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JOURNAL ARTICLES

Speal on Wrestling

Stance, Shot, and Handfighting

Chris Spealler



Wrestling has long been known as one of the oldest sports in history. Martial arts originated from the very simple sport of two individuals combating directly against one another, one on one. One of the things that attracted me to wrestling to begin with is the idea that it was “fair.” As a kid I was always into sports but I was a total shrimp. My two or three strides on the soccer field were equivalent to my friends’ one. (Granted, I didn’t know the POSE method then, and am only just learning it now, but something tells me that may not have helped.) I was constantly trying to keep up with the rest of the crowd.

Wrestling creates an even playing field. You are matched up with someone your same weight, so neither person has a size advantage over the other, and there are no excuses and no one to blame for outcomes. No person to pass the ball to, no one to call out for not paying attention, no one else to blame for your mistakes. Some people mistype wrestlers as “jocks” or “blockheads.” But I think you will find that the majority of wrestlers are actually fairly bright. At elite levels, wrestling is like a chess match—the competitors are playing a few steps ahead, anticipating movements and playing an intricate game of trying to make the opponent make a mistake they can capitalize on to score.

If you look at today’s MMA fighters, the athletes who seem to pick up on things the quickest and be most

successful have a strong wrestling background. I think the main reason for this is the body awareness that experienced wrestlers develop. Wrestlers know when they are in good body position and when they are in bad position, which may lead to a hurting. The amount of work that is involved in becoming a successful wrestler is in my opinion unparalleled by anything else. In my (limited) experience in grappling and jiu-jitsu, there is quite a bit of downtime compared to the high pace of wrestling. A seven-minute match where you are putting everything you have into it is like a hard, fast, recordbreaking “Fran” bout. Wrestling provides people with an amazing work ethic, solid body awareness, good strength to weight ratios, and the ability to transfer their skills into other athletic arenas. If you measure it up against the ten general physical skills that constitute fitness (cardiorespiratory endurance, stamina, strength, flexibility, power, speed, coordination, accuracy, agility, and balance), it stands up pretty well, both requiring and developing all of those elements.

In this month’s article we will be going over some of the most basic skills that wrestlers require. We will talk about the stance, the shot for a takedown, and handfighting. There is obviously both offense and defense in wrestling, but I think the best defense is being offensive in a controlled way, so let’s start there.

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Speal on Wrestling (continued...)

Stance

There are basically two different versions of the stance. The most common you will see is the staggered stance, which some call “sugar foot,” where one foot is slightly in front of the other. Typically it will be the dominant foot in front. I am right handed, so it would be my right foot forward most of the time, but you want to be able to switch up which foot leads. The other is the square stance, which means that there isn't really one foot in front of the other. Both are effective, and you will see the best in the world switching between them at various times for different purposes.

The staggered stance is beneficial when you encounter opponents who may tend to attack only one side of the body. If you lead with the opposite leg, it makes it more difficult for them to rely on their favorite “bread and butter” moves. If you are trained onedimensionally to only stand in a staggered stance and only with the same foot forward all the time and can't switch sides, it can be a downfall. Everything in wrestling needs to be as multidimensional as possible. This is where the square stance can be effective. Both feet are fairly even together and you aren't encountering any kind of mobility loss or limiting your options for directional movement. The square stance can be a safer option since there isn't one leg or side of the body farther out in the stance. Both provide a solid base for sound offense and defense, but as you get to know your weaknesses and your opponents' strengths, you have to become more versatile and use a variety of stances, so learn and practice all the variations.



Stance



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Speal on Wrestling (continued...)

Shot

The penetration step, or “shot,” is the basis for your takedowns and offense. If this isn’t solid, you’re in trouble. The video of this will provide a better explanation of this than my words probably do, but the most important thing you need to do in preparation for a shot is to lower your level. One of the biggest downfalls inexperienced wrestlers have is the failure to lower their level. If you try to attack your opponent and dive down toward the mat, you are already at a huge disadvantage. On the other hand, if you lower your level first and attack straight forward or even while moving in an upward motion, you are more likely to get the takedown and in much less danger of getting scored on yourself.

For the shot, then, you’ll begin in a nice low split stance and then drop forward onto your knees, with the knee of the trailing leg (the left one for most righties) making ground contact just before the leading knee does. Your head and chest stay high and facing forward (not down). From there, immediately shift your weight to the leading knee and “roll” through this position up onto your feet by sweeping the trailing leg and swinging it through (forward and up) into essentially a lunge position out in front of you. Stand up onto that foot and pull the right one through and forward to return you to a sugarfoot stance, again with the right foot leading and the left foot trailing.

Shot



Handfighting

Another mistake that’s common for novice wrestlers making is attacking without any kind of set-up, or just attacking without a purpose. “Set-ups” come from handfighting. Handfighting is being in contact with the opponent while trying to get good positioning for a shot. It causes your opponent to get off balance and/or make mistakes, and it allows you to create angles for your shot. Set-ups include “clubbing” the head, arm chops and pops, head positioning, and even calculated

shots that you may or may not get. One of the keys to handfighting and wrestling in general is that you continue to move your feet at all times. Think of it as trying to hit a moving target as compared to a stationary one. If I’m handfighting with my feet stuck in one place, I’m an easy target for my opponent and I’m not doing much to get him out of position.

Handfighting



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Speal on Wrestling (continued...)



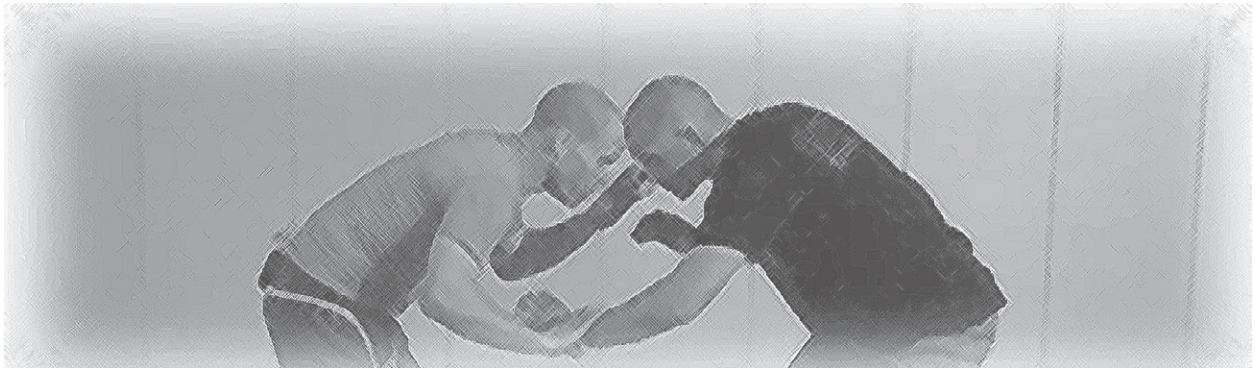
Defense and shadow wrestling

Let's not forget defense though. An opponent's attack should be stopped by four lines of defense: head, hands, forearms, and hips. First and foremost is the noggin. If you have good head positioning, that is already making it difficult for your opponent to attack effectively. If he does try to lower his level as he ought to, you just lower yours as well, and your head is still the first thing in the way. The second line of defense is the hands. Suppose your opponent gets good head position on you and takes a shot before you can move. Your hands should already be up and prepared to be the next line to stop the attack. Third is the forearms. If the attack gets past my head and hands, I still have a chance to lower my level and get my forearms up and in the way of an attack. Finally, the last line of defense is the hips. Although they are the strongest part of the body, you don't want your opponent to get to your hips. If he controls your hips, he is controlling you. The hips can be used to "sprawl" to the mat, bump the opponent out of position, or create pressure to defend attacks.



Defense





So how do we get more efficient at all of these skills? One of the most basic ways is to shadow wrestle. This is simply you moving on the mat. Learn how to move effectively while in your stance and never crossing your feet. Move forward, backward, side to side, circling. In the midst of all this foot movement, you are taking shots, sprawling and mimicking what you would be doing in a match. Another excellent approach, and much more fun, is handfighting with your partner without any attempt to take each other down. The object is to get good head position and inside ties, head clubs, fakes, and any set-up that may make him susceptible to being scored on.

In future articles we will look at takedowns, escapes, and breakdowns as well as how to incorporate CrossFit into our wrestling training and conditioning. If you are involved in MMA, a strong foundation in wrestling will provide you with a better base to build from for your fighting. Wrestling is one of the most difficult and rewarding sports and can provide us with an excellent level of fitness and appreciation for how easy basketball is—just don't ask me to be on your team.



Chris Spealler, a.k.a. "Speal" runs [CrossFit Park City](#) in Park City, Utah. He was a Division I college wrestler at Lock Haven University in Pennsylvania. Graduating in 2002, he finished two matches away from becoming an All-American at nationals. Speal now enjoys feeding the competition bug with CrossFit and training with one of his wrestling team members, Eric O'Connor ("Eric O") on the side.