

# Comprehensive Analysis of U.S. Wrestling Governance Reform & the Structural Evolution of Illinois Wrestling Institutions

By Coach Shan AI

## Executive Summary

The transformation of amateur wrestling governance in the United States—shifting from the multi-sport **Amateur Athletic Union (AAU)** to the single-sport **United States Wrestling Federation (USWF)**, & ultimately to **USA Wrestling (USAW)**—represents one of the most significant structural overhauls in American sports history. Between 1968 & 1984, the wrestling community executed a successful governance revolt against top-down multi-sport bureaucracy, establishing an athlete-centric, state-federation-driven national governing body (NGB).

Illinois served as both the physical birthplace & the primary operational prototype for this national governance reform. The formal creation of the USWF occurred in the Chicago area in 1968, its initial national championships were hosted in Evanston in 1969, & its legal battles were adjudicated through Chicago arbitration channels plus federal courts. Key Illinois administrators—notably **Steve Combs**, **Werner Holzer**, & **Ken Kraft**—led the national movement then built state-level organizational templates that were scaled across the country.

At the state level, Illinois wrestling developed through 3 parallel, specialized institutions rather than a single monolithic body:

1. **Illinois Wrestling Federation (IWF) / Illinois USA Wrestling (IL/USAW)**: Formed in 1968 as the state-level affiliate for the national USWF movement, managing Olympic-style (freestyle & Greco-Roman) competition & national team pathways.
2. **Illinois Kids Wrestling Federation (IKWF)**: Established around 1969–1971 (initially as the IWF Kids Division), evolving into an independent 501(c)(3) entity governing youth folkstyle wrestling.
3. **Illinois Wrestling Coaches & Officials Association (IWCOA)**: Founded independently in 1971 to support high school coaches, train officials, run scholastic events, & host the Illinois Wrestling Hall of Fame.

## The National Governance Paradigm Shift (1968–1984) ↓

# 1. The National Governance Paradigm Shift (1968–1984)

## Historical Governance Models Comparison

| Dimension                               | The AAU Model<br>(Pre-1968 / Through 1982)                                                                  | The USWF Model<br>(1968–1983)                                                                              | USA Wrestling Model<br>(1983–Present)                                                                     |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Institutional Structure</b>          | Multi-sport "umbrella" organization; Wrestling Committee functioned as an internal division.                | Single-sport, athlete- & membership-based national federation.                                             | Unified National Governing Body (NGB); single-sport federation.                                           |
| <b>Primary Base &amp; Power</b>         | Centralized, top-down committee structure; incumbent USOC Group A & FILA affiliate.                         | Grassroots network built on state federations, individual members, & school/college stakeholders.          | State associations as operating foundations; structured Board with active athlete representation.         |
| <b>Funding &amp; Revenue Philosophy</b> | Dues, entry fees, & donations collected from youth/age-groups were heavily funneled to elite Olympic teams. | Financed directly through individual & organizational membership fees, returning value via local services. | Membership-driven revenue model supporting grassroots pipelines, clinics, & elite high-performance teams. |
| <b>Operational Focus</b>                | Elite Olympic/World team selection & club-based competition; limited youth development.                     | Widespread grassroots expansion, youth divisions, state championships, & officials' development.           | Integrated developmental pipeline:<br>Kids → Cadets/U17 → U20 → U23 → Olympic.                            |

|                               |                                                                     |                                                                                          |                                                                                |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>International Standing</b> | Recognized by FILA (now UWW) & USOC until legally stripped in 1982. | Challenged AAU legitimacy; won domestic arbitration (1978) but lacked initial FILA seat. | Sole USOC Group A member & voting FILA/UWW representative (seated April 1984). |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

## Comprehensive Timeline of the National Transition

- **1888:** The AAU is founded, sponsoring its first national wrestling tournament & establishing itself as the governing body for amateur sports in the U.S.
- **1964–1965:** Discontent escalates after the U.S. Olympic team wins only a single bronze medal at the 1964 Tokyo Games, followed by a single bronze medal at the 1965 World Championships. High school & college coaches cite structural neglect under the AAU umbrella.
- **January 1968:** Dr. Al deFerrari (U.S. delegate to FILA) chairs an exploratory meeting at Chicago's O'Hare Airport, bringing together school-college advocates & AAU figures to discuss a dedicated wrestling federation.
- **July 31 – August 1, 1968:** The official organizing meeting of the **United States Wrestling Federation (USWF)** takes place at the O'Hare Inn in Chicago. University of Minnesota coach **Wally Johnson** is elected as the first president.
- **April 1969:** The USWF conducts its first Senior National Freestyle & Greco-Roman Championships in Evanston, Illinois.
- **1971:** The USWF launches its Junior National Championships in Iowa City, establishing a national developmental stage for high school wrestlers.
- **1974: Steve Combs** assumes the role of USWF Executive Director. The USWF establishes the **U.S. Kids Wrestling Federation** as a voting division, expanding youth membership.
- **June 13, 1977:** The USWF formally applies to the U.S. Olympic Committee (USOC) to replace the AAU Wrestling Division as the Group A member for amateur wrestling. The USOC Executive Board denies the application on July 30, 1977.
- **September 7, 1978:** Following a USWF arbitration demand filed through the American Arbitration Association (AAA) office in Chicago, a 3-arbitrator panel rules unanimously that the USWF is entitled to replace the AAU as the USOC Group A member.

- **November 1978:** Congress enacts the **Amateur Sports Act of 1978**, formalizing the requirement that each Olympic sport be governed by a single autonomous NGB.
- **July 1980:** International federation (FILA) resistance prevents immediate seating of the USWF. Congress responds by passing an amendment/rider to the Amateur Sports Act, stipulating that an organization losing a binding arbitration cannot continue exercising NGB powers.
- **August 20, 1982:** Federal District Judge **Ann Aldrich** (N.D. Ohio) issues a decisive ruling in *United States Wrestling Federation v. Wrestling Division of the AAU*. The court permanently enjoins the AAU Wrestling Division from exercising NGB powers, orders it to resign from FILA, & mandates that the USOC terminate AAU recognition.
- **September 23, 1982:** USOC President **William E. Simon** convenes a 7-person transition panel in Los Angeles (including USWF leaders Werner Holzer & Steve Combs, alongside active athletes) to form the **United States Wrestling Association (USWA)**.
- **March 13–14, 1983:** At an organizational meeting in Oklahoma City, the USWA officially adopts the corporate name **United States of America Wrestling Association, Inc.**, operating publicly as **USA Wrestling (USAW)**. Werner Holzer is elected president.

**April 25, 1984:** USA Wrestling is officially seated as a voting member at the FILA Congress, completing the 16-year transition.

[1968: USWF Founded (Chicago)]



[1978: AAA Binding Arbitration Victory (Chicago)]



[1978/1980: Amateur Sports Act & Congressional Enforcement Rider]



[1982: Federal Court Injunction (Judge Ann Aldrich)]



[1982: Transitional USWA Formed]



[1983–1984: USA Wrestling Formally Incorporated & Recognized by FILA]

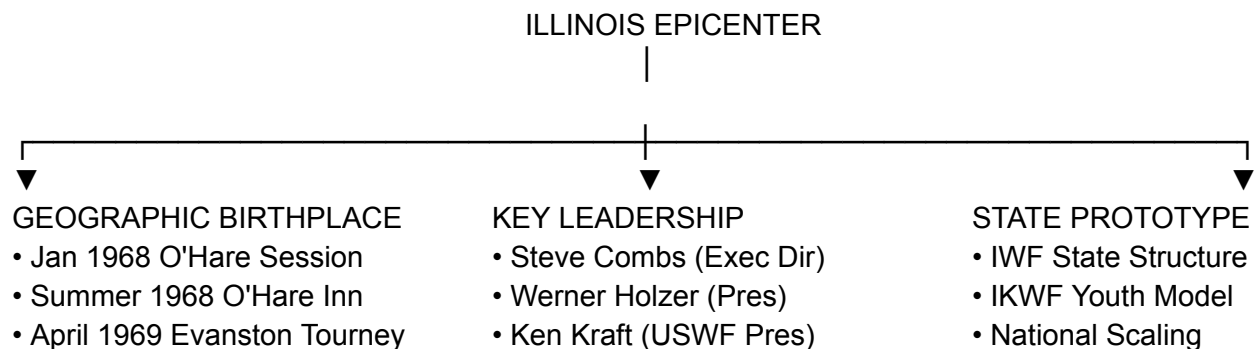
## The Legal & Legislative Hinge Points

The displacement of the AAU was achieved through a combination of legal arbitration, federal statutory reforms, & court injunctions:

1. **The AAA Arbitration (1978):** The USWF demonstrated that its state-federation network, youth divisions, officials' certification systems, & national championships constituted a vastly superior development program compared to the AAU's passive committee structure.
2. **The Congressional Enforcement Rider (1980):** When FILA & the USOC attempted to stall the transfer of power by claiming FILA rules overrode domestic arbitration, Congress intervened with a specific legislative rider designed to strip losing incumbent NGBs of their legal authority.
3. **Judicial Mandate (USWF v. AAU, 1982):** Judge Ann Aldrich's federal ruling eliminated the dual-governance stalemate by ordering the AAU out of FILA & forcing the USOC to seat the challenger. The resulting transition entity (USWA/USA Wrestling) inherited the USWF's operational structure, personnel, offices, & state-federation network.

## 2. Illinois as the Epicenter of Governance Reform

Illinois served as the geographic, strategic, & intellectual foundation of the national wrestling revolution.



### Geographic Launchpad & Championship Hosting

- **Founding Meetings:** Chicago hosted both the initial exploratory session in January 1968 & the founding convention from July 31 to August 1, 1968 (at the O'Hare Inn).
- **First National Championships:** In April 1969, Evanston, Illinois hosted the USWF's first official National Senior Freestyle & Greco-Roman Championships.

- **Arbitration Venue:** The legal demand that triggered the collapse of AAU's authority was filed & arbitrated through the American Arbitration Association's Chicago office.

## **Key Illinois Figures in National Leadership**

- **Steve Combs:** High school wrestling coach at Deerfield High School in suburban Chicago & 1968 Olympian. He built the Illinois Wrestling Federation (IWF) before taking over as USWF Executive Director in 1974. During his 11-year tenure, Combs expanded national membership tenfold (from 9,000 to over 90,000), created national officials' clinic systems, incorporated youth wrestling via the U.S. Kids Federation, & oversaw the transition to USA Wrestling.
- **Werner Holzer:** University of Illinois NCAA All-American, 1968 Greco-Roman Olympian, & founder of Chicago's Mayor Daley Youth Foundation wrestling program. Holzer served as USWF Vice President, became USWF President in 1981, sat on the 1982 USOC transition panel, & was elected the first President of USA Wrestling in 1983.
- **Ken Kraft:** Head wrestling coach at Northwestern University. Kraft served as 1 of the original incorporators of the USWF, was USWF President from 1973 to 1976, was a principal witness in the 1978 Chicago arbitration, & hosted the Midlands Tournament as well as early USWF national events at Northwestern.

## **The Illinois State Federation as the National Prototype**

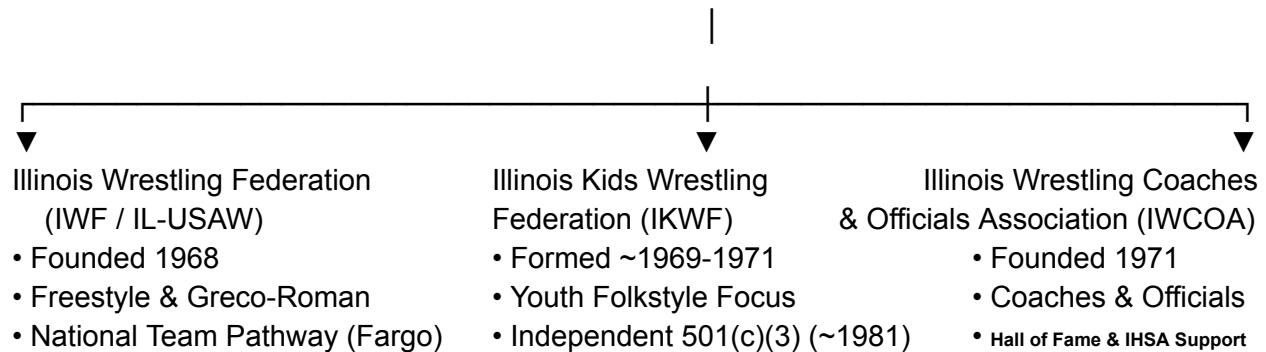
The organizational template designed by Steve Combs in Illinois—featuring local club charters, individual membership cards, state-sanctioned qualifying series, international-style clinics, & structured youth divisions—was explicitly adopted by the USWF as its national model. National Wrestling Hall of Fame records confirm that the Illinois Wrestling Federation was recognized as the "strong, vibrant state organization that would serve as a national pattern" for state associations across the United States.

## **3. Structural Breakdown & Evolution of Illinois Institutions**

Illinois wrestling did not evolve as a single monolithic entity, but rather through 3 distinct, specialized organizations that emerged between 1968 & 1971.

**Structural Breakdown & Evolution of Illinois Institutions Graph Below**

## 1968–1971 ILLINOIS WRESTLING FOUNDATION



## The 3 Pillars of Illinois Wrestling

### 1. Illinois Wrestling Federation (IWF) / Illinois USA Wrestling (IL/USAW)

- **Origins:** Established in 1968 in parallel with the national USWF movement.
- **Role & Governance:** Operates as the state-level affiliate for the national governing body. Following the national name change in 1983, the state body transitioned its public & administrative identity to **Illinois USA Wrestling (IL/USAW)**.
- **Primary Function:** Oversees Olympic-style wrestling (Freestyle & Greco-Roman) across Illinois. It manages state championship qualifiers, runs developmental camps, & selects/prepares "Team Illinois" for national competition, including the USAW 16U & Junior National Championships in Fargo, North Dakota.

### 2. Illinois Kids Wrestling Federation (IKWF)

- **Origins:** Traces its roots to 1969–1971 when Ken Kraft (then Illinois Wrestling Chairman) appointed **Ron Silverstein** as Illinois Kids Director to create a structured program for wrestlers in the 8th grade & younger. Key early organizers included Arch Richoz & Terry Weber.
- **Corporate Evolution:** Originally operated as the internal "Kids Division" of the IWF. It incorporated as an independent 501(c)(3) entity around 1981, adopting the long-standing slogan "*The 'K' is for kids*" around 1982.
- **National Impact:** In the 1976–1977 season, USA Wrestling adopted national membership card & club registration systems based on a proposal submitted by then-IKWF President **Larry Stonitsch**.
- **Scale:** By 2013, the IKWF grew to become the largest state association affiliate in USA Wrestling, serving nearly 19,000 youth athletes aged 5 to 14 across more than 250 chartered clubs.

### 3. Illinois Wrestling Coaches & Officials Association (IWCOA)

- **Origins:** Founded independently in 1971 by coaches & officials seeking a cooperative professional voice. Its initial president (1971–1972) was Steve Combs, followed by Wayne Miller (1972–1974) & Dennis Hastert (1974–1975).
- **Role & Scope:** Operates outside direct USA Wrestling state-governance channels. It is an independent professional support entity aligned with the Illinois High School Association (IHSA) scholastic framework.
- **Core Responsibilities:** Conducts mandatory IHSA coaching & officiating clinics, maintains high school state rankings, sponsors event series (Freshman/Sophomore State, Girls State, Illinois vs. Indiana All-Star Duals, Midwest Nationals), & administers the Illinois Wrestling Hall of Fame (established 1972).

### Analysis of Institutional "Splits" & Modern Integration

Historical records clarify 2 distinct organizational dynamics in Illinois:

1. **Functional Specialization (1968–1971):** Contrary to popular misconception, the IWCOA did not break away from the IWF or IKWF due to political strife. Rather, all 3 organizations emerged in the same 1968–1971 window to fulfill complementary functions: scholastic/professional support (IWCOA), youth folkstyle (IKWF), & Olympic-style state governance (IWF).
2. **The Mid-1990s Institutional Split & Modern Convergence:** IWCOA historical documents record a recognized community divide in the mid-1990s between the IWF (then focused on freestyle, Greco-Roman, & high school/junior age groups under leaders like State Chairman Fred Arkin) & the IKWF (focused on grade-school folkstyle).
3. **Operational Integration:** In subsequent years, the IKWF expanded its operational scope to absorb spring freestyle & Greco-Roman state programming for youth divisions. Today, IL/USAW & the IKWF operate in an integrated manner: sharing central administrative infrastructure (headquartered in Orland Park), utilizing unified USA Wrestling membership/sanctioning systems, & utilizing shared leadership (notably **Jim Considine**, who served as IKWF President beginning in 1993 while simultaneously serving as Illinois/USAW State Chairman starting in 1999).

### Comparative Matrix of Illinois Entities ↓

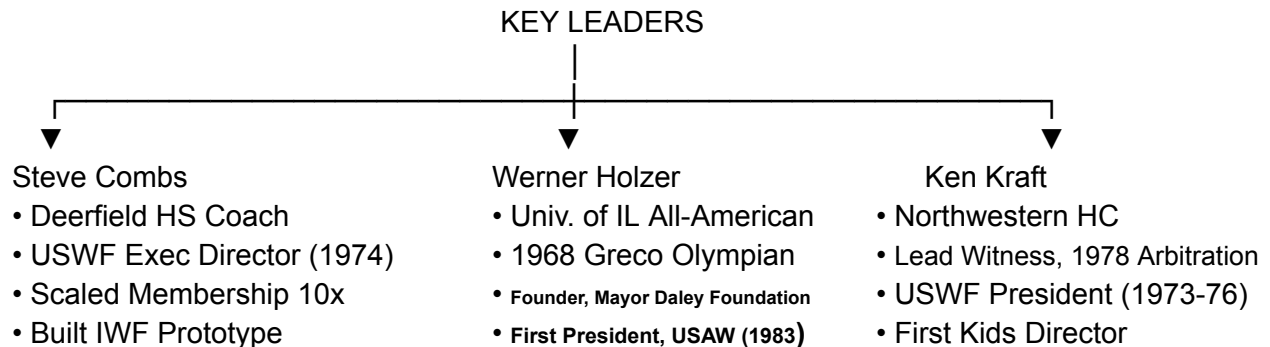
## Comparative Matrix of Illinois Entities

| Feature                | Illinois USA Wrestling (IL/USAW)                       | Illinois Kids Wrestling Federation (IKWF)         | Illinois Wrestling Coaches & Officials Association (IWCOA)   |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Founding Era</b>    | 1968 (as IWF; renamed post-1983)                       | 1969–1971 (IWF division); incorporated ~1981      | 1971                                                         |
| <b>Primary Domain</b>  | Olympic Styles (Freestyle & Greco-Roman)               | Youth Folkstyle (Tots through 8th Grade / 14U)    | Scholastic High School & Professional Support                |
| <b>Governance Role</b> | Official USAW State Chapter                            | USAW-Authorized Official State Youth Body         | Independent Professional Non-Profit                          |
| <b>Primary Events</b>  | Freestyle/Greco State, Fargo Qualifiers, Team IL Camps | IKWF Regional, Sectional, & State Championships   | Frosh/Soph State, Girls State, Hall of Fame Banquet          |
| <b>Target Audience</b> | All age groups pursuing Olympic pathways               | Youth wrestlers (Ages 5–14), youth clubs, parents | High school coaches, referees, media, hall of fame inductees |
| <b>Affiliation</b>     | USA Wrestling / United World Wrestling                 | USA Wrestling                                     | Illinois High School Association (IHSA)                      |

## Key Historical Figures and Primary Source Trail ↓

## 4. Key Historical Figures and Primary Source Trail

### Key Historical Figures



- **Fred Arkin:** IWF State Chairman (1993–1997) who directed IWF freestyle/Greco programs, hosted the 1994 Cadet World Championships in New Lenox, & launched the IWF Freshman/Sophomore state series.
- **Jim Considine:** Longtime Illinois wrestling administrator who held simultaneous leadership roles as Chairman of Illinois/USA Wrestling (from 1999) & President of the IKWF (from 1993).
- **Ted DeRousse:** USWF Illinois State Chairman starting in 1974, leading state federation activities during the national governance contest.
- **Ron Reichert:** Longtime administrator who served as IKWF Secretary/Treasurer (elected 1982), IWF Executive Director, & IWF Membership Administrator starting in 1991.
- **Ron Silverstein:** Appointed by Ken Kraft in 1969 as the first Illinois Kids Director; organized the state's club infrastructure & directed the first IKWF State Tournament series.
- **Larry Stonitsch:** Former IKWF President whose 1976 proposal for centralized membership cards & club charters was adopted nationally by USA Wrestling.

### Primary Legal & Historical Source Trail

1. ***United States Wrestling Federation v. Wrestling Division of the AAU*, 545 F. Supp. 1053 (N.D. Ohio 1982):** The federal district court decision issuing the permanent injunction that stripped the AAU of its NGB status & forced its withdrawal from FILA.

2. ***United States Wrestling Federation v. Wrestling Division of the AAU*, 605 F.2d 313 (7th Cir. 1979):** Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals decision affirming the validity of the 1978 Chicago arbitration award.
3. **Bob Dellinger, "The Changing of the Guard" (National Wrestling Hall of Fame):** The primary retrospective narrative detailing the founding meetings in Chicago, administrative growth under Steve Combs, & the USWA transition.
4. **Amateur Sports Act of 1978 (36 U.S.C. § 220501 et seq.) & 1980 Enforcement Rider:** Federal legislation establishing single-NGB autonomy & enforcing binding arbitration outcomes in Olympic sports governance.
5. **Official Handbook History of the Illinois Kids Wrestling Federation (IKWF):** Historical documentation detailing the 1969–1971 appointments under Ken Kraft, the initial 1971 state tournament, & the expansion of youth folkstyle administration in Illinois.

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