

Chapter 1

Condensed History of SOMBO Wrestling

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History of SOMBO Wrestling

Sombo (also spelled Sambo, Somba or Cambo) is an acronym for the Russian phrase "self-defense without weapons" (Som-oborona Bes Orusyia). As its name implies, it is a self-defense oriented style of jacket wrestling which incorporates techniques from both JUDO and freestyle/Greco-Roman wrestling. It originated in the Soviet Union (Russia) officially in 1939 as a form of hand-to-hand combat for soldiers, but its roots go back to ancient times. There are similar forms of jacket wrestling in the Canary Islands off the coast of Spain and also in the Cumberland-Westmoreland region of England. Currently, the former Soviet Block countries, Spain, France and the English field strong international SOMBO teams. The International Amateur Wrestling Federation (FILA) first recognized SOMBO as a sport of world stature in 1968, adopting it alongside freestyle and Greco-Roman as the third wrestling discipline. In 1972, the first European Championships were held in Russia. In 1973, FILA sponsored the first World Championships in Tehran, Iran. Four U.S. wrestlers competed in the tournament, with two placing third and one placing fifth. In 1977, the U.S. captured the Pan American title with seven gold and three silver medals, then repeated as champions in 1979 with eight gold and two silver. Also in 1979, the U.S. placed fifth in the World Championships in Madrid, Spain, having sent its first full team to this event. Eight of the ten U.S. wrestlers placed in the top six positions in their weight classes, including two third place finishers, two fourths, one fifth, and three sixths.

In 1980 the World Championships was again held under FILA in Madrid, Spain. In 1983, Sombo was included in the Pan American Games in Caracas, Venezuela.

Beginning in 1984, many changes to the structure and organization of the sport started to take place. That year Sombo separated from FILA and the International Amateur Sombo Federation (FIAS) was formed in Spain with Spain's Fernando Compte as the head. Josh Henson of the US was elected Vice-President at that time. In 1985, FIAS was accepted into the General Association of International Sports Federations (AGFIS).

In 1990-93, various countries split away from FIAS and formed separate international federations, each holding their own international and national events. In the U.S., the United States SOMBO Association (USSA) is the national

governing body, the only group officially recognized by the Amateur Athletic Union of the U.S., the only organization involved with Sombo that is recognized by the US Olympic Committee. USSA holds a National Sports Sombo Championship each year for Schoolboy age and above wrestlers, while the younger age groups (and also the older ages as well) compete at the AAU Grand National SOMBO Championships.

In the mid-1990s, a large following of the Combat form of Sombo emerged in the U.S. Promoted by a practitioner named Mark Densberger, Combat Sombo competitions have grown in popularity in recent years. Drawing from the martial arts and Judo sectors, Combat events are now a major part of all Sombo competitions.

Current Club Activity

In the US, the majority of SOMBO practiced at the club level is done so in SOMBO only clubs or in conjunction with other traditional wrestling styles. The SOMBO only clubs are geared for the serious SOMBO wrestlers. Some SOMBO wrestlers practice with JUDO clubs, while some other clubs actively promote SOMBO as one of the various styles during their regular season. The predominance of SOMBO activity is located in the Maryland/Pennsylvania region of the US. Other concentration areas include Kentucky, Missouri, Texas, and Southern California.

Very few JUDO or traditional folkstyle wrestling clubs practice or promote SOMBO wrestling. While most JUDO sensi's know about and sometimes even encourage their wrestlers to cross practice with SOMBO wrestlers, their strong commitment to JUDO prevents them from promoting this alternate style. However, a large number of Karate instructors have recognized the benefits of SOMBO technique and most encourage their students to master it along with their other techniques.