



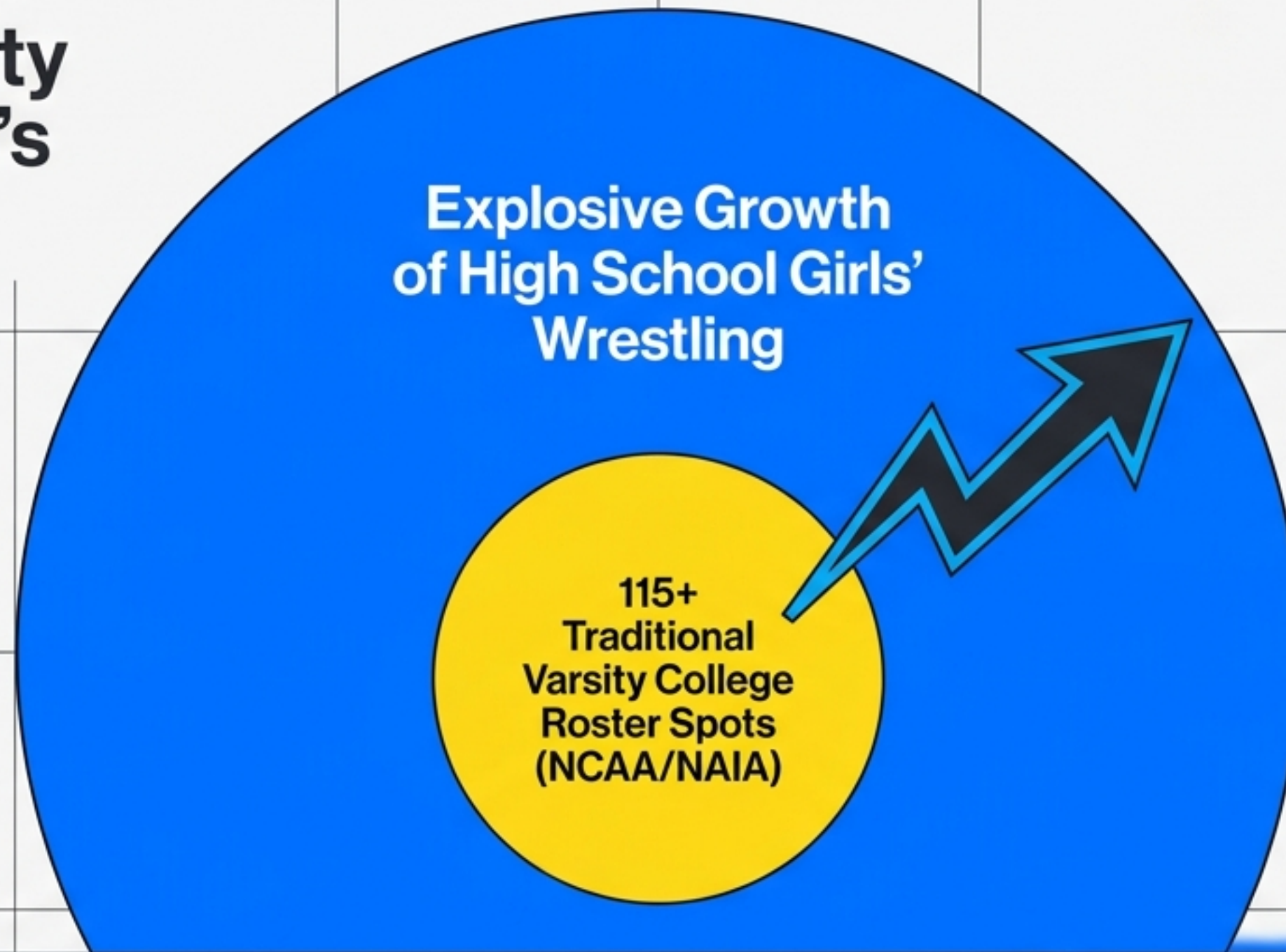
Navigating the NCWA Pathway

A Strategic Guide for Female Wrestlers & Families

A holistic navigator for college recruiting, athlete health, and elite development.

**THE
HIGH-PERFORMANCE
PLAYBOOK**

The Opportunity Gap in Women's Wrestling



THE BOOM

Women's wrestling is one of the fastest-growing high school and college sports in North America.

THE BOTTLENECK

The massive surge of high school talent creates fierce, hyper-competitive friction for a limited number of traditional varsity roster spots.

THE SOLUTION

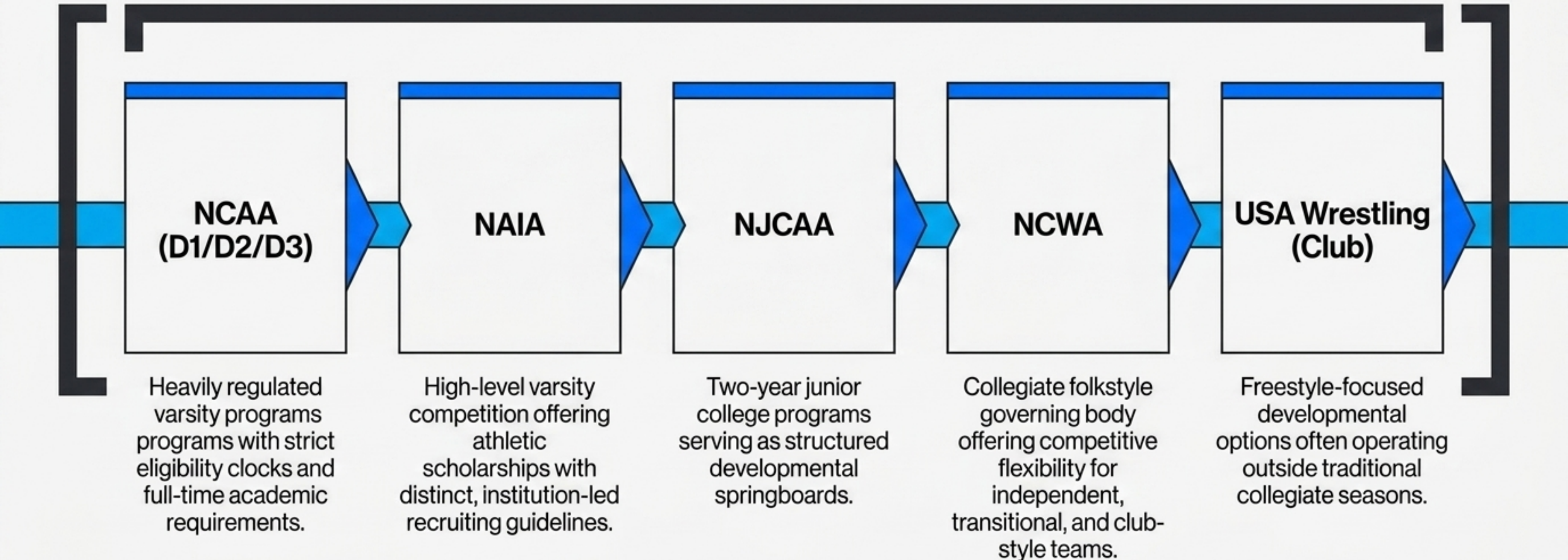
To continue competing, athletes and families must look beyond the traditional binary of "NCAA or nothing."

Mapping the Collegiate Ecosystem

Highly Regimented
Institutional Control

Spectrum of Opportunity

High Athlete
Autonomy



The NCWA: A Premier Collegiate Pathway

1997

Founded by Jim Giunta to provide a structured, competitive collegiate folkstyle environment

162+

Institutions across the US and Canada fielding legitimate, highly competitive collegiate teams

86

Women's programs sponsored, with explosive growth including 27 new programs joining in a single recent season

THE MYTHBUSTER

Not just "club teams"—many NCWA programs are officially funded by their university athletic departments. The 2025 women's division featured the closest 1-2-3 finish in NCWA history.

The Division Comparison Matrix

	NCAA	NAIA	NCWA
Eligibility Clock	Strict 5-year clock to use 4 seasons.	10-semester limit to use 4 seasons.	4 total seasons of competition with no fixed timeframe; can combine with NCAA/NAIA history.
Academic Minimums	Strict full-time enrollment required.	Strict full-time enrollment required.	Minimum 6 credit hours (moving to 9 in Fall 2026) and a 2.0 GPA.
Funding Structure	Institutional scholarships.	Institutional scholarships.	Mix of athletic department funding, self-funding, and NCWA-advocated scholarships.
Style	Freestyle transition in progress / varies.	Freestyle.	Dedicated Collegiate Folkstyle.

The NCWA Advantage: Unmatched Flexibility

The rules bend to fit the athlete's life, rather than forcing the athlete's life to fit the rules.

The Transfer / Bridge

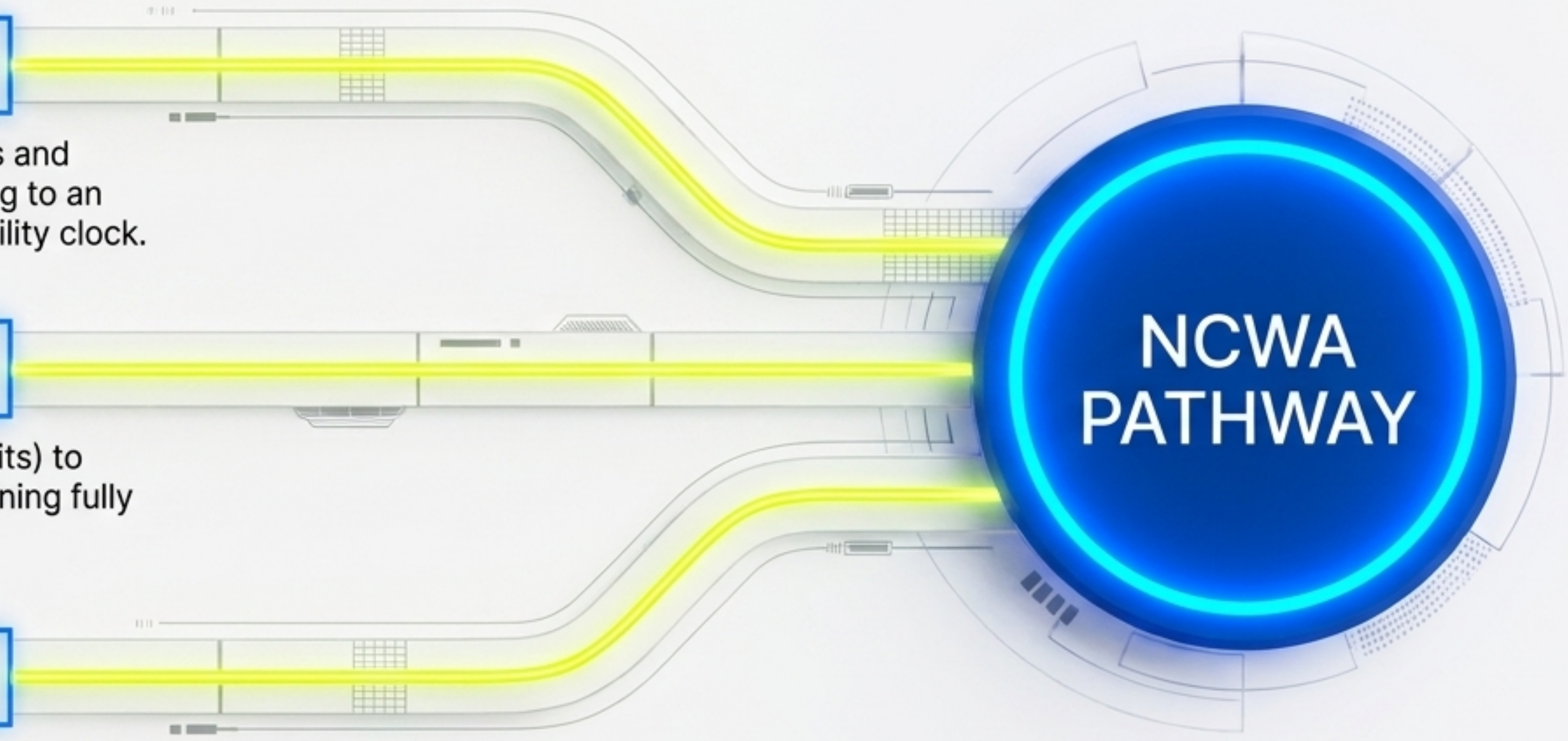
Start at an NCWA school to build skills and competitive resume before transferring to an NCAA program, preserving your eligibility clock.

The Working Student

Take a reduced course load (6-9 credits) to work or manage finances, while remaining fully eligible to compete and train.

The Academic Priority

Attend a top-tier academic university that doesn't sponsor NCAA wrestling, but maintains a fierce, highly competitive NCWA program.



The diagram illustrates the NCWA Pathway as a central blue circular hub with the text "NCWA PATHWAY" inside. Three yellow lines, representing different pathways, lead from the left towards the hub. The top line is labeled "The Transfer / Bridge" and shows a path that starts at a school icon, goes right, then curves down and right into the hub. The middle line is labeled "The Working Student" and shows a straight path from a school icon to the hub. The bottom line is labeled "The Academic Priority" and shows a path that starts at a school icon, goes right, then curves down and right into the hub. The background features faint architectural drawings of buildings and a grid pattern.

NCWA
PATHWAY

Diagnostic: Is the NCWA the Right Fit?

Do you want the institution to manage your schedule, or do you want the autonomy to manage your own development?

✓ NEEDS VARSITY STRUCTURE

- ✓ Thrives on strict, external accountability.
- ✓ Requires coach-led, daily regimented training plans.
- ✓ Prefers institutionally managed travel, meals, and logistics.



✓ THRIVES IN NCWA AUTONOMY

- ✓ Highly self-motivated and capable of self-organized training.
- ✓ Takes initiative on technical film review and physical conditioning.
- ✓ Values immense academic/life flexibility and possesses strong self-advocacy skills.

Universal Priority: Mat Safety & Environment

Evaluating any wrestling room, regardless of division.

GREEN FLAGS FOR ANY PROGRAM

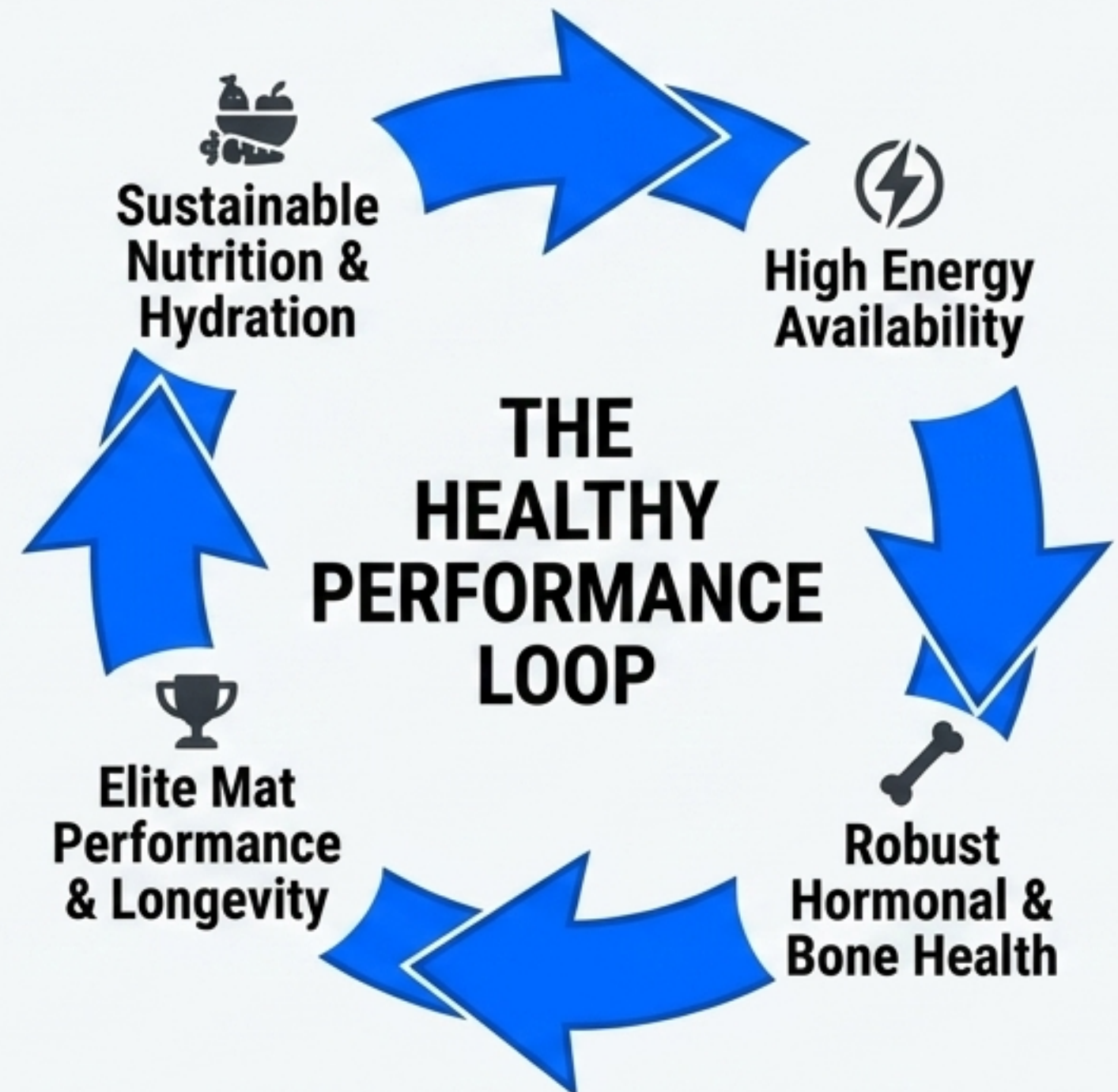
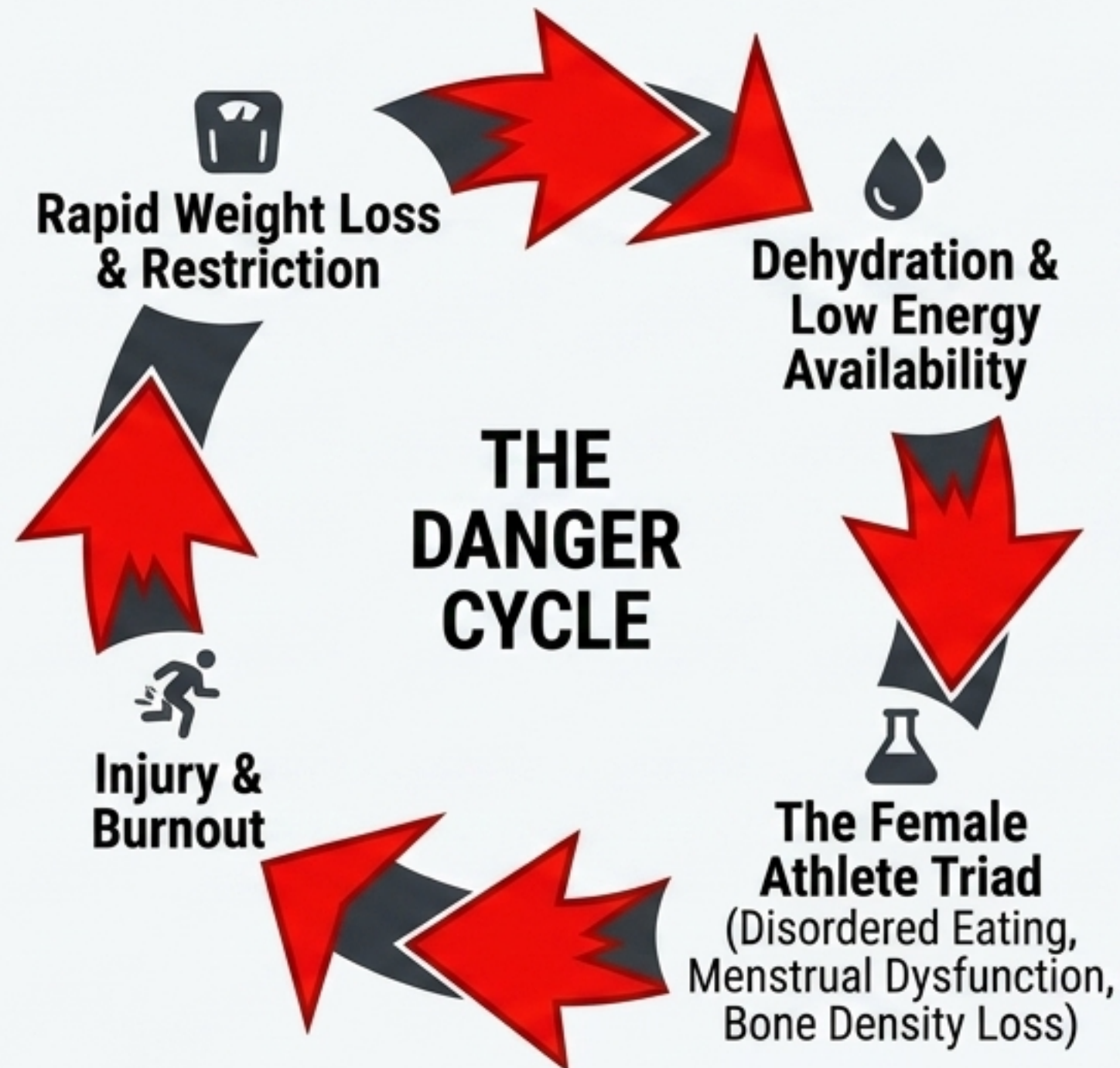
- ✓ Strict hygiene protocols (mats cleaned daily, mandatory showers to prevent ringworm/skin infections).
- ✓ Documented, strict concussion and return-to-mat injury protocols.
- ✓ Certified, credentialed coaching staff with clear, professional boundaries.
- ✓ Overt emphasis on proper falling techniques and injury prevention (ACL, shoulder, neck health).



When coached and managed properly, wrestling is no more dangerous than soccer or gymnastics.

The Biological Reality: Fueling vs. Cutting

Female bodies respond differently to restriction. The priority must shift from “cutting to survive” to “fueling to perform.”

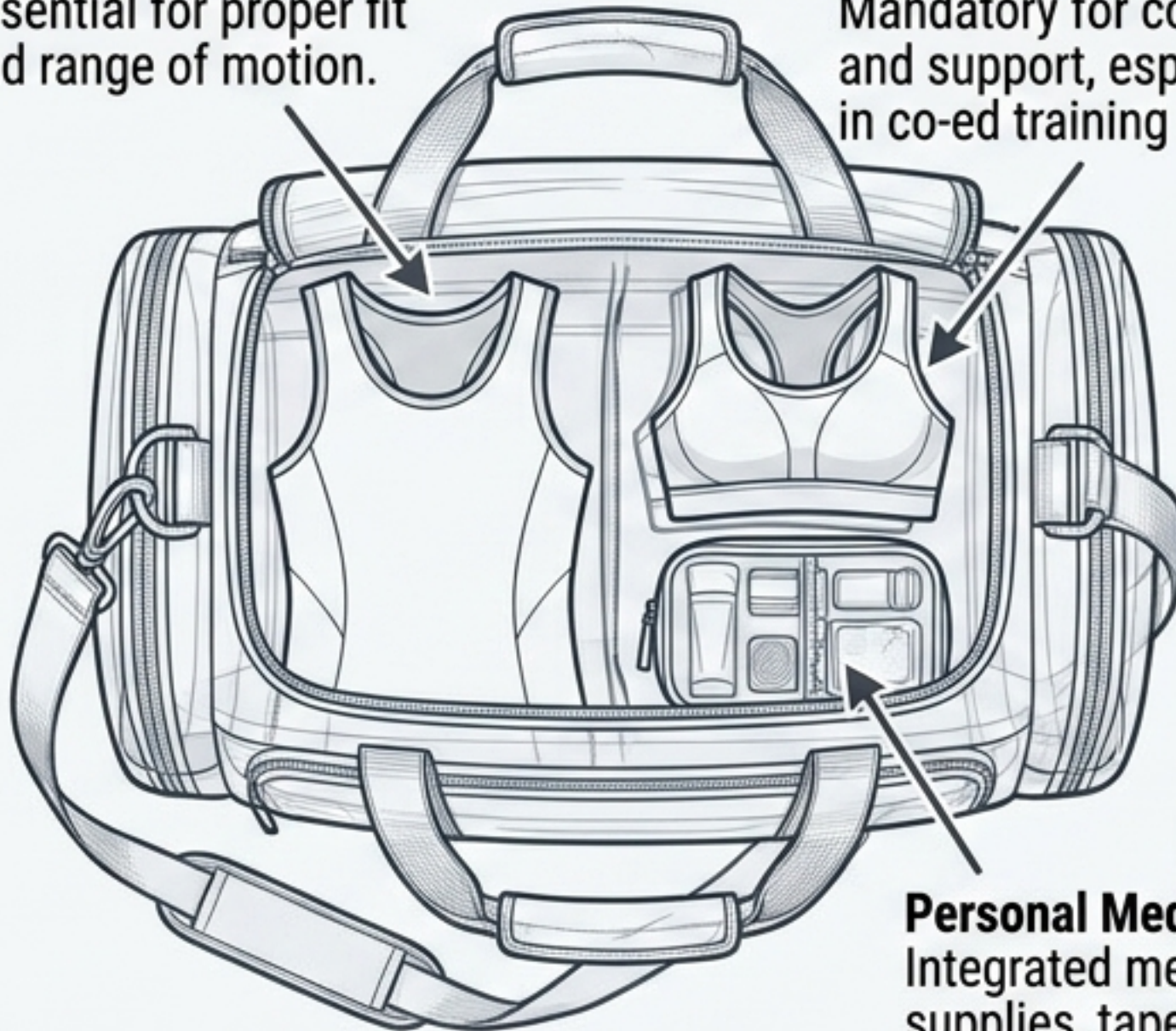


Practical Logistics: Gear, Costs, and Culture

THE GEAR BAG

 **Girls-Cut Singlets:**
Essential for proper fit
and range of motion.

 **High-Support Sports Bras**
Mandatory for coverage
and support, especially
in co-ed training rooms.



 **Personal Med Kit:**
Integrated menstrual
supplies, tape, and
hygiene wipes.

THE FINANCIAL REALITY



NCWA FUNDING DYNAMICS

 Many NCWA and emerging programs require **partial self-funding** or heavy team fundraising.

 **Budgeting** must **proactively** account for tournament entry fees, travel, private coaching, and gear.

 **Plan ahead** to avoid **financial burnout**; the trade-off is total academic and competitive flexibility.

The Parent's Playbook: The "Silent Teammate"

Be the logistical and emotional anchor, not the secondary coach.



DO THIS (The Silent Teammate)

- Manage travel logistics, packing, and sustainable tournament nutrition.
- Offer unconditional emotional support and praise effort over outcomes.
- Let the athlete and the coach lead the strategy and technical adjustments.
- Maintain a calm, quiet presence in the bleachers on competition day.



NOT THAT (The Disruptor)

- Give last-second technical advice right before a match.
- Hype up nerves or project your own anxiety on competition day.
- Undermine the coach's strategy or yell instructions from the stands.
- Push the athlete to compete through legitimate pain or injury.

Thriving in the NCWA: The Self-Starter

TECHNIQUE

- Committing to self-guided film review and intentional, focused drilling outside of mandatory hours.

STRENGTH

- Managing personal conditioning, mobility, and injury prevention outside of scheduled practice times.



ACADEMICS

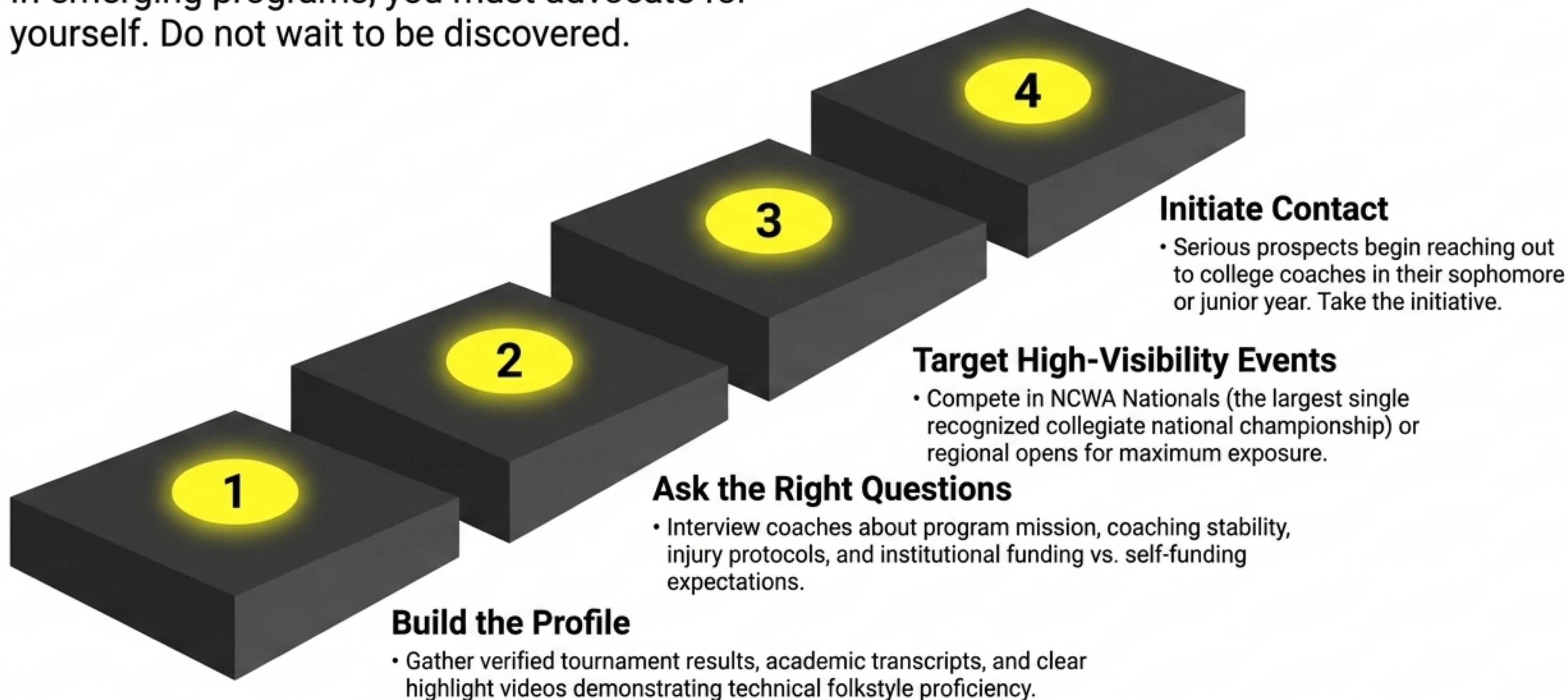
- Balancing the dual demands of self-organized physical training with college coursework and employment.

MINDSET

- Developing internal confidence to navigate a male-dominated sport and handle the emotional intensity of combat.

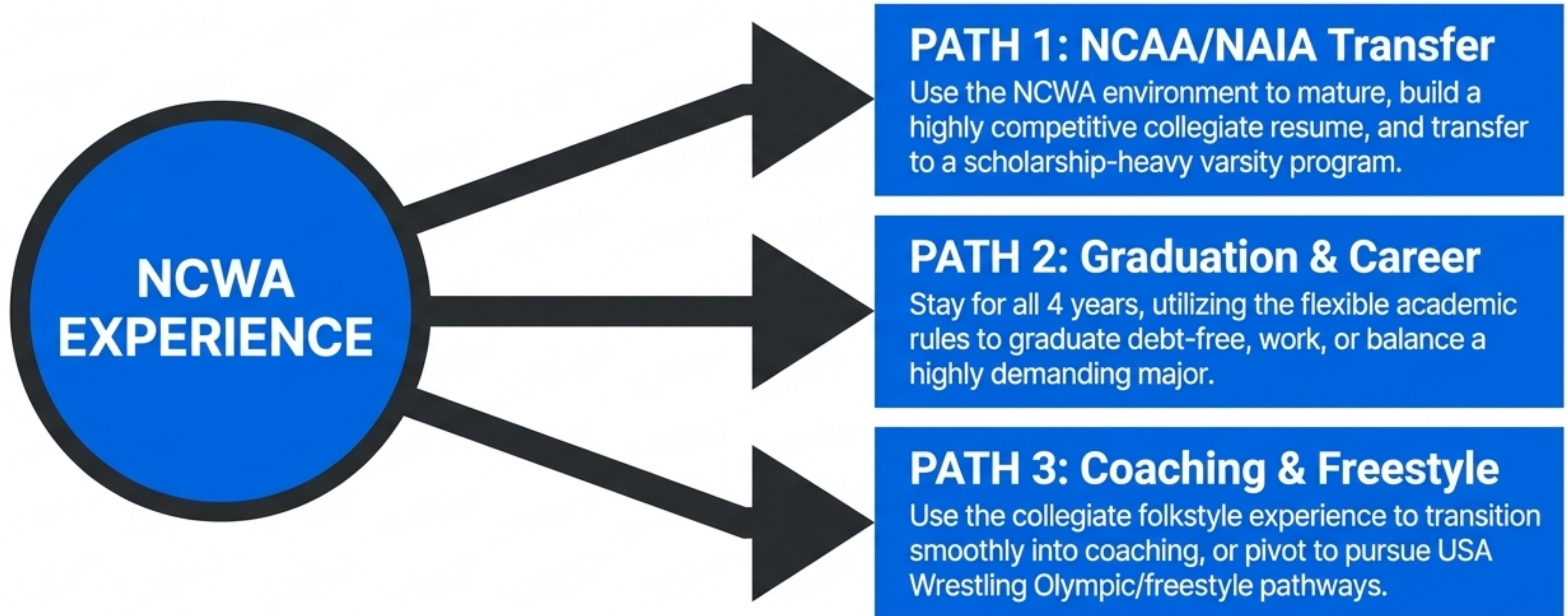
Recruiting & Self-Advocacy Action Plan

In emerging programs, you must advocate for yourself. Do not wait to be discovered.



The Transition: Destination or Bridge?

Because an athlete is limited to **4 total years** across ANY combination of associations (NCWA, NCAA, NAIA), the NCWA offers immense strategic flexibility.





Wrestling is a vehicle for life skills. The right division simply matches the athlete's current life phase. True excellence is inclusive, highly technical, and completely within your control.

Coach Shannyn Gillespie | Professional Wrestling Coach & Athletic Performance Consultant

**BUILD YOUR PLAYBOOK.
FUEL YOUR PERFORMANCE.
OWN YOUR PATHWAY.**