

# Managing Expectations for Young Wrestlers

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BY MATT KRUMRIE | JAN. 20, 2016, 6:48 P.M. (ET)

Success or failure in athletics, especially at a young age, is never an indicator of future success or failure. By focusing on having fun and incremental improvements, new wrestlers—and parents of those new to the sport—can manage expectations and focus on what really matters, not wins and losses.

Rick Moreno, Director of the Sudden Victory Wrestling Academy in Missoula, Montana, makes this point clear from the start, telling parents at his preseason meeting that the top priority is having fun. That's why they don't keep win/loss records, especially for wrestlers at the introductory level.

"Wrestling is a process," says Moreno. "We're all going to have success and failure. Some parents expect kids to have overnight success, and that is not always going to happen."

Even if a kid succeeds right away, someone, somewhere is going to catch up to them and they are going to struggle, adds Moreno.

"The reality is, every young athlete develops different," Moreno notes. "Placing any emphasis on winning and losing takes away from the process of continual improvement. That's when kids get frustrated and leave the sport. It's never a recipe for success."

By measuring success in wins and losses, parents put their child at risk for increased anxiety, says Miranda P. Kaye, a research and evaluation scientist for the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State University. Previously, Kaye was a professor in the Department of Exercise and Sport Sciences at Ithaca College, and part of a team that studied the impact that focusing on performance goals has on athletes ages 6 to 18, including wrestlers.

That research concluded that when parents set performance-oriented goals (focused on outperforming opponents, or not being outperformed), youth have increased levels of precompetitive anxiety. Instead, parents, coaches, and youth should set self-referenced goals—focused on improvement and mastery of a task. For example, working on a single-leg takedown, or aiming to get an escape in a match.

"When goals are self-referenced, youth have control over them, unlike when the focus is solely on the performance of a competitor," Kaye explains. "By setting attainable and realistic goals for a match, parents and youth can see improvement and feel confident in the athlete's improvement. It is that continued improvement that will lead to success in the long-term."

Coaches can also help young athletes and parents to set these process-oriented goals and help families focus on developing skills, adds Kaye. "Research shows that kids want to have fun and improve their skills," she notes. "Focusing on aspects of the match that they have control over is important."

Matt Njos, Kids Director for Minnesota USA Wrestling, has two sons who wrestle. One struggled at the start, rarely winning in his early years. It got to the point where he almost gave up the sport, but Njos explains that that son stuck with it, improved, and eventually became a state champion and is now competing at the Division I level, wrestling for North Dakota State University. By contrast, his

other son experienced success from the beginning, but because of his experience with his other son, Njos understood that it was no guarantee of future success.

"What I've learned is mat time is most important," Njos says. "More practice, more matches, that's where the wrestler grows and makes the improvements. It doesn't just happen. Wrestling is a tough sport, mentally and physically. Some kids will win right away. Some kids are going to go out there at an early age and they are going to get beat. It can be demoralizing, but parents need to be supportive and realistic through highs and lows."

If a parent is new to the sport and attends practice, he or she should focus on what their child is doing and what the coaches are teaching and then take those drills home and work on them with their child, says Njos. "Go home and let a seven year-old practice on you," he explains. "When I'd work with my kids at home, it helped me learn about the sport, because I wasn't a wrestler, It also helped me understand why coaches are teaching what they do. We started breaking things down to focusing on incremental improvements. That's where the real learning and improvement occurs."

It's important to remember every athlete and wrestler learns and develops at a different pace, says Jacque Davis, a coach for Beat the Streets New York. Davis recommends coaches and parents help novice wrestlers set short-term, attainable goals that have nothing to do with wins and losses. "Goal setting is important for an athlete regardless of their skill level," she says. "If taught and practiced early in a wrestler's career, it can make the difference in mental/emotional wellness."

To do this, Davis creates what she calls "road sign goals"—moments throughout the season where young wrestlers should be able to accomplish certain skills, which allows them to identify if they are on the right track. For example, it's unrealistic for a first-time high school wrestler to say they want to be an Olympic champion. But it may be realistic to say they want to place at a section tournament. For young wrestlers just learning the sport, a reasonable goal might be "by X tournament I should be able to stay in my stance the entire match" or "by Y tournament I should be able to block my legs with my head and hands."

These incremental goals allow athletes, coaches, and parents to stay grounded and not get swept away by wins and losses, says Davis. "Instead, it values the little improvements that the athlete is making and glorifies them because they're working toward the big picture. All of a sudden the parent, athlete and coach are not bummed because Timmy lost a match, instead they are happy because even though he lost, he never broke good positioning and he defended four out of the five shots that were taken on him."

Nothing is immediate, says Davis, and expectations should set with young wrestlers, accordingly.

"So often, athletes and parents think that because an athlete learned something yesterday and practiced it a couple times at home, that it has become a learned skill," says Davis. "It is important for both parents and coaches to reiterate that to become a master at something you have to fail at it—a lot. Failure is part of the process. Trust this process, be patient with this process, and don't be scared to fail. Failure equals growth, especially in the wrestling room."