

College wrestling could use some tips from freestyle

ST. LOUIS — There is little doubt that college wrestling needs help.

While the sport flourishes at the youth and high school levels, the college version is suffering. Sure, many programs have been dropped in the name of gender equity, but Title IX is only part of wrestling's problem.

The sport needs some help from within its foundation, some changes and some marketing that will promote the outstanding physical attributes of its athletes.

A veteran of 16 NCAA wrestling championships, I've seen a lot of good and a little bad over the years. I don't have all the answers to wrestling's woes, but do have a few suggestions.

Action, action, action — The coaches need to get together with their rules committee and



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make some changes to assure more action on the mat.

Incorporate some of the best of freestyle with the best of folkstyle to make bouts most interesting. The vast majority of matches that end 2-1 or 3-2 — and there's a lot of them — are boring. Marginal fans aren't going to come back to watch two guys dance around for seven minutes.

Eliminate riding time and the awarding of someone for being

a good rider. For many, that's one point for stalling well. Once a wrestler takes an opponent down, give him 10 seconds to work for back points. If nothing is happening, put the wrestlers back on their feet. Either eliminate the escape point — unless a wrestler really earns it — or give three points for a take-down.

Although this doesn't have anything to do with action on the mat, another good freestyle rule this year has to do with shoe strings. Freestyle wrestlers must tape their shoelaces, therefore eliminating a timeout to tie a shoe. This is a wonderful rule that folkstyle should add.

Change the season — This is nothing new, but something needs to be done as soon as possible.

It's silly to think wrestling

can compete head-to-head with men's and women's basketball, two of the most popular sports in this country — at any time of the year.

Wrestling needs to start its season in December, run its conference tournaments or national qualifiers in late March or early April and hold the national meet in mid to late April.

The established fans will follow the sport in a new season and it may even pick up a few new ones who don't like skipping March Madness.

Next year's tournament is in Iowa City, the 2002 meet is in Albany, N.Y., and the 2003 tournament will move to Kansas City. Nothing has been set after that, apparently because the NCAA is considering new dates for the tournaments.

Stay tuned. This is a good possibility.

A few good men — Iowa and Iowa State fans may not agree, but the sport needs more men like Minnesota Coach J Robinson.

Robinson is a tireless worker for wrestling and one of its best promoters today. The Minnesota crowds at home and on the road are second only to the Hawkeye following. Through his promotion, 13,128 fans turned out for the Iowa dual in Minneapolis, the best dual crowd this season.

He's fun to watch, speaks his mind without fear and often has good ideas for the future of the sport.

Sound familiar? Robinson has replaced Dan Gable as the sport's most visible coach.

A few more coaches like Robinson and more people will start paying attention.

Go with your strength — I

like the idea of moving the NCAA meet around, giving fans in different parts of the country a chance to experience an outstanding three-day event.

But let's face it. When the tournament is in places like Chapel Hill, N.C., it just doesn't draw as well as in places like Iowa City or Cedar Falls or, in this weekend's case, St. Louis.

Bring the championships to places where the fans can get and try a few of these mega-arenas. The United Center in Chicago would be another central location with easy access and many good seats.

Wrestling's problems can't be solved overnight, but it's time to stop waiting for something to happen and start making something happen.