



Why Women's Wrestling, Why Now:
White paper on the current state of wrestling and the
benefits of developing women's wrestling programs

Jessica B. Kirby,¹ Sally Roberts,^{1,2} Jay Coakley,¹ Amanda Stanec² & Glenn Gormley²



Center for
Critical Sport Studies

*University of Colorado Colorado Springs, Center for Critical Sport Studies¹
Wrestle Like a Girl²*

Introduction

The history of women in sport is closely aligned with changes in cultural beliefs about gender and femininity. During the first half of the twentieth century girls and women were generally excluded from sport participation or guided into individual “grace and beauty” sports performed as individuals with scoring based on gendered ideas about artistic merit. Direct competition against opponents was discouraged, but gradually occurred as women participated in sports where competitors were separated by nets, lane dividers, and other barriers that precluded physical contact. As a result, the sport participation of girls and women was generally limited to figure skating, gymnastics, diving, golf, tennis, volleyball, badminton, swimming, and certain track events in which competitors stayed in their own lanes.

Participation in team sports involving strength, speed, and physical contact was not encouraged for girls and women until the late 20th century and the enforcement of Title IX legislation. This constituted a significant turning point and greatly expanded participation opportunities for girls and women. However, opportunities to participate in combat sports, such as boxing, fencing, judo, and wrestling, continues to face resistance.

Wrestling has deep historical roots and is considered by many to be the oldest competitive sport in the world.¹ Women’s wrestling was introduced to the World University Championships in 2001 and to the Olympics at the 2004 Athens Games. It has been growing steadily since 2004 as high schools, colleges, and universities in the United States have developed clubs and sanctioned programs.

Sports are recognized for their potential to build character, confidence, self-esteem and leadership in athletes of all ages.²⁻⁴ Combat sports, including wrestling and martial arts, have been specifically recognized and documented as activities that empower girls and women.⁵ They are safe, effective, and inclusive vehicles through which to teach character development in physical education,⁶ and to inspire young women to improve complex social injustices and disparities existing worldwide.⁷⁻⁸

Women’s wrestling offers benefits to colleges and universities as a cost-efficient sport program that compliments and supports men’s programs. The inclusion of women’s wrestling in an athletic department affords university administrators a valuable opportunity to support and advocate for the empowerment and development of leaders among the young women on their

campuses. At the same time, it will challenge misleading stereotypes about girls and women as it revitalizes and brings new orientations and perspectives to college wrestling teams such as: increased respect and camaraderie between men and women on these teams, increased opportunities for larger rosters, diversified coaching opportunities, and engagement of a new and expanded fan base.

The Growth of Women's Wrestling: The Numbers

Due to traditional sport offerings and gender norms in North America, many sport leaders have yet to fully recognize the feasibility and benefits that combat sports provide sport organizations, schools, and young women. Young women competing in wrestling find it to be optimally challenging and empowering, both physically and mentally, and an endeavor that builds unapologetic confidence and self-worth, all the while teaching critical skills in self-defense.⁹ The time to recognize and amplify such benefits is now, as gender norms are changing in ways that lead girls and young women to consider participation in wrestling and other combat sports.

- Wrestling team participation among high school girls has grown consistently for 28 straight years (since 1990), and the number of female participants in wrestling has increased by nearly 500% between 2001-02 and 2017-18, climbing from 3,405 to 16,562 participants (see Figure 1).¹⁰⁻¹¹
- Individual states have begun sanctioning high school girls' wrestling, providing girls the opportunity to compete against other girls, participate in a girls' state championship tournament, and have opportunities to become high school state champions.
 - As of 2018, 12 states (AL, CA, GA, HI, MA, ME, MO, NJ, OR, TN, TX, WA) have officially sanctioned girls wrestling, with additional states currently piloting girls wrestling programs.

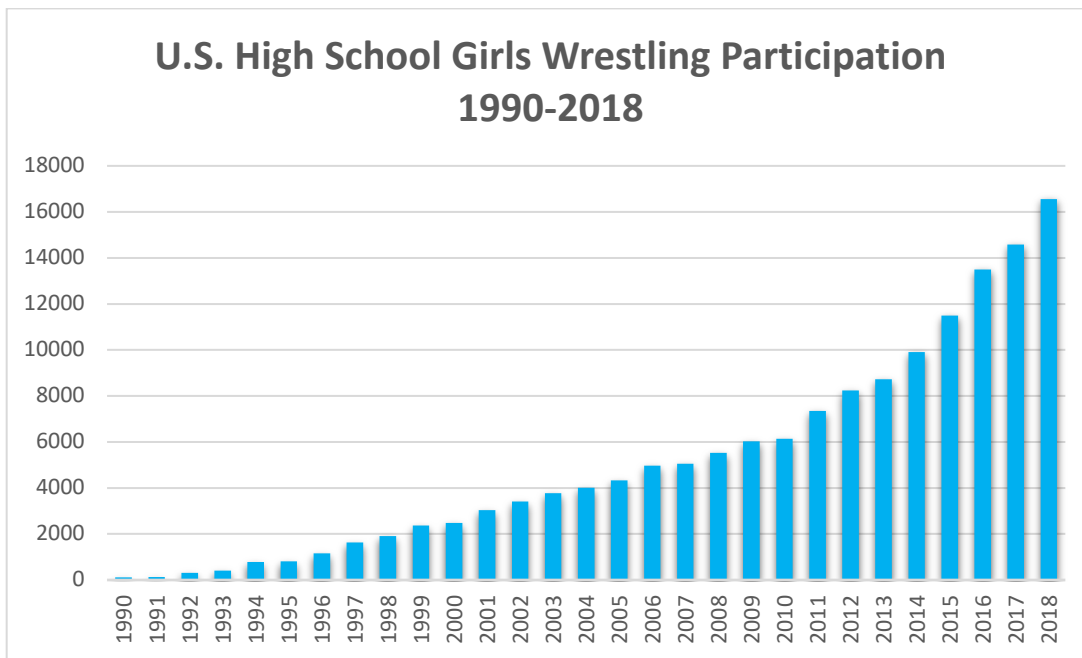


Figure 1. High school girls wrestling participation rates (NFHS, 2018)

- As other states and high schools add girls’ sanctioned programs, we predict the number of girls participating will increase dramatically and provide an expanding pool of athletes for collegiate programs. Growth potential is great as:
 - Over 8,000 high schools with boys’ wrestling teams have yet to sanction girls’ wrestling.
 - The National Federation of State High School Associations reported the number of girls wrestling increased from 8,235 in 2012 to 16,562 in 2018.¹²
 - In Colorado as a case example, the first girls wrestling tournament in 2017 drew 80 wrestlers from 42 schools and the end-of-season tournament in 2018 drew 200 wrestlers from 114 schools, which has put girls wrestling on track to become a state sanctioned sport for the 2020-21 school year. As noted by Joan Fulp, co-chair of USA Wrestling's Girls High School Development Committee, "The growth has just been amazing, . . . the momentum is real."¹²
- Women’s collegiate wrestling began to gain traction in 2007. Between 2007 and 2018, 45 colleges and universities added women’s teams. In 2018, there were 81 women’s wrestling programs at postsecondary institutions, including 18 NCAA programs, 24 NAIA programs, and 39 NCWA programs.¹³⁻¹⁴

Relationship between Sport Access and Growth

Access to participation opportunities and the growth of women’s wrestling are closely tied. Girls and women have traditionally had no school sponsored opportunities to participate in combat sports,¹⁵ but as wrestling teams for girls and women have been offered in schools where administrators are responsive to emerging sport participation preferences among girls and women, participation has increased at consistently impressive rates.

The demand among women for future participation opportunities in wrestling will increase due to two major factors:

- 1) Consistent 14% annual growth rate on average in the number of girls participating in high school wrestling over the past 5 years, with future growth increasing as more states sanction girls’ high school wrestling. A continued 14% growth rate over the next 5 years will result in over 36,000 girls participating in high school wrestling in 2022-23.
- 2) In 2020 it is projected that there will be about 2.93 million more females than males enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, and that number is expected to increase to nearly 3.3 million in 2026 (see Table 1).¹⁶ Therefore, adding women’s wrestling to college athletic programs would be a useful strategy for maintaining Title IX compliance and meeting increased demand for opportunities and providing proportional participation opportunities for female students.

Table 1. Total fall enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by attendance status, sex, and age: Selected years, 2020 and 2026 (projected, in millions)

2020 projected college student enrollment		2026 projected college student enrollment	
Total	21.35	Total	22.63
Males	9.21	Males	9.68
Females	12.14	Females	12.95
<i>Difference</i>	2.93	<i>Difference</i>	3.27

Uniting Women’s and Men’s Wrestling Programs to Grow the Sport

Historically in America, the culture of men’s wrestling has been gender-exclusive and sometimes even hostile to the existence of women’s sports. Women’s sports were often widely blamed by some in the men’s wrestling community to be responsible for the elimination of men’s

teams as a gender equity strategy.¹⁷ Adding women's wrestling teams to schools currently offering men's wrestling programs could result in improvements in wrestling culture. Moreover, it would set the tone for an inclusive and equitable athletic department and learning institution.

The growth of men's wrestling programs was slow during the years before 2007, but growth accelerated as the number of women's teams grew. Our analysis of college and university athletic departments indicates the following:

- While 45 women's collegiate wrestling programs were established over the past decade, 126 men's teams were also added to college sport programs (49 NCAA, 44 NAIA, and 33 JUCO programs).
- All 73 collegiate institutions that currently have a women's wrestling team also have a men's team at the same or higher level.
- Between 2007 and 2018, none of the 46 institutions that dropped men's wrestling had a women's program.
- The existence of women's wrestling programs potentially allows men's programs to raise roster caps that were imposed to comply with Title IX regulations.

Overall, the evidence shows that the addition of women's programs goes hand-in-hand with the growth and security of men's wrestling programs in athletic departments.

Research also indicates that female wrestlers in high school and college feel well supported and accepted by their male wrestling peers.⁵ As women train and compete alongside men, male wrestlers develop respect for their female teammates, through observation of their female peers working hard and being committed to the sport.¹⁸ Adding a women's team and combining it with the men's team makes wrestling a gender inclusive sport and provides opportunities to reduce the tendency for male team members to see Title IX as a threat to their sport¹⁹ and the tendency for female team members to see males as threats to their safety.²⁰

Cost of Developing and Sustaining a Women's Wrestling Team

Cost is an important issue when considering the addition of a new sport. However, in the case of wrestling, women's teams can be added to men's programs for relatively little cost. Unlike many other sports, wrestling is relatively inexpensive due to its minimal equipment and facility requirements. Wrestling programs are run on a fraction of the budget when compared to football programs, and adding women's teams to these programs allows for increased numbers

of rostered athletes, adds a measure of safeguard against future budget cuts, while also contributing to the true spirit of Title IX to increase opportunities for women.¹⁷ In many cases men's and women's teams in a combined program can share training facilities, equipment and staff. Additionally, combining men's and women's schedules controls administrative and travel expenses and bring team members together in a context where they have shared goals—a key factor in creating an inclusive environment and mutually supportive relationships among teammates.

With evidence-based and best practice team building and marketing strategies, combined female-male teams could be branded in a way to build capacity and community. For example, a slogan such as, *“One Sport, One Team, One Family”* could be used to promote matches as family friendly events, and in turn increase fan and alumni interest and attendance. Opportunities to watch women wrestlers compete undermines the myth of female frailty²¹⁻²² and provides physically skilled and strong role models for girls and women thinking of participating in rule-governed combat sports.

Combined female-male teams also increase the attractiveness of wrestling for corporate sponsors wanting to align their companies and products with images of strong women breaking traditional gender barriers with support from male teammates. Companies hesitant to sponsor the spectacle of MMA (Mixed Martial Arts) events may be more willing to support school sponsored wrestling that is gender inclusive.

While combined gender programs offer many benefits, universities should feel motivated to develop female wrestling programs in a system that works best for each respective institution. In other words, perhaps shared coaches doesn't make sense. Thus, athletic departments should think critically and creatively to implement a women's wrestling program in a way that will be most positive and sustainable for their environment. Coaching education workshops and hiring female coaches can provide opportunities to create a wrestling culture that is gender inclusive and supports positive relationships among male and female teammates.

Women's Wrestling Supports Needed Cultural Change on College Campuses

As girls and young women train and compete in wrestling, they foster physical and mental strength, body confidence, and a strong and stable sense of identity. These skills and attributes are powerful and necessary to counter the perception of female vulnerability²³⁻²⁵ that has

contributed to patterns of harassment and assault against women on college campuses²⁶ and within national sport governing bodies.²⁷⁻²⁸

Additionally, as gender barriers continue to be broken in American society, women increasingly volunteer for military service, including combat roles and leadership positions.²⁹⁻³⁰ More than one hundred women of diverse backgrounds were historically elected into congressional positions in the 2018 national election. Women are also more likely to consider jobs as well as sport and recreational activities that require physical strength and one-on-one competition with an opponent. Wrestling provides opportunities to experience direct physical combat under controlled conditions. These experiences would not only benefit many girls and women in high school and college, they will benefit society when these athletes graduate. At the same time, their participation would create and provide images of strong self-confident females and inspire the next generation of female wrestlers who might not otherwise participate in sport, if a sport such as wrestling wasn't offered.

Conclusion: The Time is Right for Women's Wrestling

Over the past 30 years, most girls have grown up hearing that there are no barriers to their aspirations. The idea that female athletes must comport themselves as "ladylike" and avoid sports that involve physical combat is foreign to them. As we move into the twenty-first century, girls and women are increasingly participating and competing in combat sports. This is likely due to shifting cultural norms, the fact that program offerings are expanding, that wrestling is affordable, and that singlets are made for every size. Women's wrestling is consistent with women volunteering for military service, including combat roles, and engaging in jobs and recreational activities for which combat sports offer appropriate physical and mental training. The sanctioning of women's intercollegiate wrestling constitutes an important step in the achievement of gender equity and full inclusion in higher education. In this sense, the timing is right for the addition of women's wrestling as a sanctioned intercollegiate sport; and some might say that is it overdue. In fact, it would be a big win for colleges and universities.

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