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Back on the Mat

International Olympic Committee votes to reinstate wrestling for the 2020 and 2024 Olympic Games. While wrestling officials celebrated the victory, they said the work has just begun.

By **Andréa Maria Cecil**

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FABRICE COFFRINI/AFP/Getty Images

FILA members and wrestlers celebrate the announcement that wrestling would be included in the 2020 and 2024 Olympic Games.

Wrestling's back in—at least for the next two Olympic Games.

After seven months of collectively holding its breath, the worldwide wrestling community can not only take a sigh of relief but also jump for joy.

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Interim President Nenad Lalovic guided FILA to its victory after his predecessor, Raphael Martinetti, resigned after a no-confidence vote when wrestling was omitted from the Olympic Games.

At its 125th Session, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) on Sunday morning voted to include wrestling in the 2020 and 2024 Games over softball/baseball and squash. Wrestling received 49 votes, while softball/baseball got 24 and squash tallied 22.

After outgoing IOC President Jacques Rogge made the announcement, members of the International Federation of Associated Wrestling Styles leapt from their chairs inside the room where the vote took place, shouting, cheering and hugging one another. The federation, known as FILA, dictates wrestling's rules.

"It's a great day for wrestling, that's for sure," said Mike Moyer, executive director of the National Wrestling Coaches Association, as he stepped outside a noisy New York City café whose patrons were celebrating the news.

"In a lot of ways, that vote, it's a testament to the resolve in the wrestling community. It's hard to describe—it's a fraternity like none I've ever been part of," he said.

**"That vote, it's a testament
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—Mike Moyer

"We Have Made Mistakes"

In February the IOC announced wrestling would not be part of the Games after 2016. Three months later, the IOC Executive Board shortlisted wrestling as one of three sports for possible inclusion in the 2020 Games.

At the heart of the issue were the rules. For years, the IOC had asked FILA to change them to make the sport more exciting and easier to follow for viewers. Finally, after losing a spot in the Olympics, FILA listened. The IOC agreed to consider wrestling for the 2020 Olympics only after FILA

changed the rules to make for two three-minute rounds—instead of three two-minute rounds—simplified scoring and added women to its executive committee.

In general, the rule changes focus on encouraging more aggressive offense. The wrestler who scores the most points will win rather than the one who wins two out of three rounds. Pushing an opponent out of bounds is now worth less than a takedown, and penalties for stalling have become more costly.

Nenad Lalovic became interim president of FILA after the IOC announced wrestling would not be part of the 2020 Games and previous president Raphael Martinetti resigned after a no-confidence vote. On Sunday morning, Lalovic answered questions from IOC members. He said the organization had evolved.

“We have made mistakes. We admitted it, but we decided to listen and learn, and this is the only way to be (a) partner of the IOC and a member of this family. We are aware of our mistakes and it will not happen again,” he said. “To make our sport more competitive, we have to rebuild our house, our federation. The federation is just an accessory of the sport itself. We are developing the world wrestling plan.”

The rule changes were a positive step said Rich Bender, executive director of USA Wrestling.

“The sport of wrestling is way better today than it was (in February 2012,” he noted.

Because there isn’t a professional level for high-school and college wrestlers to work toward, Sunday’s vote was that much more important for the cultivation of the sport, Bender explained.

“The Olympic gold medal is the pinnacle of wrestling, and ultimately it’s the inspiration for young boys and girls to try the sport, to participate in the sport. Certainly that recognition provides incredible opportunity for wrestling to grow its significance around the world,” he said. “It provides an incredible level of credibility to our sport. It’s certainly a designation worth fighting for.”

Despite Sunday morning’s victory, wrestling’s fixed spot at the Olympics no longer exists. FILA must campaign to include wrestling in each Games after 2024.

“This is just the beginning. We need to get back in as a core sport,” Moyer said, referencing the 25 sports that always are part of the Olympics. They include track and field, gymnastics, weightlifting and judo. Up until this year, wrestling was on that list.

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—Rich Bender

“Lesson learned. We have to continually evolve and innovate and make sure we keep our sport current and relevant,” Moyer said.

Bender echoed those statements.

“The first part of this mission’s accomplished,” he said. “The work’s just beginning now.”

Bender continued: “There’s a big expectation within the International Olympic Committee family that wrestling will push itself forward (and continue) to look at ways to conduct the sport better. There’s a big task yet to undertake, and I think our sport’s up to the challenge. For a few minutes we’ll celebrate a victory, and (then) get to work tomorrow for the sport of wrestling to take it to the new level.”

No Shock, Just Disappointment

When wrestling made it onto the list of three sports for possible inclusion in the 2020 Games, Kevin Klipstein said he knew the sport would be a tough competitor. Still, the USA Squash CEO expressed doubts about the sport’s evolution.

“It’s difficult to transform a sport in just a few months. Hopefully they follow through on a lot of changes that they’re suggesting,” he said of FILA.

Although it’s up to the IOC to determine the right mix of sports, Klipstein said the promise of adding a new sport was not met.

“It’s a bit of an odd situation where (the IOC was) opening up the Games for new sports, yet (it) didn’t add any new sports, and that’s very disappointing,” he said.

As it stands, squash meets all the IOC’s criteria for an Olympic sport, Klipstein added, and boasts roughly 3 million players in the country.



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Each of wrestling, squash and softball/baseball made its case for inclusion in the 2020 Games before the IOC, and wrestling won the vote handily.

"I don't think the issues are really on squash's side. I think we'll just continue to do what we're doing," he said. "We do feel like we have momentum and that eventually we'll get a chance to compete in the Games."

E.T. Colvin, president of USA Softball and North American vice president of the International Softball Federation, also expressed disappointed—but not surprise.

"We never really understood why they came up with taking wrestling out of it," he said. "We knew it was an uphill battle (for softball/baseball)."

Still, there's optimism.

"The thing that we can do now is we've got to become more visible," Colvin explained.

Championships typically have been held in places such as the Netherlands and Whitehorse, Canada, Colvin said, making it difficult to broadcast the sporting events or for fans to travel to them.

"The only thing north of Whitehorse, Canada, is the Arctic Circle," he noted.

"We've got to go to work and make those better events, make them more visible so that the IOC and the world will

be able to look and see that we're doing a better job. We don't want to give the appearance that this is an end-all decision or something that might kill the sport of softball or baseball," he said.

Softball officials also can better lobby the IOC, said Colvin, whose U.S. organization represents 200,000 teams.

"We're going to work through the (United States Olympic Committee) and other people and get the IOC to take a step back ... and see if they can change some things," he said. "Maybe there's no limit on the number of sports but the number of athletes."

Colvin added: "If we could get them to look at it a little bit different maybe we can get something to come about."

Sunday's loss just means harder work is ahead, he said.

"It's a setback, but it's not the end of the world," Colvin said. "We're gonna be OK."



About the Author

Andréa Maria Cecil is a CrossFit Journal staff writer and editor.