing to four sectional (final qualifier) tournaments. From there the top three advance to 12-man bracket at states.

There are 32 regional tournaments in Illinois, with a total of 448 championship matches. Of those 448 bouts, 19 ended by injury default in 2007. Those 32 regional tournaments then qualify to 12 sectionals, with a total of 168 championship matches. Of those 168, eight ended by injury default in 2007.

Illinois also seeds their preliminary (regional) tournament, and then pairs their sectional and state tournaments. The pairing system favors regional and sectional champions with first round byes while 2nd and 3rd place finishers from opposite sections wrestle to meet one of the regional champs. The seeding/pairing systems discourage anyone who might be inclined to "tank" championship matches.

In Pennsylvania, 497 schools have wrestling split into two divisions (AA and AAA). District tournaments are allocated multiple entries for the state regional qualifying tournament based on the number of schools in the district. At the four regional tournaments in each division, regions are allocated entries for the state tournament's 16-man brackets. In this state, the results from PIAA's famous District 11 were reviewed. Often called the "essential heart of Pennsylvania wrestling", District 11 has national powerhouses Easton, Northampton, Nazareth and Parkland among its participating schools. Historically, District 11 sends dozens of wrestlers through the regionals to the state tournament so it is a good place to take a closer look at the theory that there would be a tendency for the best wrestlers to "tank" the finals.

In the 2007 AAA District 11 Tournament, where the top six qualify for the Northeast Regional Tournament, there was one medical forfeit (5th place) and in the AA tournament there was one forfeit (3rd place) resulting from a disqualification in a previous bout. In the Regional tournaments where the top three and top five respectively advance to the state tournament there were no forfeits.

The pairing/seeding for the PIAA State Tournament follows a set of rules that would discourage tanking the finals in the regional tournament including: no regional champions meet in the first round; regional champions and runners-up do not meet until finals; only a minimal number of regional champions can meet in 2nd round and occurrences are evenly distributed among all regions; and returning champions in the same weight classification are seeded, if necessary.

In summary, the data reviewed did not reveal any evidence of tanking in multiple-entry state tournament qualifiers in other states by our sport's elite athletes. As these states have shown, the use of appropriate seeding/pairing procedures and, if necessary, formal rules requiring an athlete to compete, would safeguard competition and protect the integrity of the state tournament process.

Looking at the issue from another angle, New York's elite wrestlers are no more likely to tank championship bouts either. The results of sectional class tournaments in Section III and Section V show the same experience as the states discussed earlier. In these class tournaments, multiple wrestlers advance to the Sectional Inter-Class or Super Sectionals Tournament where only a single wrestler is guaranteed entry to the state tournament. Yet, over the past four years, the total number of wrestlers who qualify and then forfeit their remaining bout(s) averages one per year in all the class tournaments combined in each section.

Like the states studied, these sections used a seeding/pairing system that would discourage tanking behavior.

Finally, something like Michigan's "requirement to compete" is not without precedent in New York should officials believe such a thing is necessary. NYSPHSAA already has a "commitment to compete" policy in at least one other sport.

Multiple-entry state qualifiers would be fairer to the athletes and good for the sport in New York.

Rob Sherrill contributed to this article. He is one of the top high school wrestling analysts in the country and a long-time columnist for W.I.N. Magazine. He also publishes the "American High School Wrestling Yearbook".