

American Wrestling's Golden Pipeline: Understanding Regional Training Centers

By Coach Shan AI

What is a Regional Training Center?

Historically, American collegiate wrestling has focused on folkstyle, a style of wrestling unique to the United States. However, the Olympic Games & World Championships use freestyle & Greco-Roman rules. To bridge this gap, USA Wrestling established the Regional Training Center (RTC) system in 2009.

At their core, RTCs are officially sanctioned local training hubs. They operate as independent 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations rather than university athletic entities. This structural independence is crucial: it allows coaches & elite senior-level athletes to be paid directly by the RTC, keeping them entirely separate from university payrolls plus NCAA athletic limits.

Who gets to train in these rooms? The doors are not open to just anyone. To step onto an RTC mat, athletes must:

- Hold an active USA Wrestling membership card.
- Meet strict competitive performance criteria, such as placing at the Senior Open, U23 Nationals, Junior Nationals, or Cadet/16U Nationals.
- Live within a specified geographic radius (typically 250 miles) of the RTC facility, unless they receive a special exemption.

The Symbiotic Power-Up: How RTCs Fuel Division I Wrestling ↓

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The relationship between top-tier NCAA Division I programs & RTCs is collegiate sports' ultimate win-win scenario.

For Division I programs, an on-campus RTC offers 3 massive competitive advantages:

- **Elite Resident Partners:** Because RTCs pay post-collegiate "resident athletes" (including Olympians & World Champions) to live plus train in the area, college student-athletes get to practice daily against the best wrestlers in the world.
- **Coaching & Financial Flexibility:** College head coaches often pull double duty, leading both the university team & the adjacent RTC. The separate non-profit funding allows these RTCs to hire additional world-class coaches who can assist with training without counting against strict NCAA staff size limits.
- **An Unbeatable Recruiting Weapon:** High school recruits can clearly see a seamless transition from their college folkstyle careers straight into senior-level international training—all without ever having to move away from campus.

Of course, this setup has triggered a major financial arms race. Elite, heavily-funded clubs like Penn State's *Nittany Lion Wrestling Club*, Oklahoma State's *Cowboy RTC*, & Nebraska's *Nebraska Wrestling Training Center* pull in massive donor backings. These heavyweights can easily fund full-time living stipends, world-class training facilities, & global travel budgets. Meanwhile, smaller RTCs must rely on local club dues plus modest regional fundraisers.

RTCs Beyond Division I: Fact vs. Fiction

If you look closely at wrestling media, there is a common myth that RTCs are an exclusively Division I phenomenon. Is this actually true?

The answer is a nuanced no...

While it is true that the most prominent & heavily funded RTCs belong to D1 powerhouses, the USA Wrestling RTC model is highly scalable. Because the designation is driven by USA Wrestling—not the NCAA—any training site that meets the facility, coaching, & athlete criteria can host an RTC.

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- **Division II:** The *Wolves Wrestling Club* operates out of Northern State University in South Dakota.
- **Division III:** The *Little Giants RTC* is hosted by Wabash College in Indiana. Other D3 sites include St. John Fisher University (*Rochester RTC*), Ursinus College (*MontCo Wrestling Club*), and Luther College (*Norse RTC*).
- **NAIA:** The *Midwest RTC* is affiliated with the NAIA and is led by a former NAIA National Coach of the Year.

Why are RTCs so rare outside of Division I?

It comes down to resource constraints. Operating an independent 501(c)(3) infrastructure, funding dedicated facilities, & supporting elite post-collegiate athletes requires substantial capital. Most D2, D3, NAIA athletic departments operate on tight budgets designed strictly for undergraduate student support. While they may not have the million-dollar budgets of Power 4 powerhouses, these smaller-scale RTCs play a critical role in providing elite training opportunities to the broader, often-underserved wrestling community.

The Greco-Roman Crisis in American Wrestling

While USA Wrestling's charter states that RTCs support both international styles—Freestyle & Greco-Roman—the day-to-day reality is highly uneven.

An overwhelming 90% to 95% of major RTC resources, funding, & mat space go to Freestyle. Because NCAA college wrestling relies on leg attacks (which closely mirror Freestyle), almost all college wrestlers transition naturally to Freestyle for their post-collegiate careers.

Greco-Roman, which completely bans attacks below the waist, is heavily neglected in most rooms.

Even worse, a massive structural crisis is looming on the horizon...

For decades, the undisputed pipeline for American Greco-Roman wrestling was the Olympic Training Site at Northern Michigan University (NMU) — the successor to the famed USOEC. This single, dedicated program developed the country's elite Greco athletes & coaches under head coach Andy Bisek. However, due to higher-education resource constraints, NMU has announced that this legendary program will be officially discontinued on June 30, 2027.

With NMU's closure, the United States will be left without a single dedicated collegiate Greco-Roman pipeline. Greco training will exist only as a secondary emphasis buried inside primarily freestyle-focused RTC rooms. This upcoming shift highlights an urgent challenge for

coaches and administrators trying to keep American Greco-Roman wrestling competitive on the world stage.

Summary

Let's review the essential takeaways from this lesson:

- **Bridging the Gap:** RTCs are USA Wrestling-sanctioned 501(c)(3) non-profit training sites designed to transition athletes from domestic folkstyle into Olympic freestyle & Greco-Roman disciplines.
- **The D1 Synergy:** RTCs provide D1 programs with legal loopholes to bypass NCAA coaching limits, secure elite training partners for active students, & supercharge their recruiting efforts.
- **Accessible but Resource-Heavy:** While highly concentrated in D1, RTCs successfully operate in D2, D3, & NAIA schools (such as Wabash, Northern State), though they face much tighter budgets.
- **Style Imbalance:** Freestyle dominates RTC funding. The upcoming 2027 closure of the Northern Michigan University Olympic Training Site threatens the survival of dedicated, high-level Greco-Roman training pathways in America.

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