

Technique Notes from the 2002 NCAA Tournament

I spent 3 days watching the best college wrestlers in the nation compete for the 2002 NCAA Championships and All-American Honors. As expected, there were many close matches and excellent techniques executed throughout the weekend. Below are some general and specific observations.

We all know that finishing and countering takedowns both when on your knees and when on your feet are of paramount importance. It then amazes me when some outstanding athletes get a leg and do not demonstrate crisp finish techniques. Coaches need to spend more time polishing their wrestlers takedown finish skills. An array of finish techniques must be taught, wrestlers must experiment with the positions, and you must do "live situation" wrestling on a regular basis. Wrestlers need to spend more time wrestling live from leg attack positions to improve their leg attack finishes as well as their countering skills.

It appeared to me that the counter-attack skills of our elite wrestlers were improving more steadily than their finishing skills. I saw new counters every year, but rarely see new finishes. Many wrestlers were able to fend off near takedowns with a variety of unorthodox counters. Greg Parker became Princeton's first NCAA finalist in 20 years. He countered numerous shots throughout the tournament and created some exciting scramble situations. He used a combination of roll-through, elevator, and funk counters and he came out on top of most of the scrambles. In the semi-finals, Parker upset Otto Olson from Michigan with some exciting counters that rocked the arena. Jeff Rusak, from Old Dominion, was undefeated throughout the regular season and was very difficult to finish on. He developed a great bundle arm step-over and leg cradle series. This countered the head inside single leg into pinning situations. Parker and Rusak were unorthodox, but generally speaking, our sports best wrestlers are just plain hard to finish on. They have a combination of great balance, powerful hips, good flexibility, and a tremendous will not to give up points. Top wrestlers will fight relentlessly to fend off any scoring attack. This determination not to get scored upon is a big part of the battle. Too many young wrestlers concede points too quickly.

I was the featured clinician along with Kendall Cross at the NWCA Coaches Clinic, between sessions of the NCAA Tournament. One of the points that I addressed at the end, was that wrestlers and coaches must work harder to increase their finish percentage. I shared a baseball analogy with the coaches and it was well received. If you are a .200 hitter in baseball, you need to find a different line of work. If you are a .300 hitter, you will have a successful career. If you hit .400, you are like Ted Williams or in wrestling terms, Cael Sanderson! The fact of the matter is the difference between being a poor performer and great performer is often only 1 or 2 more successes in every 10 tries. In wrestling, if you can finish 1 or 2 more shots out of every 10, think about how many more matches you would win! This would be the difference from watching the state or NCAA Tournaments from the stands, or being on the podium. Pay attention to details. Take the time to perfect your finishes. Also, work diligently to improve your counter-attack techniques. If you can prevent your opponent from finishing AND score off his shot, this is like a four-point swing in the match. If you can gain a four-point advantage, you are going to win most your matches.

During the coaches' clinic I showed my Cement Job Series. I demonstrated the cement job, cement fixer, cement elevator, and the flying cement job. As an athlete I was able to use the cement series very effectively. My students get as much mileage out of it as our very effective front headlock series. In the quarter finals, Johnny Thompson pinned a very talented, Jeff Ratliff, with a tight cement job. He demonstrated my three key points: Get off to the side, get your underhook elbow up and deep, and stuff the head down. It was a textbook pin. In the semi-finals, Rob Rohn pinned his Iowa opponent with a cement elevator from his butt, as the Iowa Wrestler tried to finish a 3rd period high crotch takedown that would have wrapped up the match. To put an exclamation point on his cement series, Rohn fell behind 12 points. He looked to be on the verge of getting tech-failed, when he executed the cement mixer and finished with the fall.

Below are some more specific observations from the NCAA Tournament that should give you some ideas as you work to improve your skills and expand your repertoire:

Stephen Abas scored with two quick low singles. This happened when his opponent carelessly switched his lead leg while Abas was within easy striking distance. Abas' timing was perfect and he finished quickly, giving his opponent no chance to counter.

Chris Fleeger scored with explosive inside trip against Abas in the semi-finals. Fleeger's coach, Jesse Reyes, is one of the best trippers in history.

Jared Frayer hit an underarm spin and came out front with a nasty tight arm wrench to flip Jesse Jantzen to his back. I learned this unique move from the late, great Dave Schultz, and it is very effective. I saw Dave flip over numerous superstars with this technique.

Oklahoma State's, Tyrone Lewis, executed a spectacular lateral drop that would have earned him 5 points in freestyle. He set it up with a subtle whizzer jam, a la Kenny Monday. I know John Smith did not show Tyrone the lateral drop, but Tyrone does have a great John Smith low single to go with his throws. I saw some great wrestling from Lewis when he opens up.

As we know, most of the time the person who gets the choice in double over-time wins. This is not always the case as witnessed in the heavyweight finals. Tommy Rowlands and Steve Mocco's match went to double overtime, tied 1-1. Mocco won the toss and got set in the down position like a bull ready to go berserk. (Coach Hellickson was visibly upset as he possibly envisioned a reoccurrence of last year's finals when Tommy lost the toss, was warned for stalling on top, and then his opponent escaped.) Nevertheless, Tommy stayed focused and through a combination of good strategy, tremendous poise, and great determination. He found a way to ride the bull for 30 seconds to win the NCAA Championship.

I have mentioned Tommy in my articles in the past, as I have known his family since my years coaching with Russ Hellickson at Ohio State. Tommy attended my Gold Medal Training Camps and Camp of Champs many times growing up. He also came to my house for private training when he was still small enough from me to whip. (It was actually not that long ago, as Tommy is only a sophomore and was not a heavyweight in high school.) Tommy was a counselor at my camp this summer and does a great job working with kids. He is a class act! With continued effort, Tommy should continue to improve steadily and have a great future. Congratulations to Tommy, his family, Russ, and his program.

At the beginning of the final matches, Sandy Stevens gave a short bio on each wrestler and also let us know if they were Academic All-Americans. Every time it was mentioned that a finalist was an Academic All-American the crowd applauded.

It was nice to see the crowd recognize the athletes who achieved success in the classroom. It was also good to see so many of our finalists are excelling in school as well!

This NCAA Championships was a great event with many highly competitive matches. It was great to visit with so many AWN readers at the Fanfest, the Memorabilia Show, and at the NWCA Coaches Clinic. I appreciated the many positive comments you readers gave me about my AWN writings. I am flattered to know that you found my articles informative and entertaining. Thank you for your support.