Contents lists available at ASI

Acta Scientiae et Intellectus
Journal of Sport Sciences

Homepage: www.actaint.com

Research Article

A Comparative Review of the Historical and Institutional Transformation of Traditional and Modern Wrestling in Turkish Sports History

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Abstract

This review examines the historical development and institutional transformation of traditional and modern wrestling in Turkish sports history from a comparative perspective. Drawing on relevant scholarly literature, the study adopts a comparative historical review approach to investigate how wrestling practices have evolved across different historical, institutional, and cultural settings. The analysis is organized around four dimensions: organizational structures and governance, competition rules and regulations, wrestler training and knowledge transmission, and cultural identity and social functions. The reviewed literature suggests that traditional wrestling has historically been associated with local customs, community-based practices, and culturally embedded forms of competition, whereas modern Olympic wrestling has developed within federation-based governance structures and internationally standardized sporting regulations. However, these differences do not constitute a rigid distinction between traditional and modern wrestling. Traditional wrestling practices have increasingly interacted with formal sporting institutions, while modern wrestling continues to carry cultural and national significance. The Kırkpınar oil wrestling tradition illustrates how established cultural practices can persist despite changes in particular rituals and organizational arrangements. By examining these developments within a common comparative framework, this review highlights the interconnected processes of institutional differentiation, sporting modernization, and cultural continuity. The findings suggest that the transformation of Turkish wrestling should be understood through patterns of coexistence and adaptation rather than as a linear transition in which modern sporting forms replace traditional practices.

Keywords: Institutional transformation; modern wrestling; sports history; traditional wrestling; Turkish wrestling;

INTRODUCTION

Wrestling has a long history as a form of physical competition and has occupied an important place in the social and cultural life of various societies. Practised in different forms across geographical regions and historical periods, wrestling has developed in relation to local traditions, social structures, and changing approaches to athletic competition. Its historical significance extends beyond physical strength and technical proficiency, encompassing cultural practices, social relationships, and expressions of collective identity. The development of distinct wrestling styles reflects the ways in which sporting practices have been shaped and reinterpreted under different historical and cultural conditions (Philippe, 2014). The interaction between traditional wrestling practices and modern sport has involved processes of adaptation and institutional change, with established traditions often continuing alongside increasingly standardized forms of competition (Bromber et al., 2014). These developments highlight the importance of examining wrestling through its historical, cultural, and institutional characteristics rather than treating it solely as a competitive sporting activity.

Wrestling occupies a significant position in Turkish sports history, owing to its longstanding presence in social life and its close association with cultural traditions. Among Turkic communities, wrestling has historically reflected physical strength and competitive ability while also contributing to social relationships, communal solidarity, and the preservation of traditional values. Wrestling styles developed in different forms across Turkic communities, influenced by geographical conditions and local customs, yet retaining certain shared cultural characteristics (Türkmen & Buyar, 2019). The preparation of wrestlers traditionally involved the transmission of technical skills alongside principles of discipline, respect, and social responsibility. Within this framework, master–apprentice relationships provided a means of passing practical knowledge, training methods, and established customs between generations (Türkmen & Canuzakov, 2019). Such practices contributed to the preservation of wrestling traditions and their continued presence in the social and cultural life of Turkic communities.

During the Ottoman period, wrestling retained its social and cultural significance while developing within established institutional structures. Wrestling lodges (*güreş tekkeleri*) provided organized settings for the training and accommodation of wrestlers, known as *pehlivans*, and supported the organization of wrestling activities. These institutions contributed to the development of organized wrestling practices and the consolidation of wrestling within Ottoman social life (Kaya & Arstanbekov, 2022). Ottoman sports lodges also fulfilled social functions by providing food, accommodation, and opportunities for communal interaction alongside athletic training (Dever, 2019). Oil wrestling (*yağlı güreş*), a prominent form of traditional

https:// 10.5281/zenodo.23661385
Received 12 March 2025; Received in revised form 17 October 2026; Accepted 23 October 2026
Available online 23 October 2026
e-ISSN: 2519-1896/© 2026 ASI. All rights are reserved, including those for text and data mining, AI training, and similar technologies.

wrestling associated with the Ottoman period, has maintained its cultural significance through established rituals, competitive practices, and *pehlivan* traditions. The Kırkpınar oil wrestling festival preserves distinctive elements of this heritage, including the craftsmanship involved in producing the *kıspet*, the traditional leather trousers worn by oil wrestlers (Başaran & Gürçüm, 2011). The persistence of these traditions reflects the enduring relationship between wrestling, institutional practices, and cultural heritage in Turkish sports history.

Efforts to modernize sport during the late Ottoman period acquired new political, social, and institutional dimensions following the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. During the Republican era, sport became closely associated with modernization policies and the construction of national identity, influencing the place of traditional athletic practices and modern sporting disciplines within Turkish society (Krawietz, 2014b). International sporting competitions also gained importance as platforms for national representation and diplomatic engagement. In the early Republican period, participation in these events formed part of Turkey's efforts to establish an international presence through sport (Kuruloglu, 2023). Within this broader process of sporting modernization, competitive wrestling increasingly operated through formal organizations, standardized rules, and international competition structures. The subsequent development of women's wrestling and its inclusion in the Olympic programme reflected wider changes in the international organization of the sport and opportunities for participation (Curby & Jomand, 2015). The coexistence of nationally rooted wrestling traditions and internationally regulated competition provides an important historical context for examining the institutional development of wrestling in Turkey.

Traditional and modern forms of wrestling differ in their organizational structures, competition rules, approaches to wrestler training, and social functions. Nevertheless, the modernization of wrestling has not necessarily led to the disappearance of traditional practices, some of which have been adapted to changing sporting, social, and institutional conditions. The sportification of traditional Turkish oil wrestling illustrates how established customs have interacted with modern organizational structures and how cultural heritage has been reinterpreted within formal sporting settings (Krawietz, 2012). The incorporation of traditional rituals into organized competition, alongside evolving approaches to athletic performance and event management, reflects the interaction between customary practices and modern sporting arrangements (Krawietz, 2014a). Traditional and modern wrestling should therefore not be understood as entirely separate forms of competition or as successive stages in which one inevitably replaces the other. Their historical relationship can instead be examined through the continuities, adaptations, and institutional differences that have shaped wrestling practices over time.

Previous research has examined various aspects of Turkish wrestling history, including the institutional organization of wrestling during the Ottoman period, the cultural significance of traditional wrestling, and the modernization of sporting practices. Studies addressing the sportification and cultural heritage of Turkish oil wrestling have also contributed to understanding the relationship between traditional practices and contemporary sporting institutions (Krawietz, 2012, 2014a). However, these historical and institutional developments have generally been examined through different thematic perspectives. A comparative synthesis integrating organizational governance, competition regulations, wrestler training, and cultural functions may therefore provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between traditional and modern wrestling. Accordingly, this review examines the historical development and institutional transformation of traditional and modern wrestling in Turkish sports history through four interconnected analytical dimensions. By bringing these dimensions together, the study seeks to identify patterns of continuity, adaptation, and institutional differentiation and to clarify how different wrestling traditions have evolved within changing historical and organizational contexts.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a comparative historical narrative review approach to examine the historical development and institutional transformation of traditional and modern wrestling in Turkish sports history. The review focuses on the relationship between historical continuity, institutional differentiation, and sporting modernization, considering how wrestling practices have evolved under changing social, cultural, and organizational conditions. Rather than treating traditional and modern wrestling as successive or mutually exclusive categories, the study examines their historical interactions and the different forms of institutional adaptation associated with their development. A comparative historical perspective was employed to interpret developments across different periods and organizational settings. The analysis was structured around four interrelated dimensions: organizational structures and governance, competition rules and regulations, wrestler training and knowledge transmission, and cultural identity and social functions. This framework enabled the literature to be examined through common analytical categories while accounting for differences among wrestling traditions and historical contexts.

Literature Search and Source Selection

The literature was identified primarily through Google Scholar, using combinations of English and Turkish search terms related to wrestling history, traditional wrestling, Ottoman wrestling, Republican-era sport, modern and Olympic wrestling, institutionalization, sportification, and cultural heritage. Additional searches addressed wrestling federations, competition regulations, athlete development, and the cultural functions of wrestling. The review considered peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, book chapters, and relevant institutional publications. Sources were selected according to their relevance to

the research objectives, historical and institutional content, and bibliographic traceability. Particular attention was given to publications addressing the development of wrestling practices in Turkish and Turkic societies, the institutional organization of wrestling during the Ottoman and Republican periods, and the modernization of wrestling through national and international sporting structures. No chronological restrictions were imposed because the review sought to examine developments across different historical periods. Publications unrelated to the research objectives and duplicate records were excluded. Institutional documents were considered where relevant to understanding organizational arrangements and regulatory developments. As a narrative historical review, the study did not aim to provide an exhaustive systematic identification of all available publications. Instead, it sought to develop an interpretive synthesis of relevant scholarship within a clearly defined comparative framework. Accordingly, the findings are interpreted as literature-based historical assessments rather than as conclusions derived from a systematic review or quantitative synthesis.

Comparative Analysis Framework

The selected literature was examined through four analytical dimensions. The first, organizational structures and governance, addressed the development of customary wrestling institutions, local organizational arrangements, and national and international federation systems. Particular attention was given to institutional changes and the coexistence of traditional practices with formal sporting administration. The second dimension, competition rules and regulations, examined differences in sporting regulations, technical practices, competition formats, and the standardization of wrestling disciplines. The analysis considered how regulatory changes affected the organization of competitions without assuming that standardized rules were exclusive to modern wrestling. The third dimension, wrestler training and knowledge transmission, focused on the relationship between traditional forms of practical instruction, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and contemporary approaches to coaching and athlete development. The analysis considered potential areas of continuity and overlap rather than assuming a complete separation between traditional and modern training practices. The fourth dimension, cultural identity and social functions, examined the relationships between wrestling, community participation, cultural heritage, national identity, and international sporting representation. Particular consideration was given to the ways in which traditional cultural practices have been maintained, modified, or institutionally reorganized. Across these dimensions, the literature was interpreted in relation to three recurring processes: continuity, adaptation, and institutional differentiation. Comparisons were made with attention to historical period, wrestling discipline, and organizational setting. The resulting synthesis sought to identify recurring patterns and significant differences while avoiding the assumption that traditional and modern wrestling represent homogeneous or historically fixed categories.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Historical Development of Wrestling in Turkish Sports History

The historical development of wrestling in Turkish sports history has been shaped by sporting traditions that emerged across different regions, from Central Asia to Anatolia. Among Turkic communities in Central Asia, wrestling was practised as a traditional sport that demonstrated physical combat skills and formed part of various social gatherings. Between 1400 and 1850, wrestling featured alongside horse racing, archery, and other physical activities during festivals and communal celebrations (Akyildiz, 2022). Differences in geographical and cultural conditions contributed to the emergence of distinct wrestling styles among Turkic peoples. Kazakh wrestling, known as *küres*, retained elements of traditional competition while adapting to changing sporting conditions and developing new forms of organization (Türkmen & Arstanbekov, 2020). These variations reflect the regional diversity of wrestling traditions among Turkic communities.

In Anatolia, traditional wrestling developed in several forms, including oil wrestling (*yağlı güreş*), *karakucak*, and *aba* wrestling. These styles differ in their competition rules, clothing, and technical practices. Aşırtmalı aba wrestling, traditionally practised in the Gaziantep region, provides a notable example of this regional diversity. Its distinctive clothing, wrestling techniques, and local competition practices reflect the influence of regional culture on sporting traditions (Şahin, 2014). The coexistence of different wrestling styles in Anatolia highlights the importance of local practices in the historical development of traditional wrestling.

During the Ottoman period, wrestling occupied an established place in social life through local competitions and *pehlivan* traditions, while also being practised within organized institutional settings. Wrestling lodges (*güreş tekkeleri*) provided important centres for wrestler training and the continuation of wrestling activities. Historical research on the Sheikh Cemaleddin Wrestling Lodge in Edirne documents the institutional support given to wrestling and the training of wrestlers within these establishments (Turgut & Güler, 2023). Wrestling practices in these lodges were also associated with the religious and cultural traditions of the period. Connections identified between Yesevi traditions and the rituals observed in wrestling lodges point to the moral and social dimensions of *pehlivan* culture (Türkmen, 2012). Ottoman wrestling thus developed through both local customs and organized forms of sporting activity.

Following the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, changes in national sports policies influenced the development of wrestling within a new social and political environment. During the early Republican period, the promotion of physical education and sport became closely associated with modernization and national identity. An examination of the *Turkish Sports Association Magazine*, published between 1936 and 1938, indicates that sport was presented in relation to the social and

political objectives of the period (Koçer, 2023). Sporting activities organized by the People's Houses (*Halkevleri*) also contributed to the public visibility of traditional sports (Aydın, 2026). While traditional wrestling practices continued, participation in national and international competitions became increasingly important in the development of Turkish wrestling.

The international development of Turkish wrestling during the Republican era became particularly visible through Olympic participation and competitive achievements. The success of Turkish wrestlers at the Olympic Games strengthened wrestling's position within Turkey's international sporting history (Belli et al., 2020). The medals won at the 1948 London Olympics brought greater international recognition to Turkish wrestling while prompting debates concerning amateurism, athlete rewards, and the conditions governing Olympic participation (Özçakır & Llewellyn, 2017). Meanwhile, traditional wrestling styles continued to be practised in local competitions as modern Olympic wrestling developed within international competitive structures. The historical development of Turkish wrestling therefore reflects the coexistence of enduring traditional practices and increasingly internationalized forms of sporting competition.

Institutionalization and Modernization of Wrestling

The institutionalization of wrestling acquired new dimensions as traditional forms of organization changed and modern sports administration developed. During the Ottoman period, wrestling lodges (*güreş tekkeleri*) played an important role in training wrestlers and maintaining wrestling activities. Wrestling events held within the imperial court and local competitions also formed part of the period's sporting organization (Şener & İmamoğlu, 2018). From the Tanzimat period onwards, the position of traditional sporting institutions began to change as modern physical education practices and new forms of sporting organization became more widespread. Following the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, national sporting organizations and centralized administrative arrangements gained increasing importance (Zelyurt, 2013). These developments reflected the changing position of traditional wrestling institutions and the growing influence of modern sports administration.

The development of modern sports administration in Turkey also affected the position of traditional wrestling styles within the federation system. Oil wrestling (*yağlı güreş*), in particular, underwent several changes in its administrative structure. Its incorporation into the Turkish Wrestling Federation in 1984, its reassignment to the Traditional Sports Federation in 1996, and the subsequent decision to return it to the Turkish Wrestling Federation highlighted ongoing debates over its institutional governance (Yıldıran, 2000). These administrative changes reflected differing approaches to the organization of traditional wrestling within a modern federation-based system.

The standardization of competition rules represented a significant aspect of the institutionalization of modern wrestling. The establishment of sporting rules and common regulations provided a basis for organizing and supervising competitions (Vamplew, 2007). In Olympic wrestling, regulations governing weight categories, bout duration, and competition formats underwent several changes over time. These modifications influenced athletes' physical preparation and technical-tactical approaches, contributing to changes in the competitive conditions of modern wrestling (López-Gullón & Martínez-Abellán, 2011). Olympic wrestling consequently developed within an international competition system governed by standardized rules.

Changes in international wrestling governance further influenced the institutional development of the sport. In 2013, the International Olympic Committee's decision not to recommend wrestling for inclusion among the core sports of the 2020 Olympic Games raised serious concerns about its Olympic future. Following efforts to retain its Olympic status, wrestling secured a place on the Olympic programme later that year, while the International Federation of Associated Wrestling Styles (FILA) introduced reforms concerning governance, representation, and competition rules (Kaya, 2015). The federation's subsequent adoption of the name United World Wrestling (UWW) marked another stage in the reorganization of international wrestling governance. These developments illustrate how the institutionalization of wrestling has been shaped by both national administrative structures and international sporting regulations.

Comparative Analysis of Traditional and Modern Wrestling

Traditional and modern wrestling differ in their organizational structures, competition rules, approaches to athlete development, and cultural functions. Traditional wrestling has historically been associated with local communities, regional customs, and cultural events, whereas modern Olympic wrestling operates within organizational structures governed by national federations and international sporting bodies. However, traditional wrestling organizations have also undergone changes, with some local practices adapting to more formalized competition systems. Historical research on Cumberland and Westmorland wrestling in England illustrates how traditional sporting practices can be reorganized in response to changing social conditions while retaining distinctive elements of regional identity (Huggins, 2001). These developments suggest that organizational differences between traditional and modern wrestling should be understood as historically evolving characteristics rather than fixed institutional divisions. The principal organizational, regulatory, training-related, and cultural characteristics of traditional and modern wrestling are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparative Characteristics of Traditional and Modern Wrestling

Dimension	Traditional Wrestling	Modern Wrestling
Organizational structure	Historically associated with local communities, customary institutions, and regional organizations	Governed through national federations and international sporting bodies
Competition rules	Style-specific regulations, techniques, clothing, and conditions for victory	Standardized weight categories, scoring systems, bout durations, and technical regulations
Training practices	Emphasis on practical experience, customary instruction, and interpersonal knowledge transmission	Structured coaching, systematic physical conditioning, and performance assessment
Cultural and social functions	Regional identity, community participation, and cultural heritage transmission	International representation, competitive achievement, and national sporting identity

Note. *The characteristics presented represent general tendencies identified in the reviewed literature. Traditional wrestling may incorporate formal governance and standardized rules, while modern wrestling may retain significant cultural and social functions. The categories should therefore not be interpreted as mutually exclusive.*

Competition rules represent another important area of differentiation. Modern Olympic wrestling operates under internationally standardized regulations governing weight categories, bout duration, scoring systems, and permitted techniques. Traditional wrestling styles, by contrast, may follow different rules concerning clothing, methods of engagement, and conditions for victory, reflecting the characteristics of particular regional traditions. Changes to Olympic wrestling regulations have influenced match structures and wrestlers' technical and tactical decisions (Tünnemann, 2013). The development of competition analysis instruments based on revised international rules further demonstrates the systematic assessment of technical actions and competitive performance in modern wrestling (Isik et al., 2017). These differences reflect the greater uniformity of Olympic competition regulations, although traditional wrestling organizations may also adopt standardized rules within their respective disciplines.

Approaches to wrestler development also reveal differences in training practices and the transmission of sporting knowledge. Traditional wrestling has historically relied on practical experience, established customs, and interpersonal instruction, although these approaches vary across wrestling styles and communities. Modern Olympic wrestling places greater emphasis on structured training programmes, physical conditioning, and systematic performance assessment. Research on the physical and physiological characteristics of wrestlers identifies muscular strength, anaerobic capacity, endurance, and body composition as important considerations in competitive preparation (Chaabene et al., 2017). A comparative study of traditional and modern wrestlers has also examined visual and auditory reaction times, providing empirical evidence for assessing specific performance characteristics across wrestling disciplines (Mayda & Koyunlu, 2023). Nevertheless, these findings do not establish a uniform distinction between traditional and modern training methods, as individual preparation practices may overlap across disciplines.

Cultural identity and social functions constitute a further dimension of comparison. Traditional wrestling is frequently associated with regional identity, community gatherings, and the transmission of cultural values. Research on wrestling traditions in the Balkans illustrates how physical competition can serve as a means of expressing collective identity and maintaining social relationships (Hill, 1999). Modern Olympic wrestling places greater institutional emphasis on competitive achievement, international representation, and performance-based evaluation. However, Olympic wrestling can also contribute to national identity and collective belonging, while traditional wrestling may involve formal competition systems and organized sporting objectives. The distinction between these forms of wrestling therefore lies less in the exclusive presence of cultural or competitive elements than in the different ways these elements are organized, prioritized, and represented within their respective sporting environments.

Cultural Continuity and Transformation in Turkish Wrestling

Cultural continuity in Turkish wrestling is closely associated with the intergenerational transmission of traditional practices, social values, and cultural meanings attached to the sport. Within Turkic communities, the concepts of wrestling and the wrestler have historically been associated with values such as courage, respect, and social belonging beyond physical combat skills (Türkmen & Demirhan, 2013). The presence of wrestling in folk narratives and traditional belief systems further reflects how its cultural meanings have been interpreted and reshaped across different historical periods (Yeşildal et al., 2024). Cultural

continuity in wrestling therefore depends on the preservation of associated values and social meanings as well as the continued practice of the sport itself.

The cultural heritage of traditional Turkish wrestling is particularly evident in the Kırkpınar Oil Wrestling Festival. Its inscription on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010 marked an important step in the international recognition of this tradition. Festival practices, including announcements by the *cazgır*, performances of drums and *zurna*, the wearing of the *kıspet*, and established codes of conduct among *pehlivans*, reflect distinctive elements of its cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2010). Nevertheless, these traditions have not all been preserved in their original forms. Research on the ceremonial wearing of the *kıspet* indicates that although the garment remains an essential part of oil wrestling, some associated rituals have gradually disappeared (Gul et al., 2015). This distinction demonstrates that the continuation of a cultural practice does not necessarily imply the unchanged preservation of every ritual associated with it.

Economic relationships and commercialization have also influenced the cultural transformation of traditional wrestling. Research examining Turkish oil wrestling and the commodification of traditional culture provides a basis for understanding wrestling events as settings in which cultural values and economic interests intersect (Hershiser, 1998). The increasing public visibility of wrestling, the economic interests associated with competitions, and the presentation of traditional practices to wider audiences may contribute to changes in how wrestling traditions are organized and understood. However, the relationship between commercialization and cultural preservation should not be interpreted as uniformly positive or negative. Its implications depend on how economic interests interact with the practices, participants, and cultural values associated with traditional wrestling.

Cultural continuity and transformation in Turkish wrestling can thus be understood through the relationship between the preservation of traditional elements and adaptation to changing social and economic conditions. The disappearance of particular rituals, as illustrated by the Kırkpınar tradition, does not necessarily indicate the loss of a practice's broader cultural significance. Similarly, the continued organization of wrestling events does not mean that all their historical customs have remained unchanged. Assessing the cultural heritage of traditional wrestling therefore requires attention to the persistence of rituals, intergenerational knowledge transmission, community participation, and changing cultural meanings. From this perspective, cultural continuity involves the ongoing interpretation and transmission of traditional values under evolving social conditions rather than the exact reproduction of practices from the past.

CONCLUSION

This review examined the historical development and institutional transformation of traditional and modern wrestling in Turkish sports history through a comparative approach. The literature reviewed suggests that the modernization of wrestling cannot be adequately explained as a linear process in which traditional practices are entirely replaced by modern forms of competition. Traditional wrestling styles have retained elements of their regional cultural identities and historical practices, while modern wrestling has developed within national and international sporting frameworks. Nevertheless, the adaptation of traditional wrestling to contemporary organizational structures and the continuing association of Olympic wrestling with cultural and national identity indicate that these forms of wrestling cannot be separated by rigid boundaries. Differences between traditional and modern wrestling are particularly evident in their organizational structures, competition rules, approaches to wrestler development, and cultural functions. However, these differences do not imply that traditional practices and modern sporting regulations are necessarily incompatible. The example of Kırkpınar illustrates how the preservation of cultural heritage can coexist with changes in particular rituals and organizational practices. The principal contribution of this review lies in providing an integrated comparative framework for understanding the historical development of Turkish wrestling through the relationships among institutional differentiation, sporting modernization, and cultural continuity. The scope of this review is limited by the uneven coverage of historical periods and wrestling styles within the literature examined. Further historical research is particularly needed on the local organization of traditional wrestling, wrestler development practices, and the transmission of cultural knowledge across generations. Future studies could draw on federation archives, local competition records, and oral history interviews to develop a more detailed understanding of these processes. A more comprehensive examination of the historical relationships between traditional and modern wrestling would contribute to scholarship on Turkish sports history and inform efforts to preserve the cultural heritage associated with traditional wrestling.

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