

The West Virginia Stall Procedure Saga



By William Welker, Ed.D.

INTRODUCTION

Mike Mason, an all-American wrestler for West Virginia University, wrestled in the semifinals of the NCAA Division I national championships in 1998. Mason lost the semifinal match as a result of stalling infractions. The match went into the 30-second tiebreaker. Mason's opponent won the toss of the disk, and chose down. Having never been warned for stalling prior to the tiebreaker, the official warned and penalized Mason for stalling twice in less than 30 seconds, awarding the match to his opponent.

This unfortunate experience was the impetus for a two-year NFHS pilot study in West Virginia — the "Stall Procedure."

What changes were initiated?

The following rules modifications were incorporated in the first year of the Stall Procedure on a statewide basis.

No points were awarded when stalling was first called. A wrestler was warned on the first offense. On the second, third and fourth offenses, the matman's opponent was given the choice of top, bottom or neutral position. The wrestler was disqualified on the fifth offense.

Also, no stalling was called in the 30-second tiebreaker. Instead, quick stalemates were called if the top wrestler appeared to be hanging on, rather than riding his opponent.

Why develop such a radical approach for penalizing stalling?

To begin with, there have been many sincere attempts, written into the rules, demonstrated at clinics, and produced on instructional videotapes, to increase consistency in the area of stalling. However, decades of experience has taught us that it is virtually impossible to train officials to call stalling consistently.

Second, the consensus of opinion among officials in West Virginia was that stalling, like holding in football, is entirely too subjective to award "unearned" points. In football, for

example, no points (only yards) are awarded when holding is penalized.

Third, many West Virginia officials believed that too many wrestling matches have been decided by iffy stalling calls (usually the second one) in the final seconds of the bout. This either cost the matman a match or took it into overtime. Thus, the referee became the focal point of the competition, not the participants. Indeed, the "referee's decision" was eliminated several years ago for the same reason.

Finally, due to the manner in which stalling is presently enforced, many coaches perceive wrestling referees as having too much power in determining the winner.

Why the "no-stall" approach to the 30-second tiebreaker?

As the tiebreaker is now set up, the official is only thinking of penalizing the top wrestler for stalling. Of course, the bottom wrestler will lose if he stalls, but that still does not solve the problem of officiating fairness. What presently exists is an internal stalling bias against the top wrestler.

Next, there is the luck factor of the disk toss in the tiebreaker. The winner of the flip rarely chooses the top position. So, not only does he win the toss by the element of chance, choosing down, but the wrestler also eliminates any possibility of being penalized for stalling.

(Important note: With the 2001-02 rule change, the problem still exists. The new regulation awards the wrestler who scores the first point(s) the choice of position if the match reaches the tiebreaker. Both in dual meets and tournaments, the luck factor comes into play by the flip of the disk. Naturally, the matman who has choice in the second period of the match will take down. When the first wrestler gets the escape or reversal, he will be given the choice in the tiebreaker, even if his opponent does the same in the third period.)

Lastly, how can the top wrestler be expected to take risky chances for near-fall points? First, he may be exhausted after having wrestled an entire regulation bout and overtime period. And second, he probably didn't score near-fall points during the regular match because both wrestlers were so close in ability. Thus, quick stalemates, not stalling, was part of the Stall Procedure design for tiebreakers.

What did we learn the first year of the pilot study?

At the conclusion of the first season, all West Virginia wrestling coaches and officials were canvassed. It was determined that although the respondents liked the choice of position after the warning stage, the majority preferred point-penalties to follow.

The original Stall Procedure format failed to take into account coaching and/or wrestler tactics toward the end of the third period. There were isolated incidents across the state where a matman blatantly stalled, knowing his opponent would not receive any points.

The Stall Procedure for the second year was revised as follows:

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| First Offense | — Warning |
| Second Offense | — Choice of Position (top, bottom or neutral) |
| Third Offense | — 1 point |
| Fourth Offense | — 2 points |
| Fifth Offense | — Disqualification |

As far as the tiebreaker was concerned, officials continued to indicate quick stalemates, not stalling. Both coaches and officials liked this practice during the first year of the experiment.

What did we learn the second year of the pilot study?

At the end of the second year, the coaches and officials were again surveyed to evaluate the revised version of the Stall Procedure. We compared it to the traditional stalling set-up throughout the nation.

Below is a summary of the responses from numerous West Virginia coaches and officials to some of the more significant questions:

* Do you prefer giving a wrestler a choice of position on the second stalling call rather than a point?

70% YES 30% NO

* Do you like stalemates rather than indicating stalling during the 30-second tiebreaker?

88% YES 12% NO

* Do you like the second year of the Stall Procedure better than how stalling is now called in wrestling?

79% YES 21% NO

I thought the responses to the next two general questions were interesting, but not surprising to the experienced wrestling observer.

* Do you believe that stalling will ever be called the same by different officials?

4% YES 96% NO

* Whether or not you agree with an individual official's philosophy on calling stalling, do you appreciate the fact that the official is consistent on how stalling is indicated?

95% YES 5% NO

Conclusion

Everyone knows that change is initially marked with much resistance. Still, our coaches and officials viewed the modifications made for the second year of the Stall Procedure to be very workable. They found it to be an improvement upon how stalling is presently penalized.

I am very proud of the West Virginia wrestling community for having had the courage to take on a stalling project of such innovative magnitude. And, I felt it was my obligation — to them — to let you know that the Stall Procedure truly worked. ■

(Editor's Note: The Stall Procedure in West Virginia was a two-year pilot study for the NFHS from 1998 to 2000, investigating original approaches for penalizing stalling. The written report and survey statistics of this two-year West Virginia pilot study, originally referred to as the Stall Procedure, was sent to the NFHS Wrestling Rules Committee after the 1999-2000 wrestling season. Dr. Welker also presented the findings of the experiment at the NFHS Wrestling Interpreters' Meeting on September 26, 2001 in Indianapolis. The NFHS Wrestling Rules Committee has reviewed suggestions for the change in stalling procedures over the past two years, and has not found a procedure that is better than what is currently in place.)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Dr. Bill Welker, a former Pennsylvania state champion, has been the wrestling rules interpreter and clinician for the West Virginia Secondary School Activities Commission since 1989. He was selected as 1990 West Virginia Wrestling Official of the Year. Most recently, Dr. Welker was honored as the 2002 Mideast Section Distinguished Active Official.*



