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Wrestling rules overview

Revision 1.0 · Published 2026-10-06

High-level wrestling rules for families.

A Beginner's Guide to Folkstyle Wrestling

By Tre Horton

Folkstyle wrestling is the style used in U.S. high school wrestling and in many youth wrestling programs. Two wrestlers compete to control, turn, and ultimately pin one another.

At first, a wrestling match can look complicated. Once you understand a few basic concepts, the scoring and action become much easier to follow.

This guide explains the fundamentals of folkstyle wrestling using current NFHS high school rules.

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1. THE GOAL OF THE MATCH

The ultimate goal is simple: **pin your opponent.**

A pin, officially called a **fall**, ends the match immediately. A wrestler can also win by scoring more points than the opponent or by building a large enough scoring advantage to earn a technical fall.

Takedown: 3 points. Bring your opponent from a neutral position to the mat and establish control.

Escape: 1 point. Get away from your opponent's control and return to a neutral position.

Reversal: 2 points. Move from underneath your opponent to a position where you establish control.

Near Fall: 2, 3, or 4 points. Expose your opponent's back and maintain near-fall criteria for the required amount of time.

Near-fall scoring awards **2 points for 2 seconds, 3 points for 3 seconds, and 4 points for 4 seconds.**

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2. THE THREE BASIC POSITIONS

Neutral

Both wrestlers are standing and neither wrestler has control. The most common score from neutral is a **takedown**, worth 3 points.

Top

One wrestler has established control over the other. The wrestler on top tries to maintain control, turn the opponent to the back, and work toward a pin.

Bottom

The wrestler being controlled is in the bottom position. The bottom wrestler generally tries to **escape for 1 point** or **reverse the opponent for 2 points**.

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3. TAKEDOWNS

A takedown occurs when a wrestler goes from a neutral situation to establishing control over the opponent.

Takedown = 3 points

Common takedowns include:

- Single-leg attacks
- Double-leg attacks
- High crotches
- Snapdowns
- Fireman's carries
- Throws and other legal attacks that establish control

A takedown is not awarded simply because someone touches the mat. **Control must be established.**

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4. ESCAPES AND REVERSALS

Escape

An **escape** occurs when the defensive wrestler breaks the opponent's control and reaches a neutral position.

Escape = 1 point

Reversal

A **reversal** occurs when the defensive wrestler moves from being controlled to establishing control over the opponent.

Reversal = 2 points

If you simply get away, it is an escape. If you go directly from being controlled to controlling your opponent, it is a reversal.

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5. NEAR FALL

A wrestler does not have to complete a pin to score for exposing an opponent's back. When the offensive wrestler controls the opponent in a qualifying pinning position, the referee begins counting near-fall time.

Near-Fall Time	Points
2 seconds	2
3 seconds	3
4 seconds	4

Only one near fall is scored during a continuous pinning situation.

Common near-fall techniques include half nelsons, cradles, tilts, arm bars, and other legal pinning combinations.

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6. THE PIN

A **fall**, commonly called a pin, ends the match immediately.

A fall occurs when the required portions of both shoulder blades are held in contact with the mat for the required time. The wrestler who earns the fall wins regardless of the score at that moment.

In a dual meet: Fall = 6 team points

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7. TECHNICAL FALL

A **technical fall** occurs when a wrestler establishes a **15-point advantage**.

For example:

18-3 = 15-point advantage

If the 15-point margin is reached while near-fall criteria are being met, the action continues until the near-fall criteria ends. This allows the offensive wrestler to finish the scoring opportunity or secure a pin.

In a dual meet: Technical Fall = 5 team points

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8. THE EDGE OF THE MAT

Under current NFHS rules, wrestling can continue when **one point of contact from either wrestler is inbounds**. That point of contact does not have to be supporting the wrestler's weight.

This allows scoring much closer to the boundary than under older rules. Do not assume the action is over just because most of the wrestlers' bodies appear outside the boundary.

Wrestle until the whistle.

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9. PENALTIES

Not every point on the scoreboard comes from a wrestling move. A wrestler's opponent can receive points because of a rules violation.

Violations can include:

- Illegal holds or maneuvers
- Unnecessary roughness
- Unsportsmanlike conduct
- Technical violations
- Stalling
- Certain false starts or incorrect starting procedures

Penalties can become progressively more serious when violations are repeated. Serious misconduct can result in disqualification.

Some illegal actions are stopped immediately because continuing the action could place a wrestler at risk.

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10. STALLING

Wrestlers are expected to actively wrestle and make a legitimate effort to improve their position, score, or stay engaged with their opponent.

Stalling can occur in neutral, top, or bottom positions.

Simply being ahead on the scoreboard does not give a wrestler permission to stop wrestling. Both wrestlers are expected to continue working to improve their position.

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11. MATCH PERIODS

A standard high school varsity match consists of **three periods**.

The first period begins with both wrestlers in the neutral position.

At the beginning of later periods, wrestlers may begin in neutral or in the referee's position depending on choice and the match situation.

The referee's position places one wrestler on the bottom and the other wrestler on top.

Youth organizations and tournaments may use different period lengths, so match times can vary by age group and event.

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12. OVERTIME

If the score is tied at the end of regulation, the match does not end in a tie. NFHS wrestling uses an overtime procedure to determine a winner.

The sequence begins with **sudden victory**, with both wrestlers starting neutral. If the match remains tied, the wrestlers proceed through the prescribed tiebreaker periods until a winner is determined.

Individual matches do not end in ties.

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13. HOW A WRESTLER CAN WIN

Result	Margin / Condition	Dual Team Points
Decision	1-7 points	3
Major Decision	8-14 points	4
Technical Fall	15-point advantage	5
Fall	Pin	6
Forfeit	Match awarded	6
Default	Match awarded	6
Disqualification	Match awarded	6

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14. MATCH POINTS VS. TEAM POINTS

This is one of the most common sources of confusion for people who are new to wrestling.

Match points determine who is winning the individual bout. Takedowns, escapes, reversals, near falls, and penalties affect the individual score.

For example:

Wrestler A: 11Wrestler B: 6

Those are individual match points.

Team points are awarded after the individual match and contribute to the overall dual-meet score.

For example, an 11-6 win is a regular decision, so the winner's team receives **3 team points**.

A pin earns the winner's team **6 team points**.

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15. UNDERSTANDING THE REFEREE

The referee controls the match, awards points, identifies violations, determines when wrestlers are out of bounds, and stops potentially dangerous or illegal situations.

You will commonly see officials signal:

- **1 point** for an escape or certain penalties
- **2 points** for a reversal or 2-second near fall
- **3 points** for a takedown or 3-second near fall
- **4 points** for a 4-second near fall

The referee also uses specific signals for falls, stalling, illegal holds, technical violations, unsportsmanlike conduct, and other situations.

Sometimes action continues before points are officially awarded because the scoring situation has not yet ended.

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16. WRESTLE UNTIL THE WHISTLE

One of the best lessons for both new wrestlers and new spectators is:

Do not stop because you think the action is over.

A wrestler may still be inbounds even when most of the body appears outside the wrestling area. A takedown may still be developing, and near-fall criteria may still be active.

The referee determines when the action stops. Wrestlers should continue competing until they hear the whistle.

QUICK SCORING GUIDE

Action	Points
Takedown	**3**
Escape	**1**
Reversal	**2**
2-second Near Fall	**2**
3-second Near Fall	**3**
4-second Near Fall	**4**

Technical Fall	**15-point advantage**
Fall	**Ends the match**

DUAL-MEET TEAM SCORING

Result	**Team Points**
Decision, 1-7 point margin	**3**
Major Decision, 8-14 point margin	**4**
Technical Fall	**5**
Fall	**6**
Forfeit	**6**
Default	**6**
Disqualification	**6**

THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER

If you're watching your first wrestling match, you do not need to memorize the entire rulebook.

Remember these five things:

Takedown = 3. Escape = 1. Reversal = 2. Near fall = 2, 3, or 4. A pin ends the match.

Once you can recognize those scores, the sport becomes much easier to follow.

For unusual situations, penalties, equipment requirements, tournament procedures, weight management, overtime procedures, and official interpretations, consult the current NFHS Wrestling Rules Book and your state association's rules and policies.

Reference

National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS). *Wrestling Rules and Interpretations, 2026-27 season.*

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