

## WHEN DO WRESTLERS PEAK?

When sports scientists look at a sport, they often develop a profile of the characteristics of the champions. It is interesting to note the age of wrestlers at the peak of their success. The ages of all Olympic wrestling champions were examined for this article. Birth dates were obtained for most champions on the FILA Database.

The average age of all Olympic wrestling champions is 26.79 years. The freestyle average age is 26.42 and for Greco-Roman is 27.15. There are no dramatic trends apparent. The champions in Athens were a bit younger than the style average: Greco-Roman-24.38, Freestyle-25.21 and Women-20.88.

**Table 1: Average Age of Wrestling Champions**

	Greco-Roman	Freestyle
1896 Athens	26.91	
1906 Athens	24.92	
1904 St. Louis		24.69
1908 London	25.72	23.16
1912 Stockholm	26.66	
1920 Antwerp	32.91	25.03
1924 Paris	28.03	25.23
1928 Amsterdam	26.80	28.21
1932 Los Angeles	31.80	27.53
1936 Berlin	28.18	29.61
1948 London	29.16	28.85
1952 Helsinki	28.43	28.37
1956 Melbourne	27.90	25.49
1960 Rome	28.08	26.80
1964 Tokyo	26.56	26.52
1968 Mexico City	27.62	29.19
1972 Munich	27.2	25.84
1976 Montreal	25.51	25.23
1980 Moscow	26.31	23.63
1984 Los Angeles	25.69	24.83
1988 Seoul	25.26	27.25
1992 Barcelona	24.89	26.67
1996 Atlanta	26.02	26.62
2000 Sydney	27.09	25.83
2004 Athens	24.38	25.21
<b>Style Average</b>	<b>27.15</b>	<b>26.42</b>
<b>Average Age of All Champions 26.79</b>		

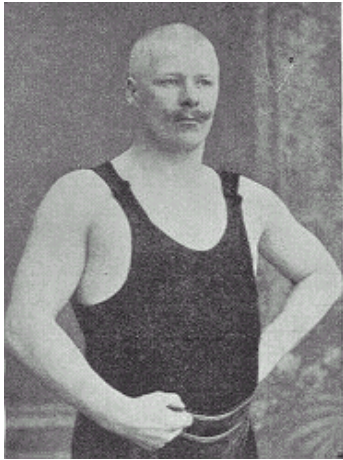
The range of ages are shown in Table 2. This table lists the ten youngest and ten oldest champions. The youngest ever champion was 19.6 years old and the oldest was 41.52.

**Table 2: Range of Ages of the Olympic Wrestling Champions**

<b>Ten Youngest Olympic Wrestling Champions</b>			
<b>Wrestler</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Games</b>	<b>Weight Class</b>
Saban Trstena YUG	19.6	1984 Los Angeles	FS 52 kg
Suren Nalbandyan USSR	20.13	1976 Montreal	GR 68 kg
Yerlikaya Hamza TUR	20.13	1996 Atlanta	GR 82 kg
Shazam Safin USSR	20.30	1952 Helsinki	GR 67 kg
Sanasar Oganesyanyan USSR	20.48	1980 Moscow	FS 90 kg
Magomedgasan Abushev USSR	20.71	1980 Moscow	FS 62 kg
Alexander Karelin USSR	21.00	1988 Seoul	GR 100+ kg
Il Kim PRK	21.02	1992 Barcelona	FS 48 kg
Varteres Samourgashev	21.03	2000 Sydney	GR 63 kg
George de Relwyskow GBR	21.06	1908 London	FS 66.6 kg
Bouvaisa Saitiev RUS	21.39	1996 Atlanta	FS 74 kg
*Bayram Sit TUR, FS 62 kg, 1952 Helsinki, listed as born 1/1/1930. This would mean that he was 21.34 years old. However, the records of many early Turkish wrestlers have birth dates entered as Jan 1 <sup>st</sup> , probably as a default.			
<b>Ten Oldest Olympic Wrestling Champions</b>			
Adolf Lindfors FIN	41.52	1920 Antwerp	GR 82+ kg
Anatoli Roschtschin USSR	40.49	1972 Munich	GR 100+ kg
Arsen Mekokishvili USSR	40.27	1952 Helsinki	FS 87+ kg
Gyula Bobis HUN	38.81	1948 London	FS 87+ kg
Johanes Kotkas USSR	37.48	1952 Helsinki	GR 100+ kg
Kaarlo Anttilla FIN	36.85	1924 Paris	GR 62 kg
Carl Westergren SWE	36.80	1932 Los Angeles	GR 87+ kg
Valentin Jordanov BUL	36.51	1996 Atlanta	FS 52 kg
Kaarlo Maekinen FIN	36.21	1928 Amsterdam	FS 56 kg
Claes Johansen SWE	35.78	1920 Antwerp	GR 82.5 kg

Weight classes have changed throughout the years and the youngest champions seem to be present in the lighter classes. 7 out of 10 champions were from weight classes less than 70 kg. However, Alexander Karelin, one of the greatest wrestlers/heavyweights of all time, won his first title as the 7<sup>th</sup> youngest Olympic wrestling champion of all time. What one generally sees is that the oldest competitors come from the heaviest weight classes. Six of the ten oldest champions come from the highest weight class. Weight class differences seem to be operating, with a tendency for heavyweight wrestlers towards greater longevity. The length of the competitive careers of heavyweights have been found to be longest.

Yerlikaya Hamza is the most recent of the youngest list, winning the 1996 GR 82 kg title at 20.13 years of age. He also won a World Championship in 1993 when he was just 17.29 years old! Bouvaisa Saitiev of Russia, is on the youngest champions list from Atlanta, and won again in Athens.



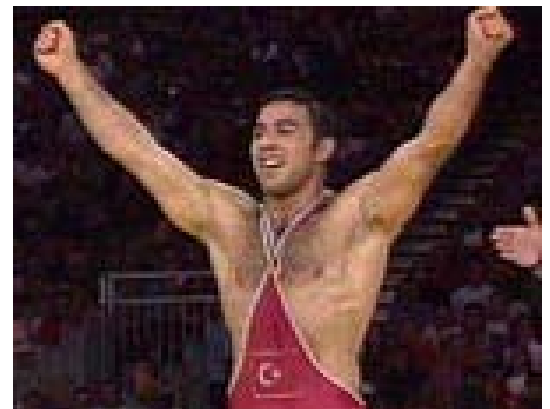
Adolf Lindfors, 1920 - The oldest Olympic Wrestling Champion at 41.52



Valentin Jordanov had both a long and successful career. He won his first World Championship in 1983, and won an Olympic gold in Atlanta at 36.51 years old.



Anatoli Roschtschin is the second oldest Olympic wrestling champion, having won his last gold in 1972, at the age of 40.49 years old.



Yerlikaya Hamza, 1996  
Just over 20 when he won Gold in Atlanta. He was 17 when he won a World Championship!

Some American wrestlers of interest are: Henry Wittenberg, the oldest American Gold Medalist, at 87 kg in 1948 when he was 33.92 years old; and the youngest American Olympic Champion, Peter Mehringer who won the FS 87 kg class in the 1932 games when he was 22.04 years old.

Bruce Baumgartner won a bronze medal at the Atlanta Games, 130 kg class, FS, at 35.74 years of age. Chris Campbell won a bronze in Barcelona in FS at age 37.87 at 90 kg. Jimmy Carr, at 17.58 years of age, was the youngest US wrestling Olympian, in the 1972 Games, in FS at 114.5 lbs.

**Athens - 2004**  
**Ages of Greco-Roman Olympic Champions**

<b>Wt. Class</b>	<b>Wrestler</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Age</b>
55	Istvan Majoros	HUN	30.12
60	Ji-Hyun Jung	KOR	21.42
66	Farid Mansurov	AZE	22.29
74	Dokturishvili, Alexander	UZB	24.59
84	Alexej Michin	RUS	25.55
96	Ibragim Gaber	EGY	24.99
120	Khassan Baroev	RUS	21.73
<b>Average Age</b>			<b>24.38</b>

**Ages of Men's Freestyle Champions**

<b>Wt. Class</b>	<b>Wrestler</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Age</b>
55	Mavlet Batirov	RUS	20.71
60	YM Quintana	CUB	24.58
66	Elbrus Tedeev	UKR	29.73
74	Bouvaisa Saitiev	RUS	29.47
84	Cael Sanderson	USA	25.19
96	Khadshimourad Gatsalov	RUS	21.72
120	Artur Taimazov	UZB	25.11
<b>Average</b>			<b>25.21</b>

**Women-2004**

<b>Wt. Class</b>	<b>Wrestler</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Age</b>
48	Irina Melnik	UKR	22.54
55	Saori Yosida	JPN	21.88
63	Kaori Icho	JPN	20.19
72	Wang Xu	CHN	18.91
<b>Average Age</b>			<b>20.88</b>

**Women:** Women competed in their first Olympic wrestling competition in Athens. They are approximately 4-5 years younger than their male counterparts. This probably reflects the relative recent development of women's wrestling. As more structures (Olympic resident training) are put in place for post education competition, this age will probably increase.

There are factors operating at both ends of the age distribution affecting the chances for observing champions that are either very young or relatively old. Most young champions are certainly prodigies with a “genius” for wrestling.

### **SOME FACTORS THAT MAY INCREASE CHANCES FOR EARLY SUCCESS**

- 1) **Growth and Maturation** There has been a steady increase in height and weight at all ages from birth to adulthood. There has been a general increase in the height and weight of Olympic athletes during the last generation. This has been matched with an acceleration in sexual maturity. In women, there has been a steady decrease in the age of menarche – from 17 in 1840 to 13.5 in 1960. A trend of earlier maturation has been observed in boys who reach their maximum height at an earlier age than a generation ago.
- 2) **Talent Identification** Systematic identification and selection of young athletes, along with earlier specialized training could also be factors.
- 3) **Weight Training** The use of weight training is now widespread in the training regimens of most young athletes. Most physiological parameters peak in the early 20's.

At the other end of the age spectrum, we know that physiological functional capacity declines with age. There are declines in aerobic capacity, peak strength and power.

### **SOME FACTORS THAT MAY INCREASE THE LONGEVITY OF WRESTLING CHAMPIONS ARE:**

**Training Programs** that slow the aging process. What may have formerly been considered “normal” deterioration may be forestalled by continuous training.

**Preservation of Strength** Many of the oldest champions compete in the heaviest weight class. Is strength more of a factor in this class? Bulgarian research indicates that the competitors in the heaviest weight categories have the longest careers at the international level of 10.7 years.

**Improved Tactics and Psychological Preparation** Veterans can take advantage of experience. This could be especially valuable in controlling competition stress, and application of tactics and strategy.

**Improved Sports Medicine** Improved training, which again includes weight training, along with better medical care, may provide athletes the ability to withstand the rigors of training and competition. This includes prevention, better treatment of injuries, and rehabilitation. Surgical repair is an important factor in extending careers.

**Professionalization of Sport** This cultural phenomenon has provided athletes with the financial support so an athlete can remain in sport longer, before having to go on to their “real world” career. Some examples are support through sport federations, endorsements, sponsorships, and prize money.

How old were the American teams in Athens?

**Ages of USA Men's Freestyle Olympic Team-2004  
(age on day of finals in Athens)**

<b>Wt. Class</b>	<b>Wrestler</b>	<b>Age</b>
55	Stephen Abas	26.63
60	Eric Guerrero	27.29
66	Jamill Kelly	26.84
74	Joe Williams	29.76
84	Cael Sanderson	25.19
96	Daniel Cormier	25.44
120	Kerry McCoy	30.07
<b>Average</b>		<b>27.32</b>

**Ages of USA Men's Greco-Roman Olympic Team-2004  
(age on day of finals in Athens)**

<b>Wt. Class</b>	<b>Wrestler</b>	<b>Age</b>
55	Dennis Hall	33.56
60	James Gruenwald	34.21
66	Oscar Wood	29.18
74	Keith Sieracki	33.09
84	Brad Vering	27.01
96	Garrett Lowney	24.90
120	Rulon Gardner	33.03
<b>Average</b>		<b>30.71</b>

Both American men's teams were mature groups. The Greco-Roman team average is over three years older than the Olympic champion average of 27.15. Veteran teams are what one would expect at the end of an Olympic cycle.

**Ages of USA Women's Freestyle Olympic Team-2004  
(age on day of finals in Athens)**

<b>Wt. Class</b>	<b>Wrestler</b>	<b>Age</b>
48	Patricia Miranda	25.20
55	Tela O'Donnell	22.10
63	Sara McMann	23.91
72	Toccaro Montgomery	21.65
<b>Average Age</b>		<b>23.22</b>

The average age of this first American women's Olympic wrestling team is just over 23 years old. It will be interesting to track the evolution of this division.

**Beijing 2008?**

Who will continue wrestling? This is a question all of our medalists field after they achieve Olympic success. Stephen Abas is talking about 2008. Joe Williams wrestled at Sunkist. Some of the athletes have not yet decided on their wrestling futures, including Cael Sanderson and Jamill Kelly.

Patricia Miranda will immediately focus on her law school challenge at Yale, and may still be in the picture. Coach Terry Steiner says no one has officially retired but thinks that Patricia Miranda may retire (she has started law school) and Sara McMann may also - but we won't really know until next year.

Then there are the athletes who know they are done. Certainly, Rulon Gardner made his intention known when he placed his ASICS on the center mat after winning the bronze medal. Coach Steve Fraser says that Dennis Hall and Garrett Lowney are also retired. If Jim Gruenwald wins gold in 2008, he would be the 5<sup>th</sup> oldest champion! Good luck to all!