

Wrestling must come together more than ever before

(Editor's Note: The following is an excerpt from a forthcoming book "Diversity Is the Difference: Bobby Douglas' Mission to Save Wrestling" by former legendary wrestler and coach Bobby Douglas and Bill X. Barron from Rocky Mountain Nationals.)

I have been an athlete, a coach, an administrator, an official, and have served on various rules committees. But never in my lifetime has wrestling — and all of contact sports — faced what we see now in this devil of a disease.

Coronavirus will impact all facets of society, but perhaps nowhere will that influence be seen as it is on the world of athletics, particularly on contact sports, specifically wrestling.

The challenge that lies before us is not only real, but also existential. It pits us against our human nature. Will Darth Vader and the virus of distrust keep us distant from one another — or will we respond more to the Luke Skywalker within us who instinctively trusts in people's best?

This virus — and the safety precautions as well as the prevailing fear which it will sustain — will be with us much longer and in potentially life-changing parameters for a time unknown. I predict this may end wrestling as we know it. With no fans and no contact, where are we?

What will wrestling be like if we are forbidden to shake hands before and after a contest, shunned when we attempt to hug a good opponent. Never mind participate in the actual body-to-body combat, which is not only the essence of the sport, but which also defines our character and delineates as true champions those who emerge whole from the 28-foot circle.

Among all the sports, wrestling stands front and center. From the Biblical origins to the Roman and Greek battlefields, to the Nubians of North Sudan from which I am descended, wrestling has directed our leadership, formed our crucial decisions and ultimately determined who we are as human beings.

It's my opinion, if wrestling is going to survive, it needs to become diversified. That means it must be available to everyone who has the ability to get onto the mat, including the disabled, minorities and females. Maybe the ultimate irony of the virus is that it attacks diversity — namely black and brown communities — in a higher percentage than other groups.

During this time of uncertainty, in all the questions expressed to me, there is an ever-present fear that wrestling is going by the wayside. Yet, to be blunt, the concern encompasses more than our sport. The actual virus, as well as the "germ" mentality, now invades our way of life and threatens our interactions with one another.

Wrestling is in danger. The virus, which now affects society, will have direct and long-lasting consequences. All contact sports are in trouble. Will the parameters of contact be forever rewritten? Will the much-anticipated NFL football stadium

concept for the canceled 2020 NAAs ever happen? Will athletes want to perform and will fans want to watch sports in a virtual reality?

On a smaller level, what is the best course forward for practice and matches, from the locker and practice rooms to the competition itself? Those in charge of wrestling organizations have a job to do, for now the rubber hits the road. This virus is perhaps the most significant problem wrestling has ever had, even if or when the professionals come up with an antidote.

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We cannot rely upon wrestling officials and persons in charge to make the decision. It must be made by those who understand how to shut the virus down. Until then, we need to put the brakes on all participation and competition until we get our arms around this situation.

Athletes, coaches and fans need to understand that this is not just dangerous. This virus is a killer; it is life-threatening to all associated individuals as well as to the sport itself.

When and how we can safely return to the sport we love is totally uncertain. The most asked question to me these days: "What do you think is going to happen to wrestling?"

Believe me, as one who has experienced and lived this sport at all levels, I feel for the athletes who have their goals on hold. If I were still a competitive wrestler, I would want to wrestle. If I were still a coach, I would want to compete.

But if you are a parent now, will you even allow your son or daughter to return to wrestling before this situation is completely resolved? As one who has lived and breathed wrestling for 75 years, as much as it breaks my heart, my answer, for now, is "no."

While I feel for everyone involved, we cannot allow this sport to endanger the lives of people. Wrestling has changed so many lives, including my own, yet I cannot imagine competing and gathering under the current circumstances.

Parents and kids may be upset because they are not wrestling. But would you rather be wrestling or lying in a casket? Look at what's happening in New York City, Chicago, and in America as a whole. And which population has the highest casualties? Minorities.

What's evident in our society is also reflected in what is missing in the sport we

must save. First, we must get this disease under control. But then to diversify and ultimately ensure the survival of wrestling, we must address the inequalities of our society while we also redefine what it means to be a wrestler.

The sport is on its back, staring at the ceiling lights. How will the wrestling community respond before an official slaps the mat, indicating the end not only of the match but of the sport?

As a former athlete, official, coach, and administrator, I am insisting that all those involved field a conference call between the NFHS, NCAA, USA Wrestling & AAU Wrestling, and the Olympic Committee, as well as seek input from all four professional sports organizations.

This situational dilemma will not be "over when it's over" like World War II and the 1980 Olympic Boycott. This choice will test our minds, our souls, our hearts. It is up to us to respond with a carefully considered, time-tested, and medically-centered approach.

Wrestling is the only sport that goes back to the history of humankind; that's mentioned in the Bible, that's essential to every battlefield outcome. Now we are faced with a disease that threatens to take wrestling away from the face of the world.

There is a Persian proverb attributed to Zarathustra: "Four things come not back: the spoken word, the sped arrow, the past

Guest Columnist



Bobby Douglas

life, and the neglected opportunity." Once gone, you can't get life back from what you have given, sent, spent, or lost.

Wrestling is the world's most magnificent embrace of bodies, spirits and minds. What begins with a handshake and ends with a hug requires an all-out physical, mental and emotional commitment. When we return to that endeavor, it needs to be fully and without reservation. ■

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