



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on February 18, 2013

## N.C. High School Wrestler Penalized for Silent Prayer Before Match

There appears to be a new rule in North Carolina's high school wrestling rule book: Prayer is prohibited. Nicholas Fant, a junior at North Carolina's Wake Forest-Rolesville High School and a 220-pound competitor in the February 12 state wrestling tournament, found that out the hard way. After dropping to a knee for a customary two-second prayer prior to his first round match, Fant was given a warning for stalling, which cost him a point in the contest. The varsity wrestler, who had not been penalized in the past for such prayers, ultimately lost to his opponent by a score of 3-0.



The penalty angered Fant's coach, Sam Hershey, who said that the one-point deficit starting out forced Fant to change his strategy for the match. Hershey said that while he would not comment on the referee's decision, he would seek a clarification to determine if penalizing a wrestler for a two-second silent prayer comported with the spirit of the rule against stalling.

In its rulebook the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) explains that a referee may call a penalty for stalling "when either wrestler delays the match. This includes straggling back from out of bounds, unnecessarily changing or adjusting equipment, or delay in assuming the starting position on the mat." While in 2008 the NFHS issued 27 pages of guidelines for how a ref is to call for stalling, nowhere is prayer mentioned.

Nonetheless, Commissioner David Whitfield of the North Carolina High School Athletic Association insisted to [Fox News](#) that the referee who penalized Fant made the right call. "When the referee called them to the center of the mat, at that point it's time to wrestle," Whitfield explained. He said the referee's ruling had nothing to do with prayer or religion. "It had everything to do with the rules of wrestling," he said. "You have discretion in all rules as it relates to wrestling, but in this case, one of the wrestlers was in the circle waiting."

But David Culbreth, an official with the Southeastern Wrestling Officials Association, said that he would have cut Fant some slack, saying that when he is reffing a match "God gets two seconds." He insisted that "I'm not going to call that. But if it turned into a 60-second prayer, he'd probably get a verbal warning — or I might try to say 'Amen' for him."

High school athletes like Fant may be influenced by the now world-famous actions of NFL quarterback Tim Tebow, who since college has had a tradition of dropping to a knee in thanksgiving to God every time his team scores. Additionally, during his college career Tebow had the scripture reference "John 3:16" inscribed into his eye black during games, a practice that college athletic officials later prohibited as distracting and unnecessary.



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