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WRESTLING; Collegiate Wrestling Deaths Raise Fears About Training

By FRANK LITSKY Published: December 19, 1997

Amateur wrestling, perhaps the simplest and purest of all sports, has been shaken by the deaths of three college wrestlers in six weeks. The deaths, all of which occurred during strenuous weight-loss workouts, have set off a national debate over training techniques, the use of controversial nutritional supplements and the risks involved in sudden, large-scale weight loss.

"These deaths may be coincidences, but they are not being ignored or taken lightly," said Gary Abbott, a spokesman for the sport's national governing body, USA Wrestling. The organization held a national conference call on Tuesday night to discuss the issues with wrestling and medical experts.

Since then, the discussions have extended to the Federal Government and local law-enforcement authorities. On Wednesday, the Food and Drug Administration said it would assign investigators to determine whether the use of certain nutritional substances, many of which are available over the counter, may have contributed to the three deaths. That same day, prosecutors in Ann Arbor, Mich., said they were deciding whether to file charges in one of the deaths, which occurred at the University of Michigan.

All of this scrutiny comes at a time when amateur wrestling, which may have as many as 750,000 participants nationwide, is already under siege on the financial front. Title IX, the 1972 law that prohibits sex discrimination at any school receiving Federal aid, has led to a subsidization of intercollegiate women's sports and major cutbacks in college wrestling programs, from 788 schools in 1982 to 247 last year.

"Our sport has a lot of adversity to overcome," said Wayne Branstetter, coach of the perennially powerful Poway High School team in southern California. "There is a sense of going on the defense for your sport."

The first of the deaths occurred on Nov. 9, when Billy Saylor, a freshman at Campbell University in Buies Creek, N.C., died of cardiac arrest after riding an exercise bike and refusing liquids as he tried to lose six pounds. He was 19 years old.

Two weeks later, on Nov. 21, Joseph LaRosa, a senior at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, died of heat stroke after dressing in a rubber suit and riding a stationary bike in an attempt to lose four and a half pounds. He was 22.

And on Dec. 9, Jeff Reese, a junior at Michigan, died of kidney failure and heart malfunction while wearing a rubber suit and working out in a room heated to 92 degrees. He was 21.

Weight has always been a problem in certain sports. Jockeys can literally grow out of their jobs. Gymnasts have become anorexic, eating nothing but green salads. The cyclist Greg LeMond, who won the Tour de France three times, said an inability in later years to lose five pounds hurt him severely in climbing mountains. Swimmers and figure skaters have been slaves to the scale.

As in boxing and the martial arts, wrestling competition is conducted in weight classes. Wrestlers forever seem to be trying to lose weight to compete in lighter classes, and they can do it easily within reason. But when they try to lose too much too soon, the results can be fatal.

The three recent deaths have led authorities inside and outside the sport to question what "too much" and "too soon" mean. At Michigan, where prosecutors are examining the circumstances of Reese's death, wrestling practice was suspended until it could be determined if safety measures were needed.

"In 25 years in college wrestling," said Lars Jensen, the coach at San Francisco State University, "I never heard until now of deaths from cutting weight.

"Hopefully, it's a freak thing. It's not worth someone's life to make a weight class."

Some wrestlers are willing to take that gamble.

"They do lie to you," said T. J. Kerr, the coach at California State University-Bakersfield. "I have kids who will starve themselves before competition, so I take them out and make them eat."

Why the insistence of losing weight and body fat? The theory is that a 160-pound wrestler who cuts his weight to 150 is stronger than a wrestler who competes at his natural weight of 150.

"A wrestler with less body fat will perform better," said Zeke Jones, an assistant coach at Arizona State University and a 1992 Olympic silver medalist.

"But he can't function with a body fat of less than 4 to 5 percent. The key is education, telling them not to lose too much body fat or too much water. A quick fix is losing water and not body fat."

Supplements Help, But Is There a Risk?

Questions have arisen since the deaths about whether the use of a popular bodybuilding nutrient, creatine, adds to the hazards of rapid weight loss. Creatine, a combination of amino acids found in skeletal muscles, is popular among athletes in an artificial form that is available in health food stores in powder and capsule form. Wrestlers use it to recover more quickly from workouts and to help develop muscle bulk, but the abuse of creatine without sufficient water intake can cause the body to dangerously overheat.

Bruce Burnett, the national freestyle coach for USA Wrestling, said: "Creatine retains water in your muscles, so it doesn't work as a coolant. It helps recovery and muscle mass. It's a problem if you take too much and don't follow directions."

Jones said: "Creatine is a supplement we use across the board. An athlete who takes it in the morning speeds his recovery for the afternoon. His muscles recover quicker. But if there's a lot of weight loss, don't take it. If you weigh 125 pounds before practice and 119 at the end, that's a 5 percent loss and it's O.K. if you don't dehydrate excessively."

Jensen, the coach at San Francisco State, agreed that "creatine is a big thing nowadays." He said members of his team used it last season, but "I told them they needed to get off it." A couple of his wrestlers are still on it, including a heavyweight, but Jensen said he does not approve of its use because of concern about possible health risks.

That possibility prompted the F.D.A. investigation. A spokesman for the agency, Arthur Whitmore, told The Associated Press that scientists with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention "contacted us with the suspicion that there may be a dietary supplement connection" in the deaths, but added that there is no evidence yet to suggest that.

Besides diet, the use of rubber suits and heated rooms is also controversial. The National Collegiate Athletic Association's medical guidelines say saunas and rubber suits should be prohibited for weight loss, but the only place they are banned is at the season-ending N.C.A.A. championships. The National Federation of State High School Associations is much tougher, forbidding the use of saunas, sweat boxes, hot showers, whirlpools, rubber, vinyl and plastic suits or similar artificial heating devices and diuretics or other methods of quick weight reduction.

But John Azevedo, coach of the top-ranked Calvary Chapel High School in Costa Mesa, Calif., said: "I know kids use saunas. They do it on their own, go to their own workout place. A sauna isn't that big of a deal if you're doing it right. It can be therapeutic. But sucking water out too fast can be harmful."

Greg Strobel, who has been coaching wrestlers for 22 years, the last three at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pa., said: "I believe you can cut only 3 percent body weight with dehydration. In a good workout, an athlete can lose 4 to 8 pounds, a football player maybe 10 to 15 pounds in practice. That's water weight they're losing. A well-conditioned athlete can lose 3 percent easily, and it won't hurt his performance and it won't hurt him.

"But if you're going to lose 5 or 7 percent of your body weight, you've got to do it without overheating your body because you can die if you're severely overheated if you're dehydrated or not. It can happen to a non-athlete as well as an athlete. That's heat stroke, and it's preventable."

Making Weight Means Everything

College wrestlers have an advantage over their high school counterparts because collegians weigh in on the night before a competition and have most of the next day to restore their fluid levels. Schoolboys weigh in on the morning of competition or an hour or two before competition.

"The biggest misconception is that you need to skip meals to lose weight," said Rohan Gardner, a two-time all-American and 1996 Big Ten Conference champion in the 177-pound class at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill.

Another problem, Gardner said, is that some coaches may decide to have certain wrestlers diet so they can drop down one weight class for big meets at the end of the season.

The three deaths dramatize the desperation of wrestlers who try to lose weight quickly.

At Michigan, when a regular was injured, Reese was the only wrestler available for the 150-pound weight class. Dr. Bader Cassin, the chief medical examiner of Washtenaw County, which includes Ann Arbor, said Reese began a program "a couple of days" before his death to lose 17 pounds.

According to Cassin, Reese, in his rubberized wet suit, worked out for two hours in the 92-degree heat. Cassin said Reese's muscle mass broke down and flooded his bloodstream with acids, causing his kidneys to shut down. It was a case, the medical examiner said, of trying to lose too much too soon.

"He probably got very close, if not to, his goal weight," Cassin said. "Unfortunately, it cost him his life."

The Washtenaw County prosecutor's office got involved in the case after it was reported that an assistant coach who was with Reese waited an hour after Reese collapsed before calling 911.

At Wisconsin-La Crosse, LaRosa was trying to get his 157 1/2-pound weight down to 153 in four hours for a meet, according to Todd Clark, a university spokesman. From 5:30 to 7:30 A.M., he rode a stationary bicycle on and off while wearing a rubberized suit. When he was still one and a half pounds over the needed weight, he drank water, Clark said, and went back on the bike. Shortly thereafter, he collapsed and died.

At Campbell, 30 miles south of Raleigh, N.C., Athletic Director Stan Collins said that after a Thursday practice, Saylor weighed 201 pounds. He had to get down to 195 for a 6:30 A.M. weigh-in on Friday for a Saturday competition. At 2 A.M. Friday, not wearing a rubber suit, he started riding an exercise bike. About 4 A.M., he collapsed, and an hour later he was pronounced dead.

Some coaches, like Jeff Buxton of Blair Academy in Blairstown, N.J., require their wrestlers to drink water during workouts. Buxton, whose 1995 and 1996 teams were ranked No. 1 in the nation by USA Today, said: "Kids in college have older bodies and can sweat more. Some of our kids don't want to drink water at practice, but we make it mandatory."

"We've known for years that kids, to make weight, would not eat or drink," said Jim Scott, the chairman of USA Wrestling's Sports Science and Medicine Committee. "Part of the problem is that young athletes are dedicated to getting better and will try anything."

Ed Reese, whose son, Jeff, was one of the three wrestlers who died, wondered about the benefits of drastic weight loss.

"Even if he would have survived," the father said, "what harm would've been done to his body? Dehydration can cause liver and heart damage. That's why there are former wrestlers dying of heart attacks in their 40's. And why should a 190-pound kid at Ohio State and a 190-pound kid at Michigan both try to lose weight and then wrestle at 170? It doesn't make sense."