

## The Mind

# Eating Disorders Among Wrestlers

Text **Robert Andrews, MA, LMFT, CSC**

*One of our wrestlers is cutting back on his diet and seems to be losing a lot of weight. I can tell it is affecting performance and I am concerned for his health. What can I do to help?*

Competitors in sports where weight impacts performance or sports that enforce weight limits – like wrestling and gymnastics – are prone to experience issues with nutrition and eating disorders.

When an athlete goes to such extremes as disordered eating to gain a competitive edge it raises a red flag.

A healthy diet is an important cornerstone to achieving and maintaining a high level of performance. When an athlete begins to sacrifice nutrition, this tells me the athlete is under tremendous stress to perform at a high level and win.

Issues around diet and eating patterns are symptoms that the athlete is not talking about that pressure. Athletes will stuff feelings of stress by overeating, or attempt to control these feelings by controlling what they eat.

Athletic trainers can work with coaches to create time for athletes to talk about the stress they are under to perform and win. An easy way to address this is to create team meetings before practice where athletes can talk about performance pressures, or anything else they have going on that might inhibit performance.

This is practical with gymnastics, wrestling and basketball teams, as they have fewer team members than football or baseball teams.

In sports, the mental and emotional aspect of competition is half of the total performance equation. With a clear mind and heart, practice sessions will be lighter, and you will see a more precise, focused and productive session.

Lastly, if the symptoms continue, take appropriate steps to get the athlete the proper care and support from a mental health provider trained in issues with food and eating.

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