

Cutting Weight the Right Way

By Phil Riccio - Wrestler, Coach, Parent, Fan

Losing weight to compete at a certain weight class, or "making weight" as it is often referred to by wrestlers, is the most misunderstood and maligned part of our sport! But it's as much a part of the sport as skating is to hockey.

There are several reasons for these misunderstandings and I'd like to discuss them as well as eliminate some of the myths and hopefully help high school wrestlers to better understand what's best for them and their team.

First lets step back and look at this from outside the sport and try to understand why it's not only misunderstood, but often frowned upon and criticized by those who have never competed.

In America Everything is BIG!

We are a country enamored with size, we like everything big, the bigger the better, big houses, big cars and big athletes. I watch the NFL and I'm amazed at the size of some of these guys. In 1986 the Chicago Bears had an anomaly know as "The Fridge". William Perry was a defensive tackle that weighed over 300 pound, he was **not** the norm. Today almost every offensive lineman in the game is over 300 pounds, many with about 40% body fat. These are very unique men that happen to be very heavy, but very mobile and, believe it or not, in pretty decent shape. Unfortunately high school athletes think they can be that "big" and still be as good as these professionals. Ninety nine percent are not, and never will be, they are just big, fat and slow, with major health problems just around the corner.

Why is it that the heavyweight division is the most popular in boxing? They certainly are not the most talented. Sure they have knockout power, but so did Tommy Hearn, Marvin Hagler and Sugar Ray Robinson, the list goes on. It has a lot less to do with skill then it does with size. The fans want to see big athletes punch each other. Why is it when they show amateur wrestling (which is not very often) they hardly ever show the entire match of anyone but the heavyweights? Because the networks are catering to the masses, and the masses want to see the big guys.

I believe the thing that epitomizes this more then anything else is no one says anything about the football player who is grossly overweight and is bound for major health problems down the road. But these same people are very critical of the wrestler who is working out very hard and gets into great shape with around 8% body fat. This is often considered "unhealthy", the kid is still growing and this is not good for them. You hear comments like "They are not eating normal", or "They could become anorexic", the list goes on. But it seems to be OK to stuff yourself with pizza, junk food and soda, and that's considered a "normal" diet for a teenager.

We have only ourselves to blame.

Now that we've looked at the bigger picture, lets step back into the wrestling community. Most of the bad reputation around weight cutting is well deserved. Although things are better today with not allowing rubber suits and saunas/steam rooms and having the morning weigh-ins, old habits and old memories die-hard. Many teachers I talk to still remember kids wearing rubber suits under

their clothes, running from class to class. Many teachers and administrators would get very annoyed the day of a match when the wrestlers were always late for class because they went to the gym to check their weight between each period. Or even worse, would skip a class all together to run. Of course there are many more drastic measures kids have taken, and these just add fuel to that fire.

Many teachers are parents and can not understand why someone is not eating, they believe that is not healthy and why can't they just wrestle what they weigh?

So if you combine the misunderstandings with the silly and annoying things wrestlers do to make weight, along with the "why would you want to get smaller/lighter" when all of America is focused on being bigger, what you have is a cultural clash between wrestlers and everyone else. We are in the minority and obviously not very well understood.

When it becomes more about making weight!

One of the things I see time and time again is that making weight becomes the primary focus, and the actual wrestling is a by-product. Getting to the weight becomes the goal. The focus on conditioning, technique and staying healthy are all secondary. This is very obvious when a kid comes into the wrestling room with 4 or 5 layers of clothing on, including a hooded sweatshirt. All this does is slow this individual down and cause fatigue. It's also a great way for teammates to jam fingers and thumbs in all those layers of clothes. If you go into any top college wrestling room all you will see is T-shirts and shorts. This allows these guys to go as hard as they can and burn more calories. At the end of practice when they are conditioning some may throw on a sweatshirt.

When all you're thinking about is getting down to weight the focus on technique suffers. I've been in many wrestling rooms as a guest and I'm often asked if I can go over a move or series of moves. I can always tell the kids who are *zoned out* because they are thinking only of making weight. My speaking is causing them to sit for 5 minutes when they could be doing something to lose weight. They are fidgety, distracted and not getting anything out of this session. Even worse, they are so hungry and thirsty they have no attention span. It's extremely difficult to learn and retain anything, either on the mat **or in the classroom**, when you are literally starving yourself!

Bouncing yourself right out of placing...

One of the biggest problems with kids cutting weight is that they do it improperly. I will discuss what you should be doing a little later on. But first you need to understand what **NOT** to do. The **number one** thing to avoid is bouncing!

Bouncing is when you come into practice on Monday - 8, 9, 10 or more pounds over your weight class. So now the focus is to get to weight for Wednesday evenings match. So on go the layers and out goes anything but the focus on making weight. So by Wednesday you've had little or nothing to eat over the last 2 days and certainly not as hydrated as you need to be. Because you have literally starved yourself for two days you eat too much (and probably not the right food) after weigh-ins. Now your digestive system goes into overdrive to process the first real food it's had in over 48 hours. This now creates a major performance problem. As your body is digesting this food you will have to go out and wrestle and will need to perform physically at a high level. But your body is busy digesting that food and you will be sluggish and not respond as well as you could regardless of your conditioning.

To compound the problem, after the match you "pig out" because you're still hungry. Of course when you get on the scale Thursday you are 8, 9 or more pounds over again and have to go through this scenario all over again for Saturday's match.

The human body is an amazing 'machine', especially a young body. It will take a little while, but 2 things will happen when you bounce or "yo-yo" like this.

First the body will begin to adapt to the starvation phase, it's known as "feast or famine". In order to function, the metabolism slows down making it tougher and tougher for the weight to come off. Basically your body is protecting you from yourself. This is part of thousands of years of evolution when our ancestors did not have the convenience of stocking up the refrigerator with food from the local grocery store.

The second thing is mental and physical exhaustion. Your body can only handle this for so long before it begins to rebel. This just so happens to coincide with about the length of the season. So just as you're getting into the end of season tournaments, your body is telling you "I can't do this anymore" and it shuts down. This is the reason many kids who did a great job at the early season tournaments in December end up placing 5th at their sectional tournament in February. Their bodies have shut down on them and they can not react like they should be able to, they don't have the strength and quickness they are use to and their endurance is down the drain. I have seen this happen way more often then I'd like to recall.

The other thing improper dieting will cause is stress on your immune system. This opens you up to injuries, does not allow your body to recuperate as fast as it should, and opens the door for all kinds of flues and other viruses.

Every wrestling season kids get sick. Several years ago I started making notes on this. Now this is in no way a scientific study, but what I came up with was pretty interesting.

First, most people just felt it was part of the season. The winter is cold and flu season and when you put a bunch of kids together in such a close contact environment as wrestling they are bound to spread germs.

That was the part that got me thinking. What makes the season any different then the off-season for the kids who wrestle year round? My two sons have been in at least 6 or 7 wrestling rooms over the last couple of months and have worked out with kids from all over the place, in fact all over the country. In one instance a couple of the kids had slight colds, but no one else seemed to get sick, even though they worked out with the kids who were not feeling well. Could it be that these kids are not cutting weight and are healthy, with healthy immune systems???

What I found was that the kids who are always cutting weight and bouncing up and down not only get sick, but also they do not recover very quickly. The kids that are cutting weight correctly, or not at all, either do not get sick and if they do they recover much quicker. Like I said, this is not a scientific study, but it certainly makes sense.

Why would you do that?

Every year I see kids who work exceptionally hard in the off-season. Not only wrestling, but lifting to increase their strength and endurance. This is several months of hard work in which there are visible results, these results are both in their physical appearance and strength. But for some

reason many of these kids just "flush" all this hard work when the wrestling season approaches. They start cutting weight and stop lifting and by the middle of the season have lost a fair amount of lean body mass and with it much of the strength they had achieved.

Here's how this works. If you start lifting in April and you weigh 162 and have 15% body fat, your lean body weight is around 138 pounds. That's actually pretty good. With all your hard work lifting, you get up to 170 pounds by the end of October. Checking your body fat you are now around 12%. So what you've done is drop 4 pounds of fat and added 12 pounds of muscle. Outstanding job (and actually pretty common for young athletes). Now you decide you are going to wrestle 152. So in order to stay within healthy parameters you don't want to get below 7% (5 or 6 is too low for teenagers that are still growing and have to make weight twice a week for over 2 months). So at 152 at 7% your lean muscle mass is 141.36, so you've lost over 8 POUNDS of muscle! That's almost $\frac{3}{4}$'s of what it took all that time to put on! Do you really want to do that?

Calculations

162 pounds x 15% BF = 24.3 pounds of fat
162 pounds - 24.3 pounds of body fat = 137.7 pounds lean body mass

170 pounds x 12% BF = 20.4 pounds of fat
170 pounds - 20.4 pounds of body fat = 149.6 pounds lean body mass

149.6 - 137.7 = 11.9 pounds of lean body mass* or muscle

152 pounds x 7% BF = 10.64 pounds of fat
152 pounds - 10.64 pounds of body fat = 141.36 pounds of lean body mass

149.6 - 141.36 = 8.24 pounds of muscle lost.

*Lean body mass consists of muscle, bones and organs. Although bones and organs will continue to develop and grow in a teenager, the greatest percentage of gain in this area is muscle.

Doing it RIGHT!

Cutting weight properly is actually not that difficult, it just takes a little discipline. The best thing to do is continue everything you are currently doing as far as working out, including lifting. Come November 1st cut out the junk food. Now this does not mean diet, it means exactly what it says, cut out the junk. Now I know most high school students have taken some sort of health class and you know what is considered junk and what's not, but here's a short list of things you definitely need to cut out.

- Potato Chips, Frito's, Cheese Doodles...
- Any kind of soda (this is a big one!)
- Candy (this includes chocolate, gummy worms, sweet tarts...)
- Processed pastry's (Funny Bone's, Twinkies, Ring Dings, Devil Dogs)
- Fast foods (McDonald's, BK) especially the fries!

If you want fast food, chicken taco's, a Burger King, Arby's or Wendy's Grilled chicken is OK, but does contain a lot of sodium.

- Big helpings of ice cream or any of the "gunk" you put on it.
- Stay away from whole milk. Try 1% or no fat (it's much better for your skin too).

- Deep fat fried foods in general.
- High sodium foods like canned soups
- Cookies (this was always the toughest for me)

OK what should you have? Well again, this is not a diet, you really don't have to limit your portions (yet), but just start eating healthy and drink LOTS of water.

The Good Stuff

- Baked or broiled meats, fish or poultry
- Fresh or frozen veggies
- Rice (stay away from white rice, go with brown or wild rice)
- Pizza is OK but not a whole one and stay away from the extra cheese and all the toppings.
Vegetable toppings like mushrooms, peppers and such are OK
- Fruit, fresh and canned
- Small helpings of ice cream ;^)
- Eggs
- Water, water and more water!!!

These are just some examples of both good and bad, using common sense is pretty self-explanatory here.

Now I always like November 1st because having some Halloween candy is a great last treat. If you continue to workout hard, including lifting, and you cut out the junk and start eating healthy, not only will you start the process in motion, but also you will actually feel a lot better. Chances are you will drop 5 or 6 pounds because you are not taking in all those empty calories. Once the season starts you'll need to modify your eating again.

One of the biggest mistakes kids make is they do not eat often enough. As I mentioned earlier your body is an amazing machine and will adapt if you starve it or if it thinks you are starving it. What you need to do is "fool" it. The best way to do this is with 4 or 5 small meals a day. This is pretty easy to do, just small portions of the good stuff with plenty of water and your body will not shut down or slow your metabolize.

What happens when you do it right is you are losing fat and not just water. You feel better and you are able to eat more normally. Your immune system does not stress out so you stay healthy. You can focus on your technique, your conditioning and the match at hand. Your schoolwork does not suffer and teachers are not complaining about "those damn wrestlers". You're not grumpy and irritable and the season is actually FUN!