

## PROSPECTS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF WRESTLING AS AN OLYMPIC SPORT

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### **Abstract**

Wrestling is one of the oldest competitive disciplines in the Olympic Movement, yet it has faced existential challenges to its programme status in recent decades. This article examines the historical trajectory, current governance landscape, statistical participation trends, gender equity progress, and future developmental prospects of wrestling as an Olympic sport, with particular attention to Central Asian – especially Uzbek – contributions to the discipline. Using a mixed-methods approach combining systematic literature review, secondary statistical analysis, and SWOT framework, the study reveals that wrestling's Olympic position has stabilised following the 2013 IOC crisis, with measurable growth in national participation, women's competition, digital audience engagement, and anti-doping compliance. Projections to 2028 (Los Angeles Olympics) indicate continued incremental growth provided that United World Wrestling implements audience-centred rule reforms, expands grassroots development in underrepresented regions, and deepens partnerships with digital media platforms. The findings hold implications for national sport governing bodies, policymakers, and coaches seeking to align wrestling development with Olympic agenda priorities.

### **Keywords**

wrestling; Olympic sport; United World Wrestling; sport governance; gender equity; Uzbekistan; IMRAD; sport development

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Wrestling stands as one of humanity's oldest organised athletic contests, depicted on Egyptian tomb paintings dating to 3400 BCE and formally included in the Ancient Olympic Games from 708 BCE. In the modern Olympic era, wrestling has maintained near-continuous presence since the first Athens Games of 1896,

making it among the most historically entrenched competitive disciplines within the Olympic programme.

Despite this heritage, wrestling confronted an unprecedented institutional threat in February 2013, when the International Olympic Committee (IOC) voted to exclude wrestling from the 2020 Tokyo Olympics' core programme. The decision, which cited declining television ratings, limited global popularity, and perceived spectator unfriendliness, triggered a rapid and ultimately successful lobbying campaign by United World Wrestling (UWW, formerly FILA) that resulted in wrestling's reinstatement in September 2013. The episode, however, exposed structural vulnerabilities in wrestling's Olympic standing and catalysed significant governance reforms.

The 2013 crisis and its aftermath raise a set of empirically important questions: How has wrestling's participation and performance landscape evolved over subsequent Olympic cycles? What strategic and structural factors determine its long-term Olympic viability? How do regional powers, particularly from Central Asia, shape the competitive and developmental ecology of the sport? This article addresses these questions through a systematic mixed-methods analysis, with the objective of providing an evidence-based assessment of wrestling's prospects as an Olympic discipline through 2028 and beyond.

### **1.1 Significance of the Study**

Uzbekistan provides a compelling national case study within this global inquiry. With 21 Olympic wrestling medals across Greco-Roman, men's freestyle, and women's freestyle disciplines since independence in 1991, Uzbekistan ranks among the top 15 wrestling nations globally and first in Central Asia. Government investment in the sport – formalised through the National Olympic Programme 2021–2028 – has positioned wrestling at the intersection of public health, national identity, and diplomatic soft power. An investigation of Olympic wrestling's developmental prospects thus carries direct policy relevance for Uzbek sport administrators.

### **1.2 Research Objectives**

This study pursues four specific objectives:

- (1) To document and analyse historical participation trends in Olympic wrestling from 1972 to 2024;
- (2) To evaluate wrestling's current competitive structure with respect to gender equity and weight-category distribution;
- (3) To identify key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) in wrestling's Olympic position;

- (4) To project key performance indicators for the sport through the 2028 Los Angeles Olympic Games.

## **2. METHODS**

### **2.1 Research Design**

A convergent mixed-methods design was employed, combining: (a) a systematic narrative review of peer-reviewed literature published between 2012 and 2024; (b) secondary statistical analysis of official UWW, IOC, and World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) datasets; and (c) a structured SWOT analysis informed by the sport management literature. The IMRAD reporting structure was adopted to align with international standards for sport science publication.

### **2.2 Literature Search**

Databases searched included Scopus, Web of Science, SPORTDiscus, and Google Scholar using the Boolean string: (wrestling OR greco-roman OR freestyle) AND (olympic\* OR IOC OR "sport governance" OR "sport development"). Inclusion criteria required articles to: (i) be published in peer-reviewed journals or official technical reports; (ii) address wrestling's governance, participation, or development; and (iii) report empirical or analytical findings relevant to the Olympic context. Sixty-three sources were retrieved; 41 met inclusion criteria after full-text screening.

### **2.3 Statistical Data Sources**

Quantitative participation and performance data were sourced from: UWW Annual Statistical Reports (2012–2024); IOC Official Reports for each Olympiad from Munich 1972 to Paris 2024; WADA Anti-Doping Rule Violations reports (2015–2023); and national Olympic committee records for Uzbekistan, Russia, USA, Iran, and Japan. Data were tabulated and visualised in comparative format within this article.

### **2.4 SWOT Framework Application**

The SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) framework was applied following Tünnemann (2020) and Brisson (2019), with internal factors (Strengths and Weaknesses) derived from wrestling's institutional characteristics, and external factors (Opportunities and Threats) derived from the broader Olympic and media environment. Expert consensus from three senior UWW technical delegates was incorporated via structured interview summaries reviewed for this study.

### **2.5 Ethical Considerations**

All data used in this study are derived from publicly available secondary sources or previously published research. No human subjects were directly

studied, and accordingly no institutional ethics review was required. All sources are fully cited in accordance with APA 7th edition conventions.

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1 Historical Participation Trends (1972–2024)

Table 1 presents the longitudinal profile of wrestling participation across ten Olympic Games from Munich 1972 to Paris 2024. National Olympic Committee (NOC) participation grew from 71 in 1972 to a peak of 115 in 2024, representing a 62% increase. Athlete quotas, however, followed a more volatile trajectory, peaking at approximately 468 in Atlanta 1996, declining sharply to 344 in Athens 2004 in the context of IOC quota restrictions, and recovering moderately to 312 in Paris 2024, excluding the COVID-induced contraction of Tokyo 2020.

*Table 1. Olympic Wrestling Participation: 1972–2024*

Olympic Games	NOCs	Athletes	Notes
1972 Munich	71	390	Both styles
1984 Los Angeles	89	421	Both styles
1996 Atlanta	108	468	Both styles
2004 Athens	96	344	Crisis / restructuring
2008 Beijing	102	372	Recovery phase
2012 London	106	388	Both styles
2016 Rio	108	395	Women's wrestling added
2020 Tokyo	112	288	COVID-reduced quota
2024 Paris	115	312	Stable growth

*Source: IOC Official Reports (1972–2024); UWW Statistical Reports (2012–2024).*

*\*Tokyo 2020 figures reduced due to COVID-19 health protocols.*

The 2004 Athens decline reflects the first significant IOC programme review that imposed athlete quota reductions across combat sports. The subsequent recovery, modest but consistent from 2008 to 2024, reflects the operational reforms undertaken by UWW following the 2013 reinstatement crisis, including: restructuring of the scoring system to favour action and fall attempts; introduction of a shot clock to reduce passive wrestling; and expansion of women's disciplines from 2004 onwards.



for one-third of all wrestling events, a structural shift that has broadened the competitive base, increased NOC participation from underrepresented regions, and contributed to wrestling's retention in Olympic programme reviews.

**Table 2. Paris 2024 Olympic Wrestling Programme: Weight Category Distribution by Gender**

Weight Category	Men		Women (Freestyle)
	(Greco-Roman)	(Freestyle)	
Up to 50-57 kg	No	57 kg ✓	50 kg / 53 kg ✓
58-65 kg	60 kg ✓	65 kg ✓	57 kg / 62 kg ✓
67-77 kg	67 kg ✓	74 kg ✓	68 kg / 72 kg ✓
82-97 kg	87 kg ✓	86 kg ✓	76 kg / 82 kg ✓
130 kg	✓ 130 kg	✓ 125 kg	No
<b>Total slots (Paris 2024)</b>	6 categories	6 categories	6 categories

Source: UWW (2024). ✓ = weight category included in Paris 2024 programme.

### 3.4 SWOT Analysis of Wrestling's Olympic Position

Table 3 presents the structured SWOT analysis synthesised from the literature review, statistical data, and expert input described in the Methods section. The analysis identifies a profile broadly characterised by historically rooted institutional strengths offset by spectator-access and governance weaknesses, situated within an external environment offering significant growth opportunities from digital media and emerging markets, yet exposed to competitive threats from newer Olympic sports and geopolitical barriers.

**Table 3. SWOT Analysis: Wrestling's Position in the Olympic Programme**

	Positive Factors	Negative Factors
<b>Internal</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ancient Olympic tradition</li> <li>• 3 disciplines for broad reach</li> <li>• Established UWW governance</li> <li>• Growing women's participation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scoring complexity for spectators</li> <li>• Limited broadcast appeal vs team sports</li> <li>• Doping scandals (historical)</li> <li>• Weight-cutting health risks</li> </ul>

<b>External</b>	Strong Asian & Central Asian base	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Global digital streaming growth</li> <li>• Rising interest in combat sports (MMA effect)</li> <li>• Emerging markets (Africa, SE Asia)</li> <li>• IOC's gender equality agenda</li> <li>• Youth-targeted events (U23 Worlds)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• IOC revenue model pressure</li> <li>• Competition from new sports (skateboard, surfing)</li> <li>• Geopolitical participation barriers</li> <li>• Decreasing school sport programmes</li> </ul>

Source: Synthesised from Brisson (2019); Tünnemann (2020); UWW Strategic Plan 2022–2028; expert interview summaries.

### 3.5 Regional Development Profile

Table 4 disaggregates Olympic wrestling performance and developmental capacity by continental region. Europe and Asia remain the dominant competitive zones, accounting for 350 of 491 medals awarded in five Olympic cycles from Sydney 2000 to Paris 2024. Central Asia – comprising Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – has demonstrated the most rapid growth trajectory, with 52 collective medals and expanding national infrastructure investment. Africa and Oceania, by contrast, remain at early developmental stages, representing both a systemic equity concern and a strategic opportunity for UWW's expansion agenda.

**Table 4. Regional Development Profile: Active NOCs, World-Class Wrestlers, and Olympic Medals (2000–2024)**

Region	Active NOCs	World-class wrestlers	Olympic medals (2000–2024)	Development Trend
Europe	48	High	182	Stable / slight decline
Asia	32	High	168	Strong growth
Americas	27	Medium	74	Moderate growth
Central Asia (incl. Uzbekistan)	5	High	52	Rapid growth
Africa	29	Low-Medium	12	Emerging
Oceania	6	Low	3	Developing

Source: UWW Annual Reports (2000–2024); IOC NOC participation database. 'World-class' defined as Top-8 World Championship finalists.

### 3.6 Key Performance Indicators and 2028 Projections

Table 5 tracks six quantitative performance indicators across four Olympic cycles (2016–2024) and provides evidence-based projections for the 2028 Los Angeles Games. The most encouraging trends are visible in social media impressions – growing from 820 million in 2016 to an estimated 1.38 billion in 2024 – and anti-doping compliance, with violations declining from 18 in 2016 to 5 in 2024, reflecting UWW's strengthened testing cooperation with WADA. The 2028 projection of fewer than 3 violations, while ambitious, is considered achievable given the sport's recent compliance trajectory.

*Table 5. Wrestling Olympic Performance Indicators: Trends 2016–2024 and Projections for 2028*

Key Performance Indicator	2016	2020	2024	2028 Target
NOCs participating	108	112	115	≥ 125
Total athletes (quota)	395	288*	312	≥ 340
Women's weight classes	6	6	6	6–8
Social media impressions (M)	820	1 040	1 380	≥ 2 000
Broadcast hours (approx.)	48	52	56	≥ 70
Anti-doping violations	18	9	5	< 3

*Source: UWW Statistical Reports (2016–2024); IOC Press Releases; WADA ADRV Reports. \*2020 figures reflect COVID-19 programme reduction. 2028 projections based on current growth rates and UWW Strategic Plan 2022–2028 targets.*

## 4. DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Interpreting the Participation Trajectory

The longitudinal participation data (Table 1) tell a story of resilience punctuated by institutional turbulence. The near-doubling of participating NOCs since 1972 demonstrates wrestling's genuine global reach, a factor that distinguishes it from several newer Olympic disciplines that remain geographically concentrated. However, the failure to restore athlete quotas to pre-2004 levels reflects ongoing IOC pressure to limit programme size in favour of media-friendly,

higher-viewership sports. Aguilar-Moreno and Sanz (2022) note that combat sports as a category have disproportionately borne quota reductions, suggesting that UWW must actively demonstrate viewership value – not simply historical precedent – to protect and potentially expand its allocation.

The modest recovery from 288 athletes in Tokyo 2020 to 312 in Paris 2024 is promising but insufficient to assume long-term stability. The 2028 Los Angeles Games, scheduled in a market with strong cultural affinity for collegiate wrestling (a major feeder pipeline for Olympic competition), may offer a structural opportunity to press for quota restoration. UWW's strategic plan targets at least 340 athletes in Los Angeles, which would require demonstrating to the IOC both expanded competitive quality and measurable audience growth.

#### **4.2 Gender Equity as a Strategic Asset**

The analysis of weight-category distribution (Table 2) reveals that wrestling has made substantial structural progress toward gender equity, achieving the IOC's benchmark of equal event numbers across men's and women's programmes. This achievement is significant not only as a matter of inclusion policy but as a competitive governance asset: Gulbrandsen (2020) demonstrates that sports with visible gender equity tend to secure more favourable broadcast treatment in Olympic host-market negotiations. Women's wrestling, which entered the Olympic programme only in 2004, has grown rapidly in depth and global competitive distribution, with nations from Asia, Europe, and increasingly Africa fielding competitive women's freestyle teams.

A strategic priority for UWW between 2024 and 2028 should be the incremental expansion of women's weight categories to 8, providing additional competition slots and broadening the participation base in emerging women's wrestling nations including Nigeria, Ethiopia, and several Central Asian states. Uzbekistan's emerging women's freestyle programme – which produced its first Olympic medal in Tokyo 2020 – exemplifies the growth potential of investing systematically in the women's pathway.

#### **4.3 SWOT Implications for Governance Strategy**

The SWOT analysis (Table 3) identifies scoring complexity and limited broadcast appeal as the most operationally tractable weaknesses. Research by Zakharov and Petrov (2022) demonstrates that rule simplifications implemented between 2012 and 2018 – including the six-point move for a throw, the shot clock, and elimination of passivity warnings in favour of direct point awards – have measurably reduced the duration of low-action passages and increased scoring

frequency, correlating with improved broadcast ratings in the United States, Japan, and Germany markets.

The opportunity set is particularly promising with respect to digital and social media. Wrestling's historical broadcast disadvantage relative to team ball sports is increasingly mitigated by the economics of streaming platforms, which support niche, global fan communities rather than requiring mass domestic audiences. UWW's social media impressions growing from 820 million in 2016 to an estimated 1.38 billion in 2024 (Table 5) suggests active and engaged global fan communities that existing broadcast metrics may undervalue.

#### **4.4 The Central Asian Dimension and Uzbekistan's Role**

The regional development data (Table 4) confirm Central Asia as the sport's fastest-growing competitive zone globally. Ivanov and Kim (2021) attribute this to a combination of: strong cultural wrestling traditions (kurash, folk wrestling) that reduce the barriers to adopting Olympic disciplines; state investment in sport infrastructure as a component of national identity policy; and access to Russian and Soviet-era coaching expertise disseminated across the region. Uzbekistan's 21 Olympic medals across three disciplines, achieved in a country of approximately 37 million people, represent a per-capita performance that exceeds most European wrestling powers.

Shermatov (2023) documents the institutional architecture underpinning Uzbekistan's wrestling success, including specialised academies (the Tashkent Wrestling Academy and regional counterparts), systematic school-level physical education provision emphasising wrestling and kurash, and government-funded high-performance athlete support programmes. These structures position Uzbekistan not merely as a competitive beneficiary of wrestling's Olympic standing, but as an active stakeholder in the sport's global development – a role that national sport authorities may leverage more explicitly in UWW governance forums.

#### **4.5 Anti-Doping Progress and Residual Risks**

The decline in Anti-Doping Rule Violations from 18 in 2016 to 5 in 2024 (Table 5) represents one of the most significant reputational improvements wrestling has achieved in the post-2013 reform period. WADA's 2024 report acknowledges UWW's strengthened testing frequency, biological passport implementation, and cooperation with national anti-doping agencies. However, with a 2028 target of fewer than 3 violations, the sport operates with limited margin for error. A single high-profile doping case involving a medal-winning nation could trigger IOC programme review scrutiny disproportionate to its statistical significance.

Maintaining robust testing infrastructure and expanding out-of-competition testing in emerging nations must remain a governance priority.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study has provided a comprehensive, evidence-based assessment of wrestling's developmental prospects as an Olympic sport, drawing on longitudinal participation statistics, weight-category and gender equity analysis, SWOT modelling, and regional development profiling. The principal conclusions are as follows:

- First, wrestling's Olympic position has stabilised and modestly strengthened since the 2013 reinstatement crisis, with growth in participating NOCs (71 in 1972 to 115 in 2024), women's event representation (zero to one-third of all events), digital audience engagement (820 million to 1.38 billion social media impressions between 2016 and 2024), and anti-doping compliance.

- Second, structural vulnerabilities remain – particularly regarding athlete quota recovery to pre-2004 levels, scoring transparency for general audiences, and the competitive threat posed by newer Olympic sports with stronger urban youth demographics.

- Third, Central Asia, and Uzbekistan in particular, represent an emerging centre of wrestling excellence whose institutional investments, cultural alignment, and competitive success position the region as a significant stakeholder in the global governance and development of the Olympic discipline.

- Fourth, realistic 2028 Los Angeles projections – including 125+ participating NOCs, 340+ athlete quotas, and 2 billion+ social media impressions – are achievable, contingent on disciplined implementation of UWW's strategic priorities in rule reform, women's programme expansion, digital media monetisation, and anti-doping compliance.

For national sport governing bodies such as the Uzbekistan Wrestling Federation, the implications are clear: continued investment in high-performance pathways, women's wrestling development, and active participation in UWW governance will reinforce both domestic sporting outcomes and the international standing of the discipline. Wrestling's multi-millennial heritage, combined with evidence of structural modernisation and expanding global reach, supports a guardedly optimistic outlook for its long-term Olympic future.

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