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Coyte G. Cooper

Erianne A. Weight

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Evolving the core product: Stakeholder's perceptions of the NCAA wrestling season

Coyte G. Cooper & Erianne Weight

KEYWORDS:

NCAA wrestling; product assessment; program eliminations; marketing

ABSTRACT

During the past 25 years, athletics directors have made the decision to eliminate more than 130 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) wrestling programs (NCAA Sports Sponsorship, 2008). While many advocates of college wrestling in the United States have blamed Title IX for program eliminations, several scholars have illustrated that the attrition of men's nonrevenue teams is instead due to the outlandish spending on men's basketball and men's football within athletic departments (Marburger & Hogshead-Makar, 2003, Zimbalist, 2003). With the economic challenges and the "arms race" occurring at the Division I level, it is imperative for college wrestling to develop strategies to ensure that each of its programs are self-sustainable in future years. The purpose of the study was to survey stakeholders of intercollegiate wrestling (coaches [N = 77], consumers [N = 954], officials [N = 29], and student-athletes [N = 279]) to identify potential strategies to enhance the quality of the college wrestling product. In addition to several critical suggestions discussed in the article, stakeholders unanimously supported an adjustment in the college wrestling post-season to avoid March Madness (M = 4.95; SD = 1.23) and the high school wrestling state championships (M = 4.43; SD = 1.41).

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Coyte G. Cooper, PhD is an assistant professor of sport administration at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, N.C.

Erianne Weight, PhD is an assistant professor of human movement, sport and leisure studies at Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio.

In today's competitive economic environment, it is essential that sport organizations are creating entertaining products that allow them to differentiate themselves from their competitors. Currently, with the economic recession in the United States (Joyce, 2008; Shell, 2007), athletic departments are faced with potential diminishing revenue streams due to the fact that many boosters, corporate sponsors, and consumers have less disposable income (Drape & Evans, 2008). Thus, with the financial shortfalls, athletic administrators are not only challenged to enhance the quality of their product and delivery, they are also being forced to eliminate spending within their athletic departments to balance their budgets (Steinbach, 2008). With the "arms race" taking place at the Division I level (Christy, Seifried, & Pastore, 2008; Kennedy, 2007), the burden

to lower costs often falls upon nonrevenue sport teams housed within athletic departments (Belson, 2009; Ridpath, Yiamouyiannis, Lawrence, & Galles, 2008).

In response to budget challenges, several athletic directors have set a precedent when making the decision to eliminate nonrevenue sport teams to enhance their financial endeavors (Marburger & Hogshead-Makar, 2003). While several nonrevenue programs have been negatively impacted, the NCAA Sports Sponsorship and Participations Rates Report (2008) illustrated that the following four men's NCAA teams have realized the most severe losses in student-athlete athletic participation due to program eliminations from 1981 to 2007: wrestling (1687 student-athletes), gymnastics (1043 student-athletes), fencing (788 student-athletes), and rowing

(598 student-athletes). Thus, men's wrestling has suffered more losses in athletic participation opportunities than any other nonrevenue sport team.

Challenges Facing College Wrestling Programs

While there were 363 NCAA wrestling programs in 1981, the number of men's wrestling programs offered by the NCAA had diminished to 234 in 2005 (NCAA Sports Sponsorship, 2008; The NCAA News, 2006). Similarly, in terms of new program growth, there was not one year of positive net program gain during the 24-year time frame (NCAA Sports Sponsorship, 2008). Further, the trend seems to be increasing as the following four college wrestling teams were eliminated in the first month of 2009: Lawrence University, Norwich University, Portland State University, and Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology (Mike Moyer [Executive Director of NWCA], personal interview, January 26, 2009). While the past program eliminations are extensive, there is additional concern for college wrestling programs considering that most athletic departments are now facing financial deficiencies (Drape & Evans, 2008).

Reasons for Program Eliminations

As the number wrestling and other nonrevenue programs have steadily declined, (Frauenheim & Skoda, 2008; NCAA Sports Sponsorship, 2008; The NCAA News, 2006), there has been a growing emphasis by scholars to identify the reasons why nonrevenue programs are being eliminated (Marburger & Hogshead-Makar, 2003; Zimbalist, 2003). As explained by Ridpath et al. (2008), there is often misplaced blame on Title IX from the wrestling community when discussing program eliminations. In response to this challenge, scholars such as Andrew Zimbalist (2003) have explained that "excess spending" and "waste" by athletic departments are the primary culprits for the attrition of men's teams. Similarly, scholars

have echoed similar concerns when suggesting that the trend to eliminate men's nonrevenue sport teams in Division I athletics is primarily driven by athletic programs who engage in the "arms race" (Marburger & Hogshead-Makar, 2003). As explained by Ridpath et al. (2008), the "loss of college wrestling teams arguably can be found in out-of-control and unfair economics in big-time college athletic programs" and the "reallocation of money from some men's sports (such as wrestling) to other men's sports (such as football, basketball, and even baseball)" (p. 278). Thus, when combined with the economic challenges facing athletic departments, it is likely that nonrevenue sport teams such as men's wrestling are facing declining financial support in future generations (James & Ross, 2004).

A recent study examined specifically what factors athletic directors within Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) athletic departments report to be important criteria related to the discontinuation of wrestling programs. Supporting previously mentioned research, financial issues were of primary concern – including budget shortages, the specific financial strain of the program, and a lack of donor support. Also highly ranked among the discontinuation criteria were categories including gender equity implications, success on the mat, regional sport popularity, fan support, and athlete academic achievement (Weight & Cooper, 2009). These criteria support the notion that in order to fortify wrestling programs, enhancing the marketability of the product is essential.

One category also included in the top-rated criteria within the Weight & Cooper (2009) study, that may be of increasing importance is athlete academic achievement. With the implementation of Academic Performance Rating (APR) and its related consequences, poor academic performance within wrestling teams may more than ever be a reason for

program elimination. Under the APR system, teams with low academic achievement are penalized through scholarship reductions (NCAA, 2009). A recent proliferation of penalties within all sports, including wrestling, has demonstrated that the NCAA is taking a much stronger position on academic reform than has been implemented previously (Christy, Seifried, & Pastore, 2008; Weiberg, 2008). Related to this emphasis on academic performance, administrators within three institutions have cited low APR scores as the primary reason for wrestling program elimination (ESPN, 2007; Portland State Athletics, 2009; Delaware State University, 2009). Thus, an additional element critical to the future of collegiate wrestling involves a strengthened emphasis on academics.

The current format in college wrestling involves a six month season that starts with training practices in September and culminates with an NCAA Wrestling Championship in March. As explained by Moyer (personal interview, January 26, 2009), the seasonal format is problematic for couple of primary reasons. First, within the current framework, wrestlers are forced to compete and control their weight leading up to two of the major academic exam periods in colleges and universities. As a result, these student-athletes are often faced with major challenges when attempting to balance their academic and athletic lifestyles. Second, from a business standpoint, the format of the current season competes with the first round of the men's NCAA Basketball Championships. Thus, with the immense popularity of March Madness, there is minimal opportunity for college wrestling to grow its consumer fan base in future generations.

Response to Challenges

With the expectation that men's wrestling will receive less monetary support in future years (James & Ross, 2004; Marburger et al.,

2003), it is necessary for the National Wrestling Coaches Association (NWCA) and advocates of college wrestling to utilize strategies of development in an effort to establish self-sustaining programs in the future. While there are several necessary initiatives to achieve this objective (e.g., educational reform, endowment campaigns, innovative promotions), a primary step involves the creation of a core product that is appealing to consumers at the local, regional, and national levels. In addition to the implementation of rules that maximize the action realized during competition, the NWCA and advocates of college wrestling must also develop a unified schedule that allows college wrestling to extend its reach to new consumer segments. Further, the schedule must also consider a format that provides student-athletes with a better opportunity to be more effective in the classroom setting.

Purpose of Research

The purpose of the research was to survey critical stakeholders of intercollegiate wrestling (coaches, consumers, officials, and student-athletes) to identify potential strategies to enhance the quality of the college wrestling product. In particular, the survey was designed to explore the format and content of the NCAA Division I wrestling season in order to uncover avenues of untapped commercial potential. With an analysis of stakeholder perceptions of the college wrestling season, the NWCA and advocates of college wrestling are provided with necessary data to make effective decisions about how to position the college wrestling season. Thus, following the results section, there are several suggestions that are made to enhance the quality of the season currently being implemented in college wrestling.

Methodology

The research instrument was designed specifically to identify strategies to enhance

the format of the college wrestling season. In order to guide the research, a focus group was implemented to determine the common suggestions for change among Division I wrestling experts (Executive Director of major wrestling organization, two Division I wrestling coaches, and two Division I student-athletes). Following the pilot study, there were three common themes that emerged as potential strategies to improve the format of the college wrestling schedule: (1) implementation of a condensed, one semester season, (2) implementation of a season with dual meet and individual championships¹, and (3) implementation of a schedule to avoid major competition (e.g., men's and women's March Madness, High School state championships). Further, within each theme, there were elements of consideration that were suggested for analysis within the survey portion of the research.

With the focus group results in mind, the researchers utilized a condensed 12-item survey instrument (1=strongly disagree; 6=strongly agree) to investigate potential season format changes among critical stakeholders (coaches [N = 77], consumers [N = 954], officials [N = 29], and student-athletes [N = 279]) of college wrestling. In order to obtain a representative sample, the entire population of Division I wrestling coaches (head and assistant) and student-athletes received an email invitation to participate in the online version of the survey.

Further, to reach consumers and officials, the NWCA National Duals event was chosen as a point of dissemination for the research. While the entire population of referees was targeted at the event, the consumers were approached with a stratified sampling method at the two main entrances at the venue. Each of the samples included in the research represented at least ten percent of their total coinciding stakeholder populations. Data was analyzed utilizing descriptive statistics in order to identify potential changes to the season offered within the core college wrestling product. Additionally, variances between stakeholder populations were explored utilizing regression analysis.

Results

Condensed One Semester Season

As illustrated in Table 1, stakeholders rated their level of agreement with the potential academic, competitive, and marketing benefits that would result from the implementation of a condensed, one semester (spring) college wrestling season. In terms of academic progress, the data indicated that both coaches (M = 4.11; SD = 1.65) and student-athletes (M = 4.57; SD = 1.49) supported the notion that a condensed season would result in improved student-athlete performance in the classroom. Similarly, coaches and student-athletes also felt

Table 1
Stakeholder's Perceptions of Improvements Related to Condensed, One Semester Season

Stakeholders	Academics		Competition		Marketability	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Coaches	4.11	1.65	4.04	1.73	4.12	1.55
Consumers	--	--	3.61	1.52	3.50	1.63
Officials	--	--	3.69	1.47	4.35	1.23
Student-athletes	4.57	1.49	4.56	1.46	4.15	1.62
Stakeholder	4.34	1.57	3.98	1.55	4.03	1.51

Note: Dashes indicate that data was not collected for the variable due to the stakeholder's lack of knowledge on the subject area.

that a shorter college wrestling season would result in the following benefits: (1) improved athletic competition through enhanced athlete performance (less burnout and injuries), and (2) improved marketability of the college wrestling product (see Table 1). Further, consumers were somewhat favorable in their response that a condensed season would result in increases in competition ($M = 3.61$; $SD = 1.52$) and marketability.

Season with Dual and Individual Wrestler Championships

When focusing on the competitive format of intercollegiate wrestling, stakeholders agreed that the college wrestling product would be more appealing if it featured both dual meet and individual wrestler seasons, each culminating with a national championship ($M = 4.14$; $SD = 1.54$). Within this context, stakeholders also felt that a sanctioned dual meet championship³ ($M = 4.89$; $SD = 1.17$) would significantly improve the consumer appeal of the college wrestling season. Further, with dual and individual wrestler championships, the stakeholder's agreed that strategic championship dates ($M = 4.70$; $SD = 1.39$) must be implemented by placing the dual meet championship prior to the NCAA Wrestling Championships. Similarly, stakeholders also indicated a strong interest in increasing the number of home dual meets in

the college wrestling season ($M = 4.79$; $SD = 1.13$). As shown in Table 2, consumers were in agreement that these changes would enhance the quality of the college wrestling product.

Season Schedule Avoiding Competition

In addition to adjusting the format of the college wrestling season, the research also examined the positioning of the current college wrestling post-season. In order to reach its full consumer potential, stakeholders agreed that the NCAA Wrestling Championships must be re-scheduled so that its date does not conflict with March Madness ($M = 4.95$; $SD = 1.23$) and the high school wrestling state championships ($M = 4.43$; $SD = 1.41$). Similarly, when focusing specifically on consumer responses, the data supported the notion that the college wrestling product would be more appealing to fans if the NCAA Wrestling Championships did not conflict with the two (March Madness [$M = 5.05$; $SD = 1.28$]; high school wrestling state championships [$M = 4.58$; $SD = 1.45$]) competitions (see Table 3).

Variations in Stakeholder's Perceptions

In addition to the overall mean values, the research also illustrated the segmented responses to the schedule changes when focusing on the stakeholder affiliation of the participants. In response to the value of a condensed, one semester wrestling season, the data supported

Table 2
Stakeholder's Perceptions on Elements of Dual and Individual Wrestler Championships

Stakeholders	Sanctioned Dual Championship		Strategic Championship Dates		Increase Home Dual Meets	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Coaches	4.94	1.24	4.68	1.44	4.70	1.13
Consumers	4.82	1.29	4.62	1.43	4.73	1.08
Officials	5.10	1.14	4.76	1.50	4.89	0.96
Student-athletes	4.70	1.01	4.74	1.19	4.82	1.36
Stakeholder	4.89	1.17	4.70	1.39	4.79	1.13

Table 3
Stakeholder's Perceptions on Importance of Avoiding Competition

Stakeholders	Avoid March Madness		Avoid HS Wrestling Season	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Coaches	4.78	1.40	4.52	1.39
Consumers	5.05	1.28	4.58	1.45
Officials	5.11	1.03	4.46	1.40
Student-athletes	4.87	1.19	4.14	1.40
Stakeholder	4.95	1.23	4.43	1.41

the notion that student-athletes were more likely to envision an improvement in academic performance than coaches ($F = 359$, $1 = 4.537$, $p < .05$). Further, the data also illustrated that coaches ($F = 1017$, $1 = 4.813$, $p < .05$) and student-athletes ($F = 1215$, $1 = 85.274$, $p < .01$) were significantly more likely to predict a drastic improvement in athletic performance than consumers due to a condensed, spring wrestling season.

Discussion

In an effort to fortify wrestling programs against elimination, the NWCA and advocates of amateur wrestling must identify strategies to improve the college wrestling product. With the growing emphasis on profit maximization in today's economic and intercollegiate athletic environment (Marburger & Hogshead-Makar, 2003; Zimbalist, 2003), it is clear that nonrevenue programs such as men's wrestling must find ways to improve the revenues realized by the programs if they are going survive in future generations. While marketing-based initiatives are important for the future of college wrestling, they are not going to be fully effective unless the NWCA finds ways to improve the current core product being offered to consumers (Cooper & Weight, 2009). Thus, the NCAA wrestling schedule (and related format) is a critical element to the sustainability of this sport in future generations.

In relation to program sustainability, the move to a condensed, one semester season offers several benefits that can help improve the positioning of college wrestling. In terms of developing the core product, the data supports the notion that a condensed season could offer two specific benefits: (1) improved athletic competition due to enhanced athlete performance (less burnout and injuries), and (2) improved marketability due to a unified event schedule. With these potential improvements, the NWCA could put college wrestling into a position to offer a much more exciting product to consumers. While this alone is enough to consider the possibility of an adjustment in the college wrestling season, the findings also revealed that a condensed schedule could bring some much needed improvements in student-athletes performance in the classroom. Given the purpose of intercollegiate athletics as well as the increased scrutiny of athlete academic performance with the advent of the APR (NCAA, 2009; Christy, Seifried, & Pastore, 2008), this benefit is extremely important because it gives athletic directors one less reason to eliminate men's wrestling programs in today's intercollegiate athletic environment.

Within the framework of adjusting the current season, there are also several content changes that must be made in order to maximize the consumer appeal of the college wrestling product. While stakeholders

supported the idea of coinciding dual and individual wrestler schedules, the data seemed to support the notion that a sanctioned NCAA dual meet championship would be most beneficial in creating additional consumer interest in college wrestling. Ultimately, this could be achieved if the NCAA membership, working with and through the NWCA, enacted legislation that would allow the National Duals to be included as an NCAA sanctioned championship event¹. Similarly, when redeveloping this event, the NWCA could have a stronger platform to promote the dual meet aspect of the sport to coaches and consumers. In future years, it is the team element of college wrestling that may allow the NWCA to grow the sport at the grassroots level (Moyer, Personal Interview, January 26, 2009).

When repositioning key events, it is also critical for sport organizations to consider their primary competition for consumers. With the current NCAA Wrestling Championships being held during the first round of the men's NCAA Basketball Tournament, it is highly unlikely that college wrestling will ever be able to draw a large amount of media attention. Similarly, this also makes it significantly less likely that college wrestling will ever develop the ability to attract new consumer segments to view its live or televised product. The college wrestling post-season also loses viewers by competing with several of the prime high school wrestling state championships. With this being the case, the NCAA Wrestling Championship loses hundreds of thousands of potential amateur wrestling viewers who choose to attend local high school tournaments. These forms of competition surely need to be taken into consideration when developing a new NCAA wrestling season.

Conclusions

For college wrestling to thrive, there must be a series of marketing initiatives implemented to increase the consumer interest in the product.

In addition to enhancing the NCAA wrestling schedule, the NWCA must evaluate the rules and regulations to ensure that an exciting core product is being delivered to fans of college wrestling. Once the entertaining product has been strengthened, innovative marketing campaigns are needed in order to create new consumer interest in college wrestling at the local, regional, and national levels. Ultimately, if amateur wrestling is able to build a solid fan base at the grassroots level, then college wrestling programs have a much greater chance of surviving in intercollegiate athletic programs. Future research should attempt to aid in the accomplishment of these critical objectives.

This research provides a framework to examine the core product being offered in other nonrevenue sports. In particular, the study provides an example of the potential improvements that can be realized from analyzing stakeholder's perceptions of the sport product being offered to consumers. With the economic challenges in the United States, scholars should continue to develop strategies to enhance the sustainability of men's and women's nonrevenue sports. Further, research should also attempt to identify ways for nonrevenue programs to survive in the current profit-maximization environment that has been adopted in Division I college athletics.

One limitation to the research is that the survey was not distributed to "non-attendees" of college wrestling. As a result, the study does not consider potential segments that could be interested in the college wrestling product if the right product was developed. In the future, researchers should consider investigating this population to determine strategies to attract these consumer segments. In addition, scholars should consider performing similar research on other Olympic sport events to improve sustainability initiatives.

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Journal of Sport Administration & Supervision

RESEARCH THAT MATTERS!

EVOLVING THE CORE PRODUCT: STAKEHOLDER'S PERCEPTIONS OF THE NCAA WRESTLING SEASON

Coyte G. Cooper
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Erianne Weight
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

CB 3182 Smith Building 05
Chapel Hill, NC 27599
Email: cgcooper@email.unc.edu

Research Problem

The purpose of the research surveyed critical stakeholders of intercollegiate wrestling (e.g., coaches, consumers, officials, and student-athletes) to identify potential strategies to enhance the quality of the college wrestling product. In particular, the research was designed to explore the format and content of the NCAA Division I wrestling season to uncover avenues of untapped commercial potential. With an analysis of stakeholder perceptions of the college wrestling season, the NWCA and advocates of college wrestling are provided with necessary data to make effective decisions about how to position the college wrestling season and enhance the quality of the season currently being implemented in college wrestling.

Issues

During the past 25 years, Universities and athletic directors have made the decision to eliminate more than 130 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) wrestling programs (NCAA Sports Sponsorship, 2008). While many advocates of college wrestling in the United States have blamed Title IX for program eliminations, several scholars have illustrated that the attrition of men's non-revenue teams is instead due to the lavish spending on men's basketball and men's football within athletic departments (Marburger & Hogshead-Makar, 2003, Zimbalist, 2003). With the economic challenges and the "arms race," it is imperative for college wrestling to develop strategies to ensure that each of its programs are self-sustainable in future years.

Summary

Following the distribution of the survey instrument, the data supported the notion that stakeholders of intercollegiate wrestling (coaches [N = 77], consumers [N = 954], officials [N = 29], and student-athletes [N = 279]) unanimously agreed upon several strategies to improve the quality of the schedule offered within the college wrestling product. In addition to several critical suggestions discussed in the article, stakeholders unanimously supported an adjustment in the college wrestling post-season to avoid March Madness (M = 4.95; SD = 1.23) and the high school wrestling state championships (M = 4.43; SD = 1.41). Several other critical findings are presented in the research.

Analysis

In an effort to fortify wrestling programs against elimination, the NWCA and advocates of amateur wrestling must identify strategies to improve the college wrestling product. With the growing emphasis on profit maximization in today's economic and intercollegiate athletic environment (Marburger & Hogshead-Makar, 2003; Zimbalist, 2003), it is clear that non-revenue programs such as men's wrestling must find ways to improve the revenues realized by the programs if they are going survive in future generations. While marketing-based initiatives are important for the future of college wrestling, they are not going to be fully effective unless the NWCA finds ways to improve the current core product being offered to consumers (Cooper & Weight, 2009). Thus, the NCAA wrestling schedule (and related format) is a critical element to the sustainability of this sport in future generations.

Discussions/Implications

The current research provides the NWCA with necessary data to work with college wrestling coaches and the NCAA to adjust the format of the current college wrestling season. Further, this research provides a framework to examine the core product being offered in other non-revenue Olympic sports. In particular, the study provides an example of the potential improvements that can be realized from analyzing stakeholder's perceptions of the sport product being offered to consumers. With the economic challenges in the United States, scholars should continue to develop strategies to enhance the sustainability of men's and women's nonrevenue sports.