

Master the Mat: A Student Athlete's Guide to American Folkstyle & International Freestyle

By Coach Shan AI

1. Introduction: Finding the Heartbeat of the Sport

Welcome to the room, athlete. If you have spent any time sweating through double-legs & gut-wrenching conditioning in a high school gym, you are already speaking a specific "native tongue" without even realizing it. That language is **American Folkstyle**.

In the United States, folkstyle (also known as scholastic or collegiate wrestling) is the undisputed heartbeat of the sport. It is the native tongue for nearly every athlete from Maine to California. While international styles like Freestyle & Greco-Roman offer a prestigious path to the Olympics, folkstyle is where your high school legacy is forged. It is the style of the "grind," the style that fills the bleachers in February, and the foundation upon which your wrestling identity is built. As your coach, I want you to understand that while other paths exist, mastering folkstyle is the most direct way to honor the work you put in every single day.

While the passion for the sport is felt on the mat, the hard data of state participation proves that folkstyle is not just a preference—it is the law of the land.

2. The Rule of the Land: Why Folkstyle Dominates the States

When we look at the landscape of American wrestling, folkstyle isn't just the dominant style; it is the official standard for almost every sanctioned body in the country.

Style Standards for State Championships Table ↓

Style Standards for State Championships

Category	Dominant Style	The Exception
Boys' State Tournaments	Folkstyle (50 States + D.C.)	None (100% Scholastic)
Girls' State Tournaments	Folkstyle (44 of 45 States)	New York (Freestyle)
National Total	Folkstyle	94 out of 95 Sponsoring State Associations

The "99 out of 100" Reality Look at those numbers: nearly 99% of all official state tournaments held annually crown their champions in folkstyle. The only notable outlier is New York, which recently moved to adopt international freestyle rules for its girls' state championships starting in 2025. For you, the student-athlete, this means that folkstyle is the essential ruleset for your current career. If you want a state medal around your neck, you must master the folkstyle mat.

This dominance at the state level is mirrored by the massive number of athletes who lace up their shoes for the winter season.

3. Understanding the Participation Gap: By the Numbers

To understand your place in the national wrestling community, you have to look at the scale of the "Folkstyle Majority." There is a massive difference between the size of the high school winter season & the specialized summer circuit.

- **The Scholastic Majority (Folkstyle):** In the 2024–25 school year, the NFHS reported a record **374,278 total wrestlers** (300,214 boys and 74,064 girls). Note that this is a "roster snapshot"—it represents the massive potential of the sport's baseline.
- **The Summer Subset (Freestyle/Greco):** The premier summer event, the Junior & 16U Nationals in Fargo, saw a record of approximately **8,531 total entries** in 2025.
- **Entries vs. Athletes:** Remember, those 8,500 are *entries*, not unique individuals. Many elite wrestlers compete in both Freestyle & Greco-Roman, meaning the actual number of unique summer competitors is even smaller.

The "So What?" for the Athlete

What does this mean for your career? It means that **over 97% of high school wrestlers participate exclusively in the folkstyle path**. While freestyle is a specialized international pathway, the "grassroots majority" stays on the folkstyle mat. This isn't a limitation; it's a massive opportunity. The overwhelming majority of college roster spots & scholarship opportunities exist for athletes who excel in the style that 374,000 other wrestlers are chasing.

Understanding the "who" is easy; understanding the "what" is how you get recruited.

4. The Folkstyle Advantage: Skills for High School & College Success

If you want to wrestle at the next level—NCAA, NAIA, NCWA, CCCAA, or NJCAA—you must develop a "recruiting identity" built on folkstyle excellence. College coaches aren't just looking for a quick takedown; they are looking for athletes who can handle the collegiate "grind."

1. **Riding-and-Return Skill:** In freestyle, if you don't turn a man quickly, the ref blows the whistle & stands you up. In college folkstyle, that doesn't happen. Coaches are looking for a "top" wrestler who can accumulate **riding time**. If you can't return an opponent to the mat & keep them there, you aren't just losing a point—you're a liability to the team's dual-meet score.
2. **Mat Control and the "Grind":** Folkstyle rewards the ability to dominate an opponent's hips and control the center. This "grind" is the standard scholastic format used to evaluate domestic talent.
3. **The Bottom Position:** In a college dual, if you can't get off the bottom, you can't win. You must be an "escape artist." In international styles, the bottom is a defensive stall; in folkstyle, it is a scoring opportunity.

Folkstyle is the standard that rewards the style you practice every day. But for years, the summer has forced athletes into a "style gap."

5. The Summer Shift: Freestyle vs. The National Elite Clash

Traditionally, when the school season ends, athletes feel forced to switch to freestyle or Greco-Roman just to find a national stage. This creates an **access mismatch**: you're often forced to find new coaches, learn a second skill set, & learn new rules just to compete.

We have a national tournament for the exception (Freestyle), but not for the rule (Folkstyle).

That is why the **National Elite Clash (NEC)** was created. The NEC is a premier, branded destination designed to give the "Folkstyle Majority" an elite national platform in the summertime. With its distinct visual identity and championship atmosphere, the NEC allows you to:

- **Test Yourself Nationally:** Compete against the best in the country using the style, skills, & mat returns you've perfected all winter.
- **Build Your Recruiting Profile:** Show college coaches you can dominate in the style they actually coach.
- **Eliminate the Mismatch:** You don't have to "abandon" your primary style to be considered a national-caliber athlete.

6. Conclusion: Your Path to Mastery

Mastering folkstyle is the clearest path to rewarding the thousands of hours you spend in the practice room. It is the style that defines American wrestling excellence. Whether you are aiming for a state title in March or a national summer crown, keep your eyes on the goal.

Athlete's Mastery Checklist

- [] **Five-Second Escape:** Drill your first-move explosiveness until no one in the state can hold you for more than five seconds. If you can't get off the bottom, work on it till → you're a weapon.
- [] **Riding Time Dominance:** Master a signature mat return & a breakdown that eats the clock & breaks your opponent's will. Make "Top" your most feared position.
- [] **The Summer Standard:** Don't let your primary skills rust. Set a goal to compete in a premier folkstyle environment like the **National Elite Clash** to prove you are the best in the ruleset that matters most.

Embrace the grind, own the mat, & master the style that defines your legacy!

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