

CAPRICIOUS RULES AND ARBITRARY DECISIONS

by Glynn A. Leyshon

When Carl Schuhmann stood to receive his gold medal at the Athens Olympics of 1896 he became the first wrestling champion of the modern Games. He had defeated five opponents in the single weight category under which wrestling had taken place and had done so under some vague rules which few, if any, of the competitors had experienced before. In terms of weight classes, things are different today. There are ten weight classes and two styles of wrestling, Greco-Roman and freestyle; thus 20 gold medals are contested rather than one. In terms of rules, however, there remains a problem.

The rules under which wrestling is conducted are controlled by the international federation, Fédération Internationale de Lutte Amateur (FILA), but the organization was not formed in the early years of the Games and this lack led to horrendous disputes over rule interpretations. Teams would arrive at the Olympic site without any idea of what the rules would be when the competitions began. Even the rules under which Schuhmann became the first Olympic wrestling king are not known exactly. [*Editor's Note: see below*] Kamper lists the competition under Greco-Roman while FILA indicates they were freestyle. Peter Irdén's comprehensive book on international wrestling, *Documentation of International Wrestling Championships: 1896-1976*, lists the 1896 results with the Greco-Roman section. What is even more surprising is that Greco-Roman rules (the Russians refer to them as "Classical") are neither Greek nor Roman. They were developed in the Rhone Valley of France in the late 1800's.

FILA (or actually its forerunner, the International Wrestling Federation) did not become established until 1922, and the first set of published rules was not available until 1937. So basically, all Olympic competition up to 1948 was held under any rules that the host country could foist off on the visitors; said rules, of course, would be to the advantage of the host-country wrestlers.

This bizarre situation led to some bizarre results. One of the worst competitions for oddities was that of 1912. At the Stockholm Games, one weight class was devoid of a champion for the only time in Olympic history. Oh, yes, there were second and third places, but no first place medal was awarded. The reason being that in the battle for the gold medal among the 29 entries, the final came down to Anders Ahlgren of Sweden and Ivar Bohling of Finland. They struggled for an incredible nine hours only to tie in the 90 kg. weight class. Probably for political reasons, the officials would not make a decision so the tie stood. Ruling that there had been no winner, the officials granted the pair silver medals and declared the first place void. The oddities did not end there.

As if a nine-hour match was not enough, later there was an even longer bout at middleweight in 1912. Alfred Asikainen (FIN) and Martin "Max" Klein (EST) grappled and panted and sweated through 11 hours on the mat. During the bout there were stoppages for lunch, morning prayers, and, one assumes, for the relief of bodily functions. How could one train for an 11-hour match? The Swedish rule committee obviously had no feel for the athletes, officials, or spectators.

The style of wrestling in Stockholm was limited by the host nation to Greco-Roman. There had been freestyle competition at St. Louis, which is usually described as Catch-as-Catch-Can. The Americans, for example, eschewed Greco-Roman for the more widespread and popular freestyle wrestling, and it certainly must have influenced the officials in St. Louis in 1904 that all the entries were Americans, none of whom had wrestled under any other rules than Catch-as-Catch-Can. But without an overseeing body to standardize the regulations, the

Stockholm people imposed their own version on things. What effect did this have on competitors from foreign countries? Quite a bit.

A member of the U.S. team of 1912, William Lyshon of Philadelphia, wrote a bitter report:

“ . . . I never saw so many injustices and so many rules broken in my life. I saw for myself how the judges looked the other way whenever one of their fellow country men was pinned down by both shoulders. And, how when it was necessary, they qualified a fall-down of a Swedish wrestler as a ‘roulade.’ . . . There was a complete and arbitrary method of seeding whenever it was a question of a Swedish wrestler having a chance . . . ”

The Swedes, in fairness, did not have a good hand to play when confronted with being the host country. Where were the rules to come from? After settling arbitrarily on only the Greco-Roman style, a committee drew up the rules for the competition on the following basis: “Each country had its own rules and great differences can be found. The committee had to choose among the material at its disposal those regulations which it was thought might be of use in drawing up the proposed rules for the competition.” What a situation for both competitors and referees; to step into the Olympic Games and compete under or apply rules that were unknown to them until the competition began.

Things improved somewhat in subsequent years if one can judge on the basis of a dearth of 11-hour matches, but bitter disputes were constant in reference to just what was expected in the rules and what actually took place. In 1924 at the Paris Games (still, of course, without any codified rules for wrestling) the Canadians among others were upset. Coach Sydney Chard made the following statement to the AAU of Canada:

“ . . . with a Swedish referee our man (Jim Trifunov) lost the bout on a rolling fall after having all the best of the battle. I protested vigorously that this was contrary to the rules which state very clearly that, ‘a rolling fall shall not count.’ The Secretary-General, Mr. Percy Longhurst, informed me that there could be no appeal against the referee’s decision.

The general organization and the conduct of the tournament was deplorable and it is our opinion that a letter of censure should be forwarded to the Permanent Olympic Committee with the following recommendations:

1. That a regulation wrestling mat be used, not a soft bed mattress.
2. That the mat be extended three feet (91 cm.) all around.
3. The time of the bout be changed from 10 to 15 minutes - 5 minutes overtime.
4. That an interpretation of the rules be issued illustrating the holds that are barred and sent to each country.
5. That officials be selected in advance and meet together before the tournament to clear on rules and the committee be responsible that an interpreter be present.

unless we can be sure of proper arrangements being made and competent and impartial officials being charged with officiating that it would not be advisable for Canada to enter a team. ”

By 1948, things were marginally better if one can judge by certain reports. There was still, however, an unclear picture of the rules as far as North Americans were concerned caused perhaps by lack of translation. Consider this report written by the manager of the Canadian team of 1948:

“The last book of rules for wrestling was published in 1937 by the I.A.W.F. and there were no qualifying interpretations for the various rules which resulted in most of the English speaking countries getting the wrong conception of the rules. It is easily understood that there could be some disagreements in the verdicts of the judges due to the misunderstandings on the rules. This was evidenced by [Maurice] Vachon’s bout where the South African judge gave the decision to Vachon by a wide margin and the two continentals awarded it to the Turk [Adil Candemir]. . . .

For the advancement of wrestling, the AAU has been requested to give the wrestling committee authority to publish the Olympic Rules without deviation except in the most necessary points, and to include therewith proper interpretations of these rules as shown at the 1948 Olympics.”

It is truly hard to believe that a sport could be carried on for so long as it evidently was, at both local and international levels without a set of rules. How could this have happened?

The explanation lies probably in the universality of wrestling. The so-called “new rules” drawn up in 1937 were a combination of Swedish, Hungarian, and Finnish folk styles. Every country of long standing developed a folk style of wrestling: **glima** in Iceland, and **Cumberland** and **Westmoreland** style in northern England are two examples, and they are not dissimilar. A standard grip around the body (or in glima, onto a leather harness) is taken and it cannot be released. Then each man tries to throw the other to the ground. Since the hold is restricted there are a limited number of ways that this can be accomplished. Thus, a wrestler from one style could readily pick up the rudiments of the other. There are, after all, only so many ways to lift, trip, or even grip a man. Refinements such as time, weight classes, conditions that constituted a fall, etc., were usually treated as insignificant compared to the real task of subduing one’s opponent. What was true of glima and Cumberland styles was true of all folk styles. It was rough and ready wrestling, usually without weight classes, and usually without written rules. Rules were absorbed by osmosis while competing in village battles. Naturally, when one went from the village to the international arena, he relied on what he knew best which was the wrestling reactions ingrained in him by countless bouts at home. Little wonder there was squabbling. Is it over now?

No. The tradition of squabbling over interpretation lingers. Disputes begged for intervention and mediation in the early years as novice referees attempted to translate and then learn the correct interpretation of the rules which were written in a foreign language (French being the tongue for the rules as first presented). The mat officials, anywhere from one to four at different times, often looked to a higher authority to bail them out, when a situation became “sticky.” The practice became accepted. This unfortunate legacy continues. Rarely does a major competition such as the Olympics or the world championships pass without at least one intervention from on high whether requested or not. This demeaning and paternalistic approach to officiating was evident at the 1993 World Championships when a FILA member came out of the stands to reverse a decision already made on the mat. It astonished and bewildered athletes, officials, and spectators, but it stood. An echo of the early years of capricious and arbitrary rules and decisions.

Editor's Note

From the masters thesis *The History of the United States Olympic Wrestling Team from 1896 to 1920* by Harvey Lee Abrams, June 1979, Southeast Missouri State University, Appendix A lists the rules for the 1896 competition. However, as Leyshon states, these rules hardly describe the type of wrestling permitted. Abrams states that the competition was Greco-Roman, but unfortunately does not give his source for the rules or for that statement. Rules 1 and 2 discuss the format of the competition. Rules 3-6 are as follows and are the only information we have about the 1896 Olympic wrestling rules:

3. It is forbidden, during wrestling, the holding of the head [sic {Abrams}] and the genitals, the tripping, the holding of the throat, the choking [sic {Mallon}], the biting, the hitting and the use [sic {Abrams}] of the nails.
4. Wrestling is conducted with open palms. It is forbidden to close the hand together while it is permitted to hold the wrist in order to tighten a hold on the opponent.
5. It is forbidden to wrestlers to wear shoes during wrestling.
6. A loser is declared when by falling in [sic {Mallon}] his back both shoulders touch the ground simultaneously.

Commentary by Donald Sayenga

Glynn Leyshon's primary theme is one which I support wholeheartedly. One of the earliest students of the ancient Games, the British classical writer, E. N. Gardiner, noted in 1910 that "wrestling is the oldest and most widely distributed of all sports" from which he concluded that modern agreement upon rules necessarily would be achieved only with great difficulty. Solution to the problem thus far has eluded wrestling enthusiasts, with the dismal result that three separate competitions in Greco, Judo, and Freestyle are conducted in the Modern Games, with a fourth style proposed from time to time. Leyshon mentions a rules dispute as recently as 1992 at the World Championships in Toronto. I believe it is timely for ISOH to publish a critique such as that written by Mr. Leyshon. I make four comments about his essay:

1) Although it is appropriate to evoke the image of a contemporary medal ceremony, winners in 1896 received silver medals, not gold. Also, Schuhmann wrestled only twice to become a winner. The rules adopted were apparently those from previous Panhellenic celebrations. Two of the five entrants were Greek and therefore likely to have been familiar with the rules. The 1896 rules are available in complete form [see above]. In 1968 when I studied the 1896 Games during a visit to Athens, I was able to obtain a copy of the exact rules translated into English for me by the Hellenic Olympic Committee. There were only six simple rules. In my view they were quite succinct, not "vague." The 1896 Greek rules allowed leg-holds, but otherwise resembled the French classical style. In my view all the record books should more correctly list the champions in sequence from 1924 onwards. The

1896-1920 champions should be listed in separate groups, or else in one group with separate identification of the local rules applied. [*Editor's Note:* Abrams list of the 1896 rules (above) were copied from those given him by Sayenga, including the misspelling of choking (chocking) .]

2) FILA was organized at Berlin in 1913 under German leadership, having been proposed as an outcome of protests against the 1912 Swedish Olympic Rules Committee. No progress was achieved on unified rules due to the outbreak of warfare from 1914-18. Lacking unified rules for use at the hastily organized Antwerp Games, FILA was reconvened under Swiss leadership in the summer of 1921. Rules for two separate styles were adopted in 1921, and all Olympic "wrestling" since 1921 has been governed by official FILA rules in two different styles which are actually almost identical. In 1964, the Japanese introduced jacket-wrestling using the Judo rules synthesized by Dr. Jigaro Kano, which were adopted outside of FILA, at least in part because of his stature within the IOC. The use of two sets of FILA rules for 70+ years has been accompanied by at least one major international dispute over rules interpretation at each of the Games with the possible exception of 1932.

3) In the Ancient Hellenic Games, wrestling contests continued until there was a winner. In 1912, the Swedish Rules Committee decided to use time limits, according to the official report, edited by Erik Bergvall. Competitors were allowed into one weight-class only, with one hour as a general time limit, but three judges had to agree on the winner at the end of an hour. If the judges disagreed, 30-minute overtime periods were ordered, one after another, until the judges could agree. When only three competitors remained in a class, a fresh start round-robin began. The total number of preliminary bouts was around 300. In each of the five weight classes there were at least seven matches lasting the full hour or more. In the round robin for second place at 75 kg., twenty overtimes were called before Klein of Russia was named a winner. It was in this match where the men actually competed on the mat for eleven hours without interruption except for a rest break every 30 minutes, I believe this 11-hour match preceded the round robin match at 82½ kg. where a draw was declared after 16 overtimes (nine hours total) between Ahlgren of Sweden and Böling of Finland. Bergvall's official report states "it was necessary for the victor to have beaten his opponent, and as neither man would give in to his adversary, there was nothing else to be done than to declare both men winners of second prize." At heavyweight, a similar marathon was underway when Jensen of Denmark was forced to default due to severe sunburn after about three hours!

4) Although the complaint of William Lyshon (a minor American competitor who was not really a contender in 1912) is dignified by being quoted by Sandor Barcs in *The Modern Olympics Story* (Budapest, 1964, p. 67) the really big 1912 dispute at Stockholm was between the Swedes and Finns. One of the contemporary Swedish accounts (S. Warelius) states the argument was over whether or not the Finns should be allowed to use "painful arm twisting."

Summary Comment: The Olympic Wrestling Championships present a notable failure of international rulemaking. In addition to the Canadian complaints cited by Leyshon, I could add quite a few others I have collected. Way back in 1896, Baron de Coubertin lamented the existing sports situation as he found it: "Partout, j'avais rencontre la discorde, la guerre civile etablie les partisans ou les adversaires de telle ou telle forme d'exercice . . ." Unfortunately, after almost a century of Olympic wrestling, not much has changed in the combative mat sports.