

Coaching High School Wrestling Makes Me A Better Lawyer

By **Richard Davis** (February 14, 2024, 2:27 PM EST)

*In this **Expert Analysis series**, attorneys discuss how their unusual extracurricular activities enhance professional development, providing insights and pointers that translate to the office, courtroom and beyond. If you have a hobby you would like to write about, email expertanalysis@law360.com.*

While I'm not certain, I'm pretty sure that I'm the only person in Alabama who currently is both a securities litigator and a high school wrestling coach.

Admittedly, I'm somewhat of an accidental wrestling coach, but it has turned out to be what eminent painter Bob Ross might have called a "happy accident." Coaching wrestling has been great fun, but it also has helped me become a better lawyer.

Embrace the unknown.

My introduction to wrestling occurred about 10 years ago when my son wanted to sign up for youth wrestling in first grade. A few days before the first practice, he asked, "Dad, do you think they will let me wear a mask?"

At that point, I realized that he had presumed it would be WWE-style wrestling. We ultimately convinced him to give Olympic-style wrestling a shot, and he wound up really enjoying it.

Fast forward to 10th grade, when he moved to a local private school and asked the athletic director if the school would start a wrestling program. The athletic director agreed, but only on the condition that I would be the head coach. I accepted this bargain reluctantly, in part because I knew very little about how to be a wrestling coach.

But that step into the unknown has led to amazing experiences, including watching our boys win their first varsity matches, getting medals for top finishes and, most importantly, watching them show grace and sportsmanship as they proceed through the challenges of the wrestling season.

I easily could have played it safe. I could have stood on the sidelines and waited for the school to find someone else — perhaps someone more qualified than I was (which was a pretty low bar). I'm glad that I did not take that route.

As lawyers, we sometimes err too far on the side of caution and are unwilling to put ourselves into new, and often uncertain, situations. But jumping into a new experience — embracing a willingness to say yes — presents opportunities to learn new lessons. After doing so, you'll find you are much less daunted by unfamiliar situations and much more willing to dive into new, unfamiliar territory.

Find (and be) a mentor.

Once I agreed to take the coaching position, I quickly realized my first problem — I didn't know what I was doing. So, I set out to find a mentor. Luckily, the coaching staff at my son's old school agreed to help me.

They showed me how to register the team for tournaments, how to handle weight certification (i.e., the mandatory preseason weight check to ensure that the wrestlers do not cut too much weight too quickly), and how to give meaningful instruction during matches.

I'll admit that I still occasionally give dumb advice — like "Pin him!" or "Stand up!" — during matches, the latter of which is easier said than done when a 175-pound person is lying on top of you. But my wrestlers have made it through almost two seasons without major coaching-related blunders, which would not have been possible without great mentorship from the other coaches.

Their mentorship as wrestling coaches has made me a better mentor to other lawyers. If you spend time as a mentee, you'll be more patient with questions, having asked plenty of your own. You'll be more understanding of situations where people are a bit lost and need a simple nudge in the right direction, or where people are completely lost and need to start from scratch.



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Being a mentee will change your perspective and will make you a more compassionate mentor.

Know the rules.

One requirement of being a licensed coach is passing the state high school wrestling rules test.

I figured I knew enough to ace it, especially having watched plenty of youth wrestling matches over the years. Plus, I have passed three different state bar exams, so how much tougher could the Alabama High School Athletic Association wrestling rules test be?

Well, I have to report that it actually was much tougher than I expected.

But studying the rules has also proven to be useful. I now watch matches with a clearer understanding of the rules and how they apply. I can occasionally spot an error by the referees or the scorekeepers. Last season, I even used my courtroom skills and knowledge of the rules to get a call overturned in one of our wrestler's matches.

As a lawyer with almost 30 years of experience, I can fall into the trap of assuming what the rules are, particularly in new or unfamiliar jurisdictions. I will also admit that my current understanding of the rules is based in part on what I learned in my civil procedure class in 1994. But, of course, those rules have changed over time.

Being a coach has reminded me that it's important to take time to read and understand the applicable rules. Not only are they a necessary precondition of practice, they can also help you achieve positive, substantive results for your clients.

Engage with new people, especially those who may be different than you.

One thing I knew about youth wrestling was that the season would take me to some interesting places.

At work, I typically deal with legal departments of major financial institutions and Fortune 500 companies, which can be a somewhat different crowd than the attendees at the average Alabama high school wrestling tournament. But the folks I have met have been warm, hospitable and thrilled to see our team at their event.

As lawyers, we often operate in a bubble. But that is not where most people live. By spending time in different environments, you will become better at connecting with nonattorneys — these can be people who you will encounter as jury members, fact witnesses, courthouse staff, and those in other important roles. Going outside of your lawyer bubble will enhance your ability to connect with different crowds, which will improve your overall effectiveness as an attorney.

Get back up.

While wrestling is a physically demanding sport, the bigger challenge is often the mental aspect. High school wrestlers typically stand toe to toe with someone as big and strong as they are, and spend six minutes trying to put the other person's shoulders on the mat.

Matches can be draining and exhausting. Referees do their best, but don't always get it right. Getting pinned in front of your teammates, friends and coaches can be hard to swallow.

But at most tournaments, win or lose, you have to wrestle another match 45 minutes later. And that is where the mental challenge lies, for both the wrestler and the coach. As a coach, I need to console my wrestlers with the right mix of sympathy and candidness. I need to instruct them on tactics that they can use for their next match. But most importantly, I need to encourage them to be resilient, to get back up and give it another shot.

As a securities litigator, I have experienced great victories and crushing defeats. I occasionally have felt that the referees (i.e., the judges or arbitrators) have gotten things wrong. But every time something doesn't go my way, I have to remember what I tell my wrestlers: When the next match begins, go put your toe on the line and give your best effort for yourself and the team. In the end, resiliency, I believe, is one of the most important skills that any professional can have.

It's more than just six minutes.

Even my favorite high school wrestling movie of all time can be helpful to lawyers. As mentioned above, a wrestling match typically lasts for six minutes. So, I'll end with a quote from the classic 1985 movie "Vision Quest." In the immortal words of Loudon Swain's friend, Elmo, "It ain't the six minutes ... it's what happens in that six minutes."

While that's good advice for wrestlers, it's also a good reminder for clients who are scrutinizing those 0.1 increments on our time sheets.

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