

# Wrestling – a significant Olympic sport

By Karl Lennartz

A speciality of the ancient Games was the pankration, described by Plato as “a contest combining imperfect wrestling and imperfect boxing”. The marble statue was created in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D.

Photo: Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi



The Olympic programme consists of core sports, plus additional sports. The core includes at least 25 sports, chosen before every new edition of the Olympic Games from a circle of 28 privileged International Federations (IF).<sup>1</sup> The decision is taken by the IOC meeting on the proposal of the Executive Board (EB). The EB decides on the composition of events, at the latest three years before the relevant Olympic Games.

In addition the EB can recommend the inclusion of one or several additional sports. Thus the IOC gives those sports dropped from the core a second chance. This opportunity is also available to such sports as previously were only on the waiting list, provided that the International Federation administering that sport is recognised by the IOC.<sup>2</sup>

The programme of the next Olympic Games in 2016 in Rio de Janeiro will consist of 26 core sports which were decided on at the 2004 IOC Session in Athens. The sports of golf and rugby sevens will be added, these having been chosen by the IOC in 2009 in Copenhagen from a shortlist of seven additional sports.

An in-depth analysis consisting of 33 criteria contributed to the decision process. The EB had remitted this to the Programme Commission. Four years later the previous unsuccessful applicants baseball / softball, karate, roller sports and squash again applied to be included in the elite circle, to which were added sport climbing, wakeboarding and wushu. To the surprise of many, wrestling part of the Olympic firmament since the ancient Games, was excluded from the core programme

and forced to take its chance with the other would be Olympic sports. When the EB met in St. Petersburg on 29 May, the shortlist to be offered to the full IOC membership was reduced still further. Wrestling will vie for one spot alongside baseball/softball and squash. Whether the wrestlers, whose community consists of 111 nations, can get back into the programme for 2020 by this circuitous route is more uncertain. The privilege of the final decision does reside, to be sure with the 125<sup>th</sup> IOC Session, which meets from 7 to 10 September in Buenos Aires, for mostly the majority of members follow the recommendations of the Executive Board.

### Worldwide indignation and solidarity

There were relatively few public pronouncements from the other shortlisted sports but since doubt was cast upon its Olympic future, the sport of wrestling has received more media attention than for decades. There were vigorous protests worldwide, especially in the countries of the Asian area, in which wrestling in its numerous and varied forms is a popular sport. Even the Russian President Vladimir Putin considered the matter so important that he intervened with the IOC. Two Olympic champions – the Bulgarian Valentin Yordanov and the Russian Saghiid Murtasaliyev – even threatened to send back to Lausanne the gold medals they had won in 1996 and 2000. One athlete even went on hunger strike.

In the face of the threatened exclusion the wrestlers are looking for powerful allies, and are even discovering politics, which otherwise fails whenever opponents come from the USA and Iran. Along with the Russian wrestlers, the teams of both countries met in mid-May for an historic display competition in the New York Grand Central Terminal, in which the sporting result – Iran defeated the USA 6–1 – was secondary. For the Iranians, who are among the world elite, the deletion of this sport would equate to a wound to their national pride, and the Americans too show more than just solidarity. They are also receiving support from Japan and Turkey. The female wrestler Saori Yoshida, three times consecutively Olympic champion, is one of the faces of Tokyo's application for the 2020 Olympics. An Olympic Games without wrestling? For the Turkish candidate city of Istanbul as well, that would be simply unthinkable.

The worldwide protest movement has shown that wrestling is more than a sport. After all this oldest martial art was Olympic two and a half thousand years ago. Perhaps, however, it is that very archaic image that caused the 15 EB members to query the right to existence of this sport. One can only speculate.

It may be that the extensive competition programme was regarded as disruptive. In 2012 in London there were no fewer than 18 events on the programme: eleven

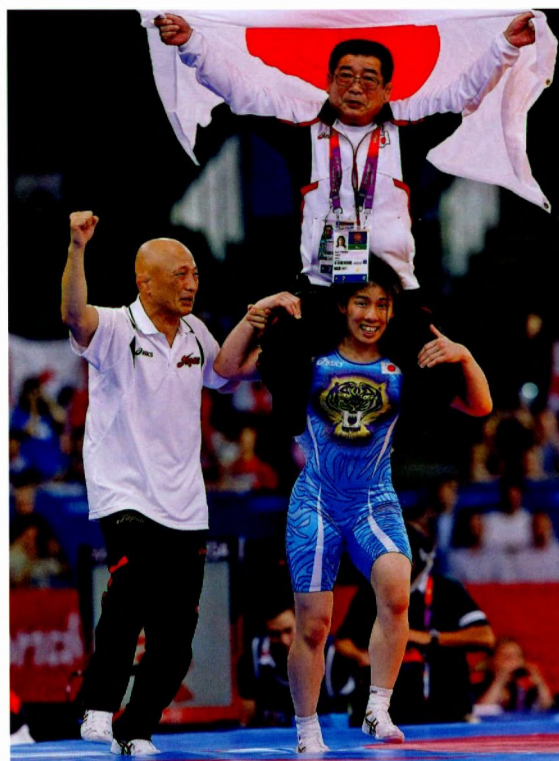
in freestyle wrestling (including four for women) and seven in the Graeco-Roman style. No less than 344 women and men entered the mat. Were this sport being deleted the number of competitions would be reduced by 15% and that of the athletes by 6%.

It can be difficult to follow on television, especially or those who are unfamiliar with the rules, and the subdivision into two styles can be confusing. In addition many people think wrestling is an unaesthetic sport, since the competitors are physically very close, especially in relation to women. While wrestling in the USA is still one of the most popular college sports, it has lost its impact especially in Western Europe. In the last decades entire strongholds of wrestling have disappeared, which may well be connected with the reduced number of successes – a consequence of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the emergence of new wrestling nations.

Certainly the change in lifestyle plays a part. The amount of physical labour has reduced, while the attention to aesthetics and personal care, promoted

The world's most successful female wrestler is the Japanese Saori Yoshida, who lifted her father Eikatsu on her shoulders after the third victory in the 55 kg class at London 2012. Eikatsu Yoshida, who was Japanese champion in 1973, had taught her the secrets of the sport from age three. Today the ten-time world champion is one of the faces of Tokyo's Olympic candidature for 2020.

Photo: picture-alliance



by advertising, has increased. It is part of today's social norms to keep a certain distance and a minimum of personal space from other people, whereas just the opposite is required in wrestling. All the more astonishing is the sudden appreciation of the numerous supporters, from whom in the past little was heard or read. When did the TV channels last transmit an international championship, when did an article about wrestling last appear? It would have been good to have such enthusiasm for the sport over the past few years.

The leadership of the International Federation of Associated Wrestling Styles (FILA) has a lot to answer for in this. In 1973 under the Yugoslavian President Milan Ercegan, there began a root and branch reform of the rules, with the aim of making wrestling faster, more attractive and more easily understood, but in recent years this development has stagnated. Perhaps this pressure of a possible exclusion was just what was needed by FILA to mobilise its efforts to change things.

No question: the loss of Olympic TV rights money, which amounts to tens of millions, would pull this sport even farther downhill. But why this traditional sport and no other? Why not delete the expensive sport of modern pentathlon, fighting for its life for years, but which has proved under its President Klaus Schormann that it is possible to fit in with television requirements, and which moreover is the only sport that has a prominent Olympic ancestor: IOC founder Pierre de Coubertin.

### Wrestling has been Olympic for 2500 years

What speaks for the retention of wrestling? From my viewpoint, it is above all the history and varied nature of this sport, for there has been wrestling since there have been human beings. To survive, it was necessary to run, jump, throw and fight, and thus wrestle. At some stage these skills became sport, even if the purposes of attacking and defending still played a major role.

Now it has become important to see who was the fastest and who had the greatest endurance, the best jumper or thrower and the strongest and most skilful fighter. Rules were created to ensure an even playing field.

To achieve better performances, speed, strength, endurance, technique and tactics were enhanced by coaching. And our children and grandchildren still fight.

In leading early civilizations wrestling played a significant role. Examples that could be mentioned are above all Egypt and ancient Greece. From most epochs of the kingdom of the Pharaohs, pictorial representations of wrestling have been handed down. The high point of the pictorial legacy are the representations in six graves of nomarchs in Beni Hassan from the 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> dynasty (c. 2000 BC). Several walls there are covered with sequences of figures of fighting wrestlers. These are unique documents, not just for wrestling but for world history. A detailed representation of a wrestling bout is to be found in Homer's Iliad. There, wrestling was part of the funeral games conducted at the burial of Patrokles.

*[708] [...] and up stood Odysseus of many wiles, he of guileful mind. Then the twain, when they had girded themselves, stepped into the midst of the place of gathering, and laid hold each of the other in close grip with their mighty hands, even as the gable-rafters of a high house, which some famous craftsman joineth together, that he may have shelter from the might of the winds. And their backs creaked beneath the violent tugging of bold hands, and the sweat flowed down in streams; and many a weal, red with blood, sprang up along their ribs and shoulders; and ever they strove a main for victory, to win the fashioned tripod. Neither might Odysseus avail to trip Aias and throw him to the ground, nor Aias h'im, for the mighty strength of Odysseus held firm. But when at the last they were like to weary the well-greaved Achaeans, then unto Odysseus spake great Telamonian Aias, saying: "Zeus-born, son of Laertes, Odysseus of many wiles, lift thou*

From most epochs of the kingdom of the Pharaohs there are pictorial representations of wrestling. The climax of the pictorial reproduction are the representations in six princely graves in Beni Hassan from the time of the 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> dynasties (around 2000 BC). There several walls are covered with around 200 different positions.





Four Greek vase paintings (from left to right): oiling and massage (5<sup>th</sup> century BC, British Museum, London), wrestling bouts (520 BC, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin), massage (480 BC, Villa Giulia, Rome), athletes with strigils (460 BC, Musei Vaticani, Rome).



*me, or let me lift thee; but the issue shall rest with Zeus." [725] He spake, and lifted him; but Odysseus forgot not his guile. He smote with a sure blow the hollow of Aias' knee from behind, and loosed his limbs, so that he was thrown backward, and Odysseus fell upon his chest; and the people gazed thereon and were seized with wonder. Then in his turn the much-enduring goodly Odysseus essayed to lift, and moved him a little from the ground, but lifted him not, howbeit he crooked his knee within that of Aias, and upon the ground the twain fell one hard by the other, and were befouled with dust. And now would they have sprung up again for the third time and have wrestled, but that Achilles himself uprose, and held them back: "No longer strain ye now, neither be worn with pain. Victory is with you both; take then equal prizes and go your ways, that other Achaeans too may strive." [738] So spake he, and they readily hearkened to him and obeyed, and wiping from their bodies the dust they put upon them their tunics.<sup>3</sup>*

Each ephebe had to be trained in wrestling. For that there was a special sports facility, the palaestra. Palaestra comes from "palé", wrestling. It usually consisted of an interior space surrounded by a hall with pillars, in which training was carried out.

The athlete stripped off, oiled himself and strewed sand on his body, so that his opponent could get a grip and did not slip. After training or competition the layer of sand was scraped off with a strigil, after which the athlete bathed. The modern word 'palace' (similar building form) developed from the concept of the 'palaestra'.

Wrestling was conducted in a standing position. Holds were permitted on any part of the body. Whoever touched the sand three times (!) with any part of the body except the feet had lost. Today's so-called Graeco-Roman style thus had nothing to do with the type of wrestling of antiquity.

At the Olympic Games in 708 BC, wrestling was introduced as a fourth discipline after the three running races. In 632 BC, wrestling for boys was added. In the pentathlon (also from 708 BC) wrestling was the fifth and last discipline. The best wrestler became Olympic champion. As there were no weight classes, the wrestlers and others competing in two-man contests would today probably have been super-heavyweights, or there was a proverb: "to eat like a wrestler". The pentathletes had the bodies of today's multi-event athletes. These athletes were heavily criticised by the intellectual Greeks for their physical shape and their brutal methods of fighting. That was however in direct opposition to their popularity with the spectators.



The "ram" position: The two wrestlers are pushing each other with their heads.

Photo: ca. 510 BC, National Archaeological Museum, Athens

Multiple Olympic champions were, as today, stars to be admired, and among them were two wrestlers: Milon of Croton and Timasitios of Croton. Milon (c. 555) achieved his first Olympic victory as a boy at the 60<sup>th</sup> Olympic Games in the year 540 BC. Eight years later (532) he became men's Olympic champion. From 532 to 516 BC he recorded five consecutive victories at Olympia. At the Pythian Games in Delphi he won seven times, at the Isthmian Games ten times and at the Nemean Games nine times. By doing this he six times received the title of Periodonike, awarded to a sportsman when he had come first in all four Panhellenic Games.

Milon was the first Periodonike whose name has survived and the only six-time winner in whole of antiquity. In 512 BC his younger opponent Timasitheos of Croton defeated him.

Milon became the military leader in the war that broke out in 510 BC between Croton and Sybaris. Sybaris was defeated and plundered. Milon is said to have been married to a daughter of Pythagoras called Myris. Many

legends surround his feats. Let me mention two: every day he carried a calf on his shoulders, and could still do that when the beast became adult. When he was having a meal with others one of the pillars of the house broke, but Milon held up the falling beams until all those present could escape. In modern times numerous sculptors have depicted Milon.

Amongst the tribes of the Migration Period, wrestling was one of the most important physical exercises. An illuminating source is the Nibelungenlied. On their wedding night, Brunhilde refuses her husband King Gunther, wrestles him to the ground and ties him up. The next night she herself is wrestled into submission by Siegfried, standing in for Gunther under the Tarnkappe (cloak of invisibility).

In the Middle Ages too, wrestling played a central role with farmers, squires and knights. It was one of the seven skills of physical training for knights and thus also a part of squires' education. There was wrestling at every fair. Arguments that could not be settled by the

Olympic weight categories

MEN											
Olympic Games	Graeco-Roman	Freestyle									
1896	1	1	1952	8	8	16	2004	7	7	14	
1904		7	1956	8	8	16	2008	7	7	14	
1906	4	4	1960	8	8	16	2012	7	7	14	
1908	4	5	1964	8	8	16	2016	7	7	14	
1912	5	5	1968	8	8	16					
1920	5	5	1972	10	10	20					
1924	6	7	1976	10	10	20					
1928	6	7	1980	10	10	20					
1932	7	7	1984	10	10	20					
1936	7	7	1988	10	10	20					
1948	8	8	1992	10	10	20					
			1996	10	10	20					
			2000	8	8	16					

WOMEN			
Freestyle			
Flyweight	2004-2016	4	
Lightweight	2004-2016	4	
Middleweight	2004-2016	4	
Heavyweight	2004-2016	4	



court were decided, after an indecisive fencing match, by a wrestling contest.

Wrestling in the late Middle Ages had such a great significance that numerous illustrated books by well-known artists like Albrecht Dürer and Fabian von Auerswald were put together, in which all possible holds were described and depicted.

When modern sport developed, wrestling was among the first sports to spread everywhere. Graeco-Roman style arose in the middle of the last century in Italy and France, and freestyle wrestling based on antiquity in England. Competitive wrestling was initially carried out in two administrative areas, for heavy athletes and for gymnasts. In 1912 the Fédération Internationale des Luttes Associées (FILA) was founded.

Besides "Olympic" wrestling there are numerous other variants in the world. The Swiss "Schwingen", widespread since the late Middle Ages, is as popular in that country as football. Fighting takes place on a circular surface covered with a thick layer of sawdust. The two opponents wear a short pair of denim trousers over their clothes. The two fighters grasp each other by the so-called "Schwingerlose" and try to force their opponent on to his back by a series of "swings" (Schwingen). The most important event is the Swiss "Schwing- und Alpenfest", which takes place only every three years. The winner of this tournament is hailed as the "Schwingerkönig" ("king of the swingers"). The prize is traditionally an ox.

As a variant of the "Hösenringen" there is the Icelandic Glima wrestling, known since the 8<sup>th</sup> century, which was a demonstration sport at the 1912 Olympic Games in Stockholm. It is widespread in Iceland. There is even an International Federation, the International Glima Association (IGA)

There are further examples of types of wrestling world-wide: In the 1970s the well-known German film director Leni Riefenstahl visited the Nuba people in the Sudan. There she saw the traditional wrestling of the Nuba tribes, about which there had been reports in writings about ancient Egypt. Even at most of the regional Olympic Games of the past, wrestling was part of the programme, for example at the Cotswold Olympics in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, at the Much Wenlock Games and at the Olympics in Greece.

As was to be expected, wrestling was accepted into the programme of the first Modern Olympic Games. The first Olympic champion was the German Carl Schuhmann, a gymnast who defeated the Greek strength events athlete Georgios Tsitas. There were neither weight classes, nor was the length of bouts laid down. Only when the opponent was "shouldered" was the contest decided.

At the 1900 Olympic Games wrestling was not on the programme, but from 1904 on the athletes competed every time for medals.

Medieval wrestling literature (from left to right): Fabian von Auerswald, "eighty-five holds" (1539), Hans Wurm, "Das Landshuter Ringerbuch" (ca. 1505), Nicolas Petter, "Worstel-Konst" (1674).



Since human memory has existed, wrestling in Tibet has been among the most popular sports. Wrestling was used especially to train the Dalai Lama's bodyguard. During the fifth Dalai Lama period all male Tibetans had to master "nine skills", of which six had a sporting character – among these was wrestling.

Wrestling is held in all countries: the Yakuts (right), who also fight in the snow, produced Olympic champions like Roman Dmitriyev (1972) and Pavel Pinigin (1976). Far right: Japanese sumo, which is carried out in a circle of sand marked out with a straw rope, was first mentioned in 712.



Photos: Karil Lenmartz Archives

Since 1920, both Graeco-Roman and freestyle wrestling have been included on the programme without interruption. As with most other sports there was an increasing number of events, and in wrestling more and more new weight classes, an increase from 5+5 (1920), 7+7 (1932, 1936), 8+8 (1948-68), to 10+10 (1972-1996). Since then, FILA has had to make changes in order to accommodate women's participation and to comply with the regulations which have restricted the overall number of competitors to 10,500.

From 1948 there had been an increase, because some nations entered whose sportsmen were smaller and lighter than the Europeans and North Americans. On the other hand the intensive training led to the necessity to introduce a class for super-heavyweights. The consequence of that was that the weight divisions between classes had again and again to be changed. In the interests of equality competitions for women have been on the programme since 2004. Until 1924 there was no time limit. In 1912 in Stockholm the final in the Graeco-Roman light-heavyweight was broken off after

nine hours. Both wrestlers received a silver medal. The gold was not awarded.

The most recent rule changes were decided on at the Extraordinary FILA Congress in Moscow on 18 May 2013, when the Serb Nenad Lalović was elected as the new President. He replaced Raphaël Martinetti of Switzerland who had resigned in the wake of the Executive Board's initial recommendation.

In future the time of contests is to be twice three minutes. Even the passive wrestlers are increasingly in for it now. There will also be a woman as Vice-President for the first time, and the number of feminine weight classes is to increase. People will eagerly await to see if the efforts of the wrestlers will be rewarded by the IOC. ■

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- 1 Olympic Charter, III. Programme of the Olympic Games, Rule 45, 8 July 2011.
  - 2 Ibid. Bye-law to Rule 45, 2.1.3.
  - 3 Homer, *Iliad*, with an English Translation by Augustus Taber Murray. Books 13-24 [The Loeb Classical Library, 171], 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition by William F. Wyatt, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1999.