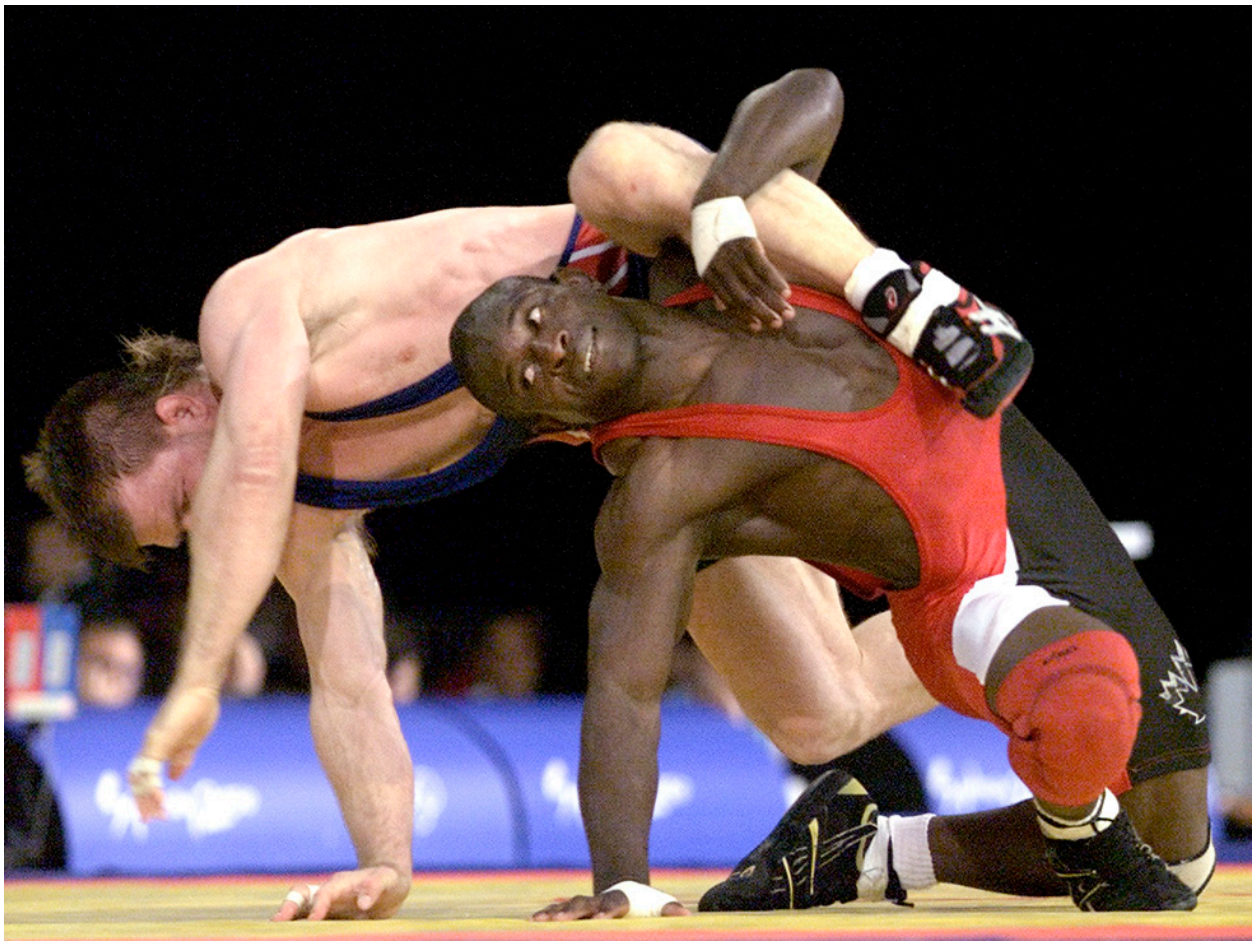

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Choke Out?

International Olympic Committee to decide fate of wrestling at the Games on Sept. 8 in Buenos Aires.

By Chris Cooper

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Toronto Star Via Getty Images

The announcement knocked the wind out of many wrestlers around the world.

In February, the International Olympic Committee, which organizes the Olympic Games, said wrestling would no longer be part of the international sporting event after 2016.

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Three months later, though, the executive board of the IOC chose wrestling as one of three sports for possible inclusion in 2020. Wrestling will grapple with squash and baseball/softball when the IOC makes its final vote on Sept. 8 in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Many thought the IOC's initial decision was financially driven: with a small and declining viewership, wrestling has never had top television rankings. The IOC's official stance was wrestling didn't provide enough opportunities for women, and that the rules—dictated by the International Federation of Associate Wrestling Styles, or FILA—were too hard for the viewing audience to follow. The real reason might have been entirely different.

After years of asking FILA to make its sport more exciting to viewers through rule changes, points reassignments and penalties for stalling the action, the IOC might have decided on a display of power.

Many wrestlers, current and former, have found their way to CrossFit, and some CrossFit coaches worry the exclusion of wrestling from the Olympics will cut opportunities for young athletes, killing scholarships and, eventually, the sport.

The Olympics are generally regarded as the pinnacle of competition, and the removal of the sport is in some minds a death knell for a discipline depicted in cave drawings dated as early as 7,000 B.C.

Wrestlers in CrossFit

LeRoy Gardner III owns CrossFit Soul Ruckus in Katy, Texas. Gardner was a collegiate wrestler in Minnesota and says the Olympic dream kept him focused in school.

"When I went to college," he said, "I had three goals: to be national champ, to position myself for the Olympics, and to get a degree. In that order."

Gardner used wrestling to keep him out of trouble through school and says without the potential for Olympic glory, wrestling wouldn't have had the same appeal.

"That was always the dream, out there on the horizon. It kinda pulls you," said Gardner, who achieved wrestling success to the collegiate level. "How many times in college do you feel like, 'Today's the day I want to go to the library and study'? None. You don't want to do it, but it's necessary, so you do it anyway."



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Gardner, a former collegiate wrestler, coaches both CrossFit athletes and competitive wrestlers in Texas.

"Like there's going to be a time when you don't want to do sprints in the morning, but you do it anyway. Maybe you're staying in, not partying. You have to be the exception, the weirdo. You have to do things that no one else will do, but you can see the payoff. Like CrossFit—there's no one telling you that you can be too good at pull-ups. Do more and benefit. Go find out, express whatever genetic potential you have."

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Now a CrossFit coach, Gardner applies much of the philosophy he learned as a wrestler.

"I try to get the athletes to understand—when you start feeling challenged, that's the beginning of getting better. That's when it starts. I tell CrossFitters and the wrestlers that I coach to hurry up and go get tired. That's where the magic is," he said.

Gardner uses CrossFit and wrestling to move athletes toward their athletic goals, but he fears that without the goal of the Olympics for wrestlers, many will quit the sport to pursue others.

"I've seen athletes forgo the best they could be in wrestling in order to play junior varsity football—third or fourth string. And these are people who are varsity athletes for wrestling in the area," Gardner noted.

Big Changes at FILA

Immediately following the IOC's decision to remove wrestling from the 2020 Olympics, FILA held a confidence vote on then-president Raphael Martinetti.

"Martinetti was antagonistic to the IOC. He had done some things that were overtly confrontational with the IOC. The new guy (Nenad Lalovic) has been more willing to engage

with the IOC. Now FILA is saying, 'How do we do better? How do we meet what you guys are asking of us before we lose it all?' I credit FILA for mobilizing fast after the decision was reached," Gardner said.

Under Lalovic's leadership, FILA moved quickly to change the rules for wrestling matches and accommodate the IOC's requests. The new rules encourage more aggressive offense. The wrestler who scores the most points will win instead of 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.

"I couldn't tell you the rules of wrestling in two minutes. It would take 15 minutes to explain the points. The IOC didn't like this system."

—LeRoy Gardner III



Chris Cooper

Taylor Rosario has Olympic dreams that might end with the Sept. 8 IOC vote.

"This decision recognizes the great lengths to which we are going to reform our sport and address the IOC's concerns," Lalovic said in late May in a statement released after the announcement.

The new rules will make viewing simpler for a television audience without wrestling experience. Because Olympic events are often broadcast for hours at a time, the IOC doesn't want viewers to change the channel when they see flat soles and Lycra.

"Maybe some of it is just putting FILA in its place a little," Gardner said. "Maybe we should change the rules to make it more media friendly. I couldn't tell you the rules of wrestling in two minutes. It would take 15 minutes to explain the points. The IOC didn't like this system and is saying, 'You'd better take us seriously.' We've corrected a lot of these (problems) in the last three months."

In Gardner's opinion, the IOC's initial decision to remove wrestling from the 2020 Games was a shot across FILA's bow. Play by our rules, or take your singlet and go home.

"We have to be more spectator friendly, not cryptic. A fan should know who's winning and why. That hasn't been the case the last two Olympic cycles," Gardner said.

IOC vice-president Thomas Bach on July 31 addressed FILA's changes in Berlin, Germany.

"I have the impression that the international federation (FILA) has understood very well the messages sent to them," Bach told the Foreign Press Association. "The international federation has drawn its conclusions. It is now here with a new president, new program and new ideas for the sport. That is why I personally believe that wrestling has good chances to come through the vote in September."



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Rosario (right) uses CrossFit to train for wrestling and finds she has better endurance than most of her competitors.

Olympic Sports?

Olympic sports are not set in stone, and many have been dropped or added over the years.

For instance, power boating was an Olympic sport in 1908, and tug of war was a sport from 1900 to 1920. Golf was last contested in 1904 but will be back in 2016. Baseball and softball were dropped after 2008.

After the 2010 Winter Olympics, in which the Canadian and American teams outscored opponents by incredible margins, women's ice hockey was warned that uneven competition could affect its status in future Games. Also in 2010, female ski jumpers petitioned the Supreme Court of B.C. to force the IOC to include women's ski jumping. They lost; the IOC said there are too few female ski jumpers to warrant inclusion in the Games.

The IOC determines which sports make the cut, with tangible and intangible aspects considered.

"To be on the Olympic program is an issue where you need universality as much as possible," IOC president Jacques Rogge said in a 2008 article on MLB.com. "You need to have a sport with a following, you need to have the best players and you need to be in strict compliance with WADA (World Anti-Doping Agency). And these are the qualifications that have to be met. When you have all that, you have to win hearts. You can win the mind, but you still must win hearts."

The IOC has put pressure on Major League Baseball to allow its players to participate in the Games to showcase the best athletes in the world, but professional athletes were actually banned from the Games prior to 1971.

Sports that are dropped from the Olympic roster often receive less government funding, as was the case with softball in Australia.

—Mike Warkentin



Courtesy of Roy Shoaf

Rosario is focusing on the Olympics rather than a college scholarship, a gamble considering wrestling's tenuous Olympic future.

Neither the IOC nor FILA responded to the *Journal's* request for comments.

Playing ball with the IOC appears to have helped FILA's case. After FILA changed from three two-minute rounds to two three-minute rounds, simplified its scoring and added women to its executive committee, the IOC agreed to consider wrestling for the 2020 Olympics. However, the sport's fixed spot in the Games, once thought unassailable, is gone. FILA will have to campaign to have wrestling included in the 2020 Games and every Games after that.

Taylor Rosario

One of the athletes training with Gardner at CrossFit Soul Ruckus is Taylor Rosario. In her first year competing, Rosario won the cadet (14-15) age bracket at nationals in Fargo, N.D., in July. Although only 14, Rosario was eligible to wrestle in the junior (16-18) category, in which she finished second in the nation against girls four years older.

Rosario's mother, Pam, credits CrossFit and Gardner's coaching for Taylor's success.



Courtesy of Roy Shoaf

"Taylor's a great third-round wrestler. When the others are gassed, she's turning it on," Pam said. "When freestyle wrestling changed to three-minute rounds, she was ready to go."

After her victory in Fargo, Taylor was quick to return to the gym and the mats. She does CrossFit both at Soul Ruckus and NHB CrossFit, where Pam coaches. Taylor chooses to compete primarily in matches that will position her well for an Olympic shot, rather than focusing on smaller, local folkstyle (aka "collegiate") matches—the quickest road to a scholarship. It's a risk she's willing to take in her pursuit of Olympic glory.

Taylor will be eligible for the 2016 Olympics but will likely be at her peak for 2020—if wrestling makes the cut for the Games.

"There's a difference in training paths between Worlds and scholarships," Taylor said. "Colleges look at your high-school career more. Worlds look at your career outside of high school."

High-school wrestling is folkstyle, while world-championship matches—and the Olympics—are freestyle.

"The Olympics are the biggest reward you can get from wrestling. If it were removed, I would still wrestle, but it wouldn't have the same impact. Some girls would quit the sport."

—Taylor Rosario

"The Olympics are the biggest reward you can get from wrestling," Taylor said. "If it were removed, I would still wrestle, but it wouldn't have the same impact. Some girls would quit the sport."

She continued: "Girls' wrestling is just starting to get popular. It probably has something to do with Clarissa Chung winning bronze at the 2012 Olympics."

Gardner worries losing Olympic exposure for wrestling could mean fewer opportunities for kids like Taylor. High-level matches could lose their luster and the collegiate scholarship system could suffer as a result.

"NCAA participation would definitely drop," he said.

Without the distant promise of the Olympics, the best athletes would simply switch to other sports, killing the feeder system for NCAA and World Championship wrestling in the U.S.

"The trickle-down effect is a much scarier proposition than just the short-term decision," Gardner said.

From the athlete side of the equation, Taylor can also see the looming threat to collegiate wrestling. She thinks participation at all age levels will decrease if wrestling is permanently removed from the Olympics.

"I could definitely see it happening. Scholarships are because of the Olympics. For girls, it's harder for us to get scholarships in the first place, but girls can get good wrestling scholarships," she said. "They'd think, 'If I'm not going to get a scholarship, why should I do this?' That would be when girls would start quitting."

The Match in Argentina

On Sept. 8, young wrestlers and their coaches will eagerly watch the news for the IOC vote on wrestling's fate for 2020. Teenaged hopefuls, and those in the development stage, could miss the opportunity of a lifetime if wrestling is cut from the Olympic program for even a single Olympiad. Because the Olympics are held only once every four years, an eight-year gap could mean that many miss their window.



Courtesy of Daniel Igali

If wrestling is out in 2020, some of Daniel Igali's young athletes might miss their chance at Olympic glory.

A vote to keep wrestling in the 2020 Games won't guarantee it will be in the 2024 Games. On the shortlist, wrestling will continue to fight for its presence at every Games. This fight is the biggest of Daniel Igali's career, and he's had some big ones.

Igali won the Olympic gold medal in 2000. Born in Nigeria and representing Canada, Igali beat Arsen Gitinov to stand atop the podium in Sydney, Australia. Wrestling created opportunities for Igali; now he's creating a better life for many youth in Nigeria.

Born in Eniwari, one of the poorest villages in the Niger Delta, Daniel—known by his birth name, Baraladei, in Nigeria—would literally have to wrestle his 19 siblings for a share of food. He was winning national competitions at the age of 16 and was given refugee status in Canada in 1994. He won the World Freestyle Wrestling Championships for Canada in 1999, and he won the country's first Olympic gold medal a year later.

Daniel Igali feels if wrestling were removed from the Olympics, it would be the end of wrestling in Nigeria.

Igali established the Daniel Igali Foundation almost immediately after his win in Sydney. He began securing funds for a school in the village of Eniwari and opened the doors to the Maureen Matheny Academy in 2006. The school is named after his surrogate mother in Canada. Kids—boys and girls—study and eat at the school. And they wrestle.

"We provide wrestling shoes and a mat for them to ensure that kids have the opportunity to go to school," Igali said. "I want them to be able to pursue that path, and if we don't have the Olympics, the drive to pursue that sport will be lost. It will become a recreational sport and it will lose its luster."

Igali's coaching helped a team of four Nigerians qualify for the 2012 Olympics, which had significant effects on their



Courtesy of Daniel Igali



Courtesy of Daniel Igali

In the village of Eniwari, Nigeria, wrestling represents a chance for a better life for many young students. That might change if wrestling is no longer an Olympic sport.

lives. Although they didn't make the medal round, they returned home as local heroes.

"A lot of young kids look up to them as role models. They have a lot more responsibility to lead lives that are exemplary because of it," Igali said.

The kids who attend Maureen Matheny Academy might be able to attend school elsewhere but would not achieve the same level of education. They would lose most opportunities for travel.

"It gets them out of their villages and into the cities," Igali said. "They would never have that opportunity otherwise, and that's just a start. The older ones are 14 now, and soon they'll get into representing their country in other countries. They all want to do it more than anything."



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Gardner and Rosario, along with the worldwide wrestling community, anxiously await the IOC's decision on Sept. 8.

The Nigerian government is focused on the Olympic Games. Its funding for projects like Igali's wrestling school is predicated on national glory. Igali feels if wrestling were removed from the Olympics, it would be the end of wrestling in Nigeria.

"There would be no funding from government. Then it would be very difficult for individuals to fundraise and pay to go to competitions," Igali said.

Igali's fame in Nigeria led to political office; in 2011 he was elected to the Bayelsa State House of Assembly. He also coaches Nigeria's national wrestling team. When he flies to Buenos Aires to petition for the continuation of wrestling as an Olympic event, Igali will have far more than medals on his mind: he'll be carrying the hopes of a host of young athletes. He's vowed to return to Nigeria victorious.

"I'm going to Buenos Aires on Aug. 28. I'll be there for a week, trying to rehearse what I'll say to the IOC," he said.

Igali's savage dedication to his cause—be it a gold medal, a school or a scrap of food—has led him to triumph before.

This time, he and the rest of the wrestling world will be fighting the IOC, as well as squash and baseball/softball. Only one of the three sports will be contested at the 2020 Games.

In September, the wrestling world—and thousands of CrossFitters—will be watching.

In or out?



About the Author

Chris Cooper is the owner of CrossFit Catalyst and a staff writer for CrossFit Inc.