



Best Off-Season Sports for Wrestlers

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Introduction

Wrestling is a physically demanding sport that requires athletes to be in peak condition, not only during the competitive season but also in the offseason. A wrestler's success on the mat depends on maintaining a balance of strength, endurance, flexibility, and mental toughness. Offseason training plays a crucial role in ensuring wrestlers remain competitive and continue to develop their physical and psychological skills (Caloglu & Yuksel, 2020). Engaging in complementary sports during the offseason is an effective way to stay fit and avoid burnout, as it prevents the overuse of specific muscle groups and offers mental variety.

Cross-Training Sports for Wrestlers

Track and Field (Sprints and Distance Running)

Track and field is an ideal cross-training sport for wrestlers, as it focuses on building both speed and endurance, two essential components of wrestling (Cieśliński et al, 2021). Wrestlers require explosive power, especially during the first few seconds of a match, when quick takedowns and movements can dictate the course of the encounter (Ozbay et al., 2019). Sprinting helps improve this explosiveness by targeting the fast-twitch muscle fibers (Jansson et al, 1990). which are crucial for rapid movements such as shots, escapes, and transitions (Maglischo, 2011). By engaging in sprinting exercises, wrestlers can enhance their ability to explode off the starting line, initiate attacks, and recover quickly after a period of intense effort.

In contrast, distance running focuses on aerobic conditioning, helping wrestlers build the stamina necessary to maintain high levels of intensity throughout a match (Tosun et al., 2025). Wrestling bouts, especially at the high school level, often involve prolonged periods of grappling, where maintaining endurance is essential to outlast opponents. Distance running enhances cardiovascular fitness and promotes efficient energy utilization, which helps wrestlers maintain focus and power throughout the match (Farzad et al., 2011). The stamina gained from distance running is especially beneficial in the latter stages of a bout when fatigue can impair technique and decision-making. Together, sprinting and distance running enhance a wrestler's conditioning by developing a combination of explosive power and sustained endurance, enabling them to perform well under various match conditions.

Football (Linebacker or Running Back Positions)

Football, particularly positions such as linebacker or running back, offers significant physical benefits for wrestlers, enhancing their strength, stamina, and mental toughness. Linebackers and running backs are required to demonstrate a blend of speed, power, and endurance, qualities that are directly applicable to wrestling (Nowak et al., 2025). The explosive

bursts of speed and physical contact involved in these positions mirror the movements and actions that occur during a wrestling match (Curby, 2005). In football, linebackers must be quick and powerful in their tackles, much like a wrestler needs to be explosive during a takedown. Running backs, on the other hand, require strength and agility to break tackles and maintain balance, paralleling the demands of maintaining control during a wrestling match.

One of the most important benefits of football for wrestlers is the development of mental toughness. Football is a highly physical, contact-heavy sport that often requires athletes to push through fatigue and endure pain, similar to wrestling. This aspect of football builds resilience, which is crucial for wrestlers who must face mental and physical challenges during a match. The ability to stay focused and aggressive in high-pressure situations is a shared characteristic between both sports (Yucel & Sebiha, 2016). Agility, quick decision-making, and physicality also play crucial roles in both wrestling and football. In football, linebackers and running backs must make split-second decisions on where to move next and how to react to opponents, a skill that translates directly to wrestling's dynamic and ever-changing nature. Practicing these skills in football helps wrestlers make faster, more effective decisions on the mat, improving their overall wrestling IQ and performance.

Judo

Judo, a sport that emphasizes throws, grips, and balance, is an excellent cross-training activity for wrestlers. The techniques learned in judo are directly transferable to wrestling, particularly in terms of body control and positioning (Çağlar, 2014). One of the primary skills wrestlers can gain from judo is the ability to execute and defend against throws (Osipov et al., 2019). Judo's emphasis on throws teaches wrestlers how to utilize an opponent's momentum to gain an advantageous position, similar to wrestling moves such as throws and hip tosses (Perrin, 2002). Additionally, judo teaches wrestlers how to maintain balance while executing powerful moves, which is crucial for controlling an opponent during a wrestling match.

Grips are another crucial component of judo that complements wrestling. The ability to control an opponent's hands, arms, and body during a match is central to both sports. Judo teaches wrestlers to establish dominant grips early in the match, giving them control over their opponent's movements. This ability to dictate the flow of the match is crucial in wrestling, where wrestlers continually strive to gain leverage and control (Drid et al., 2021). Judo's focus on balance also enhances wrestlers' ability to remain stable and maintain a low center of gravity, a crucial principle in wrestling when attempting to take an opponent down or defend against a takedown (Osipov, 2018).

Joint locks and submissions are additional techniques learned in judo that can enhance a wrestler's defensive and offensive skills. Although joint locks are not legal in wrestling, the ability to control an opponent's joints and body positioning helps wrestlers improve their overall control and positioning during a match (Caloglu & Yuksel, 2020). By practicing these techniques, wrestlers can better understand how to avoid being caught in vulnerable positions and how to exploit opportunities for attacks (Mikheev et al., 2002). Overall, judo provides valuable skills that complement wrestling by improving a wrestler's ability to move, balance, and control their opponent effectively.

Boxing and Kickboxing

Boxing and kickboxing offer several key benefits for wrestlers, particularly in the areas of cardiovascular fitness, footwork, and mental toughness. Both sports focus on developing speed, strength, and endurance, all of which are essential qualities for wrestlers. Boxing, in particular, enhances cardiovascular fitness by pushing athletes to maintain high-intensity efforts for extended periods (Podlivaev, 2010). In wrestling, matches often require bursts of energy that demand superior conditioning. By cross-training in boxing, wrestlers can develop the cardiovascular capacity to maintain explosive energy during extended grappling sequences, especially in longer matches or overtime situations.

Footwork is another area where boxing and kickboxing can greatly benefit wrestlers. Both sports emphasize agility, balance, and the ability to maneuver effectively in a confined space. In wrestling, maintaining proper foot placement and positioning is crucial for both offense and defense (Curby, 2005). Through boxing, wrestlers can improve their footwork, learning to move quickly and decisively while maintaining proper stance and positioning. This improves a wrestler's ability to execute effective takedowns, avoid attacks, and control the pace of the match.

The psychological benefits of boxing and kickboxing are equally valuable. Both sports require intense focus and mental resilience, as athletes must stay calm and composed under pressure. In boxing, athletes must continually assess their opponent's movements, anticipate strikes, and react quickly, a mental exercise that builds sharp focus and decision-making skills (Rushall, 2006). For wrestlers, this translates into improved mental toughness, allowing them to remain focused and make sound decisions during high-stress moments in a match. The ability to stay composed and execute moves with precision, even under pressure, is crucial for success in wrestling.

Swimming

Swimming is an excellent, low-impact, full-body workout that provides numerous benefits for wrestlers. One of the primary advantages of swimming is its ability to build cardiovascular endurance while reducing the risk of injury. Wrestling can be hard on the joints and muscles due to its high-intensity nature, but swimming allows wrestlers to maintain their conditioning without putting excessive strain on their bodies (Nurmukhanbetova & Muskunov, 2024). The buoyancy of water supports the body, making it easier for athletes to perform exercises that might otherwise be too taxing on land.

In addition to its cardiovascular benefits, swimming helps build muscle strength, flexibility, and endurance. The constant movement in water engages a wide range of muscle groups, which enhances overall muscle tone and flexibility. For wrestlers, increased flexibility is crucial for preventing injuries and maintaining fluidity in movement. Swimming also improves lung capacity, a vital component of endurance in wrestling (Curby, 2005). Wrestlers need to control their breathing during matches, and swimming provides an excellent opportunity to improve both lung capacity and breathing efficiency, which can enhance performance during high-intensity wrestling bouts.



Swimming's low-impact nature also makes it an excellent recovery tool for wrestlers. After intense wrestling practice or competition, swimming can serve as a restorative workout that helps aid in muscle recovery and reduce soreness. It provides a full-body workout that targets muscles not typically utilized in wrestling, helping to prevent muscle imbalances and promoting overall physical well-being.

Weightlifting

Weightlifting is an essential component of any wrestler's training regimen. Strength is a cornerstone of wrestling success, and weightlifting provides a structured way to build the necessary muscle mass and power. Key exercises for wrestlers include squats, deadlifts, and bench presses (Sobko et al., 2023). Squats and deadlifts are particularly important for developing lower-body strength, which is vital for takedowns, escapes, and maintaining balance during a match. These exercises help wrestlers build the explosive strength needed to drive through opponents and execute powerful moves.

The bench press is an excellent upper-body exercise that targets the chest, shoulders, and triceps, helping wrestlers develop the pushing power necessary for controlling opponents in top positions. Additionally, weightlifting strengthens the core, which is critical for maintaining stability and generating power in wrestling (Ozbay & Ulupinar, 2022). A strong core allows wrestlers to control their bodies during dynamic movements, such as lifting or throwing an opponent. Overall, weightlifting enhances the strength and power that are essential for every phase of a wrestling match, from initiating attacks to defending against takedowns.

Weightlifting also improves muscle endurance, which is critical in a wrestling match. Wrestlers need to exert high levels of force repeatedly throughout a bout, and weightlifting helps develop the stamina to maintain strength and control (Drid et al., 2021). In addition, lifting weights during the offseason can help prevent injuries by strengthening the muscles surrounding the joints, which is particularly important given the high-impact nature of wrestling. Weightlifting offers a systematic approach to building strength, enabling wrestlers to develop the specific muscles required for wrestling while also enhancing their overall athleticism.

The Best Combination of Sports for High School Wrestlers

Wrestling + Football + Track (It is a common background in US high school, best for athletes aiming for overall athleticism or those considering multi-sport college recruitment)

Combining wrestling with football and track provides a comprehensive and well-rounded athletic development plan for high school wrestlers. Each of these sports contributes uniquely to a wrestler's physical conditioning, enhancing their wrestling performance in multiple areas. Football, particularly positions like linebacker or running back, focuses on building strength, power, and mental toughness (Ozbay et al., 2019). These attributes are essential for success on the wrestling mat. In football, the ability to explode off the line and initiate contact directly correlates with the explosiveness required in wrestling, especially during takedowns. Additionally, the endurance built in football, particularly through long drives or consistent effort in



high-contact situations, strengthens the cardiovascular system, ensuring wrestlers can maintain energy throughout a match.

Track, on the other hand, complements the power and strength developed in football by focusing on cardiovascular conditioning and explosive speed. Sprints in track improve quick-twitch muscle fibers, which are necessary for the rapid, explosive movements wrestlers need during takedowns or escapes (Farzad et al., 2011). Distance running in track also helps build endurance, teaching wrestlers how to pace themselves over long periods and maintain high levels of performance, even in the later stages of a match when fatigue sets in. This combination of wrestling, football, and track creates a well-rounded athlete who is strong, fast, and resilient, improving all aspects of wrestling performance, from quickness on the mat to the ability to endure through physically demanding bouts.

Example: Many U.S. high school athletes successfully balance football, wrestling, and track. For instance, former NFL linebacker Ray Lewis wrestled in high school and credited it with improving his tackling and explosiveness on the football field.

Wrestling + Swimming + Weightlifting (Injury prevention, best for wrestlers who want to maximize performance while staying healthy)

A combination of wrestling, swimming, and weightlifting is ideal for wrestlers looking to balance aerobic conditioning with strength development. Swimming is a low-impact, full-body workout that complements wrestling's anaerobic demands by enhancing cardiovascular fitness and muscle endurance. For wrestlers, swimming builds lung capacity, which is crucial for maintaining stamina throughout a match, and strengthens muscle groups that may not be fully engaged in wrestling alone (Sobko et al., 2023). The fluid movements of swimming promote flexibility and mobility, both of which are important for wrestlers to maintain a low center of gravity and execute effective grappling techniques. Furthermore, swimming provides an excellent recovery workout for wrestlers, enabling them to keep their fitness while minimizing the risk of injury from overuse.

Weightlifting, on the other hand, builds the specific strength required for wrestling. Compound lifts, such as squats, deadlifts, and bench presses, enhance core strength and power, which are vital for executing strong, explosive movements like takedowns, lifts, and throws. Unlike swimming, which focuses on endurance, weightlifting targets muscle growth and strength development (Osipov et al., 2019). Wrestlers who incorporate weightlifting into their offseason training will increase their muscle mass, thereby improving their ability to overpower and control opponents on the mat. Together, swimming and weightlifting complement each other by improving cardiovascular conditioning and strength, ensuring that wrestlers are not only enduring but also powerful, explosive, and resilient in their matches.

Example: NCAA wrestlers often use swimming as a recovery tool during the offseason. Olympic wrestler Jordan Burroughs has emphasized the role of supplemental strength training in maintaining explosiveness, while swimming helps prevent overuse injuries.

Wrestling + Judo + Boxing (Best for wrestlers who wants to specialize in combat sports)

A combination of wrestling, judo, and boxing provides wrestlers with a diverse skill set that enhances both their grappling and striking abilities, creating a well-rounded athlete. Judo's focus on throws, grips, and balance directly complements wrestling by enhancing a wrestler's ability to control an opponent's position and execute takedowns. Techniques from judo, such as the ability to off-balance an opponent and throw them to the mat, are highly transferable to wrestling, where maintaining control and executing dominant moves is crucial (Rushall, 2006). The emphasis on balance and positioning in judo also improves a wrestler's ability to maintain control during exchanges, which is essential for scoring points and defending against attacks.

Boxing, meanwhile, focuses on cardiovascular fitness, hand-eye coordination, and mental toughness, all of which are essential for wrestling. The footwork and head movement required in boxing improve a wrestler's agility and reaction time, making it easier for them to move swiftly on the mat and avoid their opponent's attacks (Drid et al., 2021). Additionally, boxing teaches wrestlers how to stay calm under pressure and maintain focus during intense exchanges, a skill that is invaluable during the high-pressure moments of a wrestling match. Combining judo's grappling expertise with boxing's striking focus enables wrestlers to develop a more dynamic approach to competition, preparing them for all aspects of a match, whether it involves a standing position or grappling on the ground.

Example: Mixed martial arts athletes often transition from wrestling and judo backgrounds. Ronda Rousey, for example, was an Olympic judoka before moving into MMA, where her grappling and striking skills complemented each other.

Conclusion

Offseason training through cross-training in various sports is essential for wrestlers to stay competitive, develop their skills, and prevent burnout. Sports such as track, football, judo, boxing, swimming, and weightlifting each contribute uniquely to building the strength, endurance, mental toughness, and flexibility required for wrestling. Combining these sports allows wrestlers to enhance specific physical attributes while developing a well-rounded skill set. Whether improving explosive power through track sprints, building mental resilience through football, or refining grappling techniques in judo, each sport adds value to a wrestler's overall performance. By diversifying training, wrestlers not only improve their physical conditioning but also stay motivated and avoid the monotony of focusing solely on wrestling. Ultimately, the right combination of sports ensures wrestlers remain in peak condition, mentally sharp, and ready to perform at their best when the season begins.

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