

# LUCHA LIBRE 101

## What is lucha libre?

*Lucha libre* (literally: free fighting) is the name given in Mexico to professional wrestling. At once a highly demanding physical sport and a spectacular performance art, lucha libre has its origins in the late 19th century, during the French Intervention war of the 1860s, when it was adapted from traditional Greco-Roman wrestling, similar to what you might see in collegiate or Olympic competitions.

## What are the rules?

A lucha libre match is won when one or more falls, or points, are scored against the opponent. The first type of fall is the pin, which consists of holding the opponent down in a way that their shoulders are in contact with the mat for three seconds. In order for a pinfall to be valid, the pinned wrestler's shoulders must touch the mat for three counts by the referee. Escaping a pin attempt before the referee can count to three is known as kicking out.

Another type of fall is the submission, where a wrestler puts the opponent in a painful hold that is difficult to escape, usually one that bends or stretches one or more joints in an uncomfortable way. A wrestler is said to have “tapped out” when, after being unable to escape, they submit to the opponent's hold, normally by tapping either the mat, the opponent, or even themselves with the palm three times in quick succession (hence, people use the term tapping out to mean “giving up”).

Both of these fall methods can be prevented by a rope break. This occurs when a wrestler manages to come in contact with any of the ropes surrounding the ring during a pin or submission hold. If this happens, the referee calls “rope break” and the opponent must back down. (Pins and submissions are also considered invalid if the wrestler attempting them is using the ropes or turnbuckle for leverage.)

The other standard method of scoring a fall is by countout. When one or more of the wrestlers involved in a match exit the ring, the referee will begin a slow count, either to ten or twenty, which will continue until everyone is back in the ring.

In the early 20th century, however, it grew into more of a spectacle. Back then, it could be spotted all around the country in small-scale carnival performances, where the showbiz aspect began taking over with the introduction of colorful costumes, personas, and flashier, less practical moves. Soon after it became a regional phenomenon, and the introduction of the iconic masks followed. In no time, it was a nationwide pastime, watched every weekend by millions!

Any wrestlers found outside the ring when the count ends will then be counted out, and a fall will be scored against them. If all the wrestlers participating in a match are counted out at the same time, the match could either end in a draw (tie) or be restarted upon their return to the ring, according to predefined stipulations.

The other main way to score a fall against an opponent is disqualification (or DQ). It always involves breaching the rules in one way or another, and is called at the referee's discretion. Among the offenses liable to have a wrestler disqualified are: failure to obey the referees, repeatedly punching with a closed fist, willful time wasting, refusal to comply with a rope break after five seconds, intentionally attacking the referee, usage of moves specifically forbidden by the rules, usage of any foreign objects or weapons—most commonly the folding chairs the front row audience sit in, outside interference such as from a wrestler not involved in the scheduled match (often in cahoots with the match participants). An exception is the ‘No DQ’ match, in which some of these actions might be allowed.

The forfeit occurs when one of the participants refuses to wrestle, either from the get-go or at any point during the match. He or she is then said to have forfeited, and a fall is awarded to the opponent.

Finally, we have the technical knockout, also known as TKO. The TKO happens when a wrestler is deemed unable to continue by the referee, normally as a result of an injury requiring immediate medical attention, which can sometimes even include blood loss! When one wrestler is unable to continue, a fall via TKO is awarded to the opponent.

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## Who are the luchadores?

Lucha libre is a performance sport symbolizing the struggle between good and evil, and each of the *luchadores* represent one of these qualities.

The *técnicos* are the good guys. As their name indicates, they try to win their matches using their technical skills, which can include anything from intricate submission moves to breathtaking aerial maneuvers, which are executed by performing acrobatic, high-flying jumps and flips with the aid of the ropes or the turnbuckle, allowing for forceful impact on the opponent with use of the wrestler's body-weight and momentum. A good luchador knows not only how to use their body, strength, speed and skill as a weapon, but also their opponent's, and even the ring itself! *Técnicos* are beloved by the audiences, being regularly cheered and widely supported, which they will in turn repay by attuning their performance to impress the spectators.

The *rudos* on the other hand, are the bad guys. Their name does not mean "rude," but rather "tough," and if you've seen them, you'll know this goes without saying! Regardless of their technical mastery, *rudos* prefer pursuing victory by the use of "street smarts" and underhanded means, constantly trying to bend the rules and even cheat whenever opportunity allows. Examples of this range from poking an opponent's eye when the referee is distracted, having allies interfere directly or indirectly in their matches, using weapons whenever they can get away with it, and in general trying to obtain every advantage possible without being disqualified. It is also not beyond many of them to play "mind games" with their opponents and the audience, either by taunting, insulting, trash-talking, or feigning injury or contrition. For all of this and more, *rudos* are booed and despised by audiences. Don't feel too bad for them, though, for more often than not, *rudos* love being hated!

## What makes it different from American pro wrestling?

If you are familiar with American-style pro wrestling, you might find yourself thinking what you just read doesn't sound very different from what you know.

Well, yes and no. It is of course the same sport at its core, and as such, the rules and tenets that govern it are very similar, whether you're in Guanajuato or in L.A. The differences are not so much in rules, but in style and interpretation.

First, lucha libre is a lot faster and more spectacular. *Luchadores* are much smaller and more agile than their American counterparts, and this leads to them using an acrobatic, high-flying style more attuned to their physique, with much less emphasis on the power moves regularly executed by huge American pro wrestlers.

Second, while American pro wrestling is almost always contested to one fall, lucha libre is usually contested in a best-two-out-of-three format. Hence the iconic announcement: "¡Lucharaaaaán a dos de tres caídas, sin límite de tiempo!" ("They will wrestle to two out of three falls, with no time limit!")

In a similar vein, while in America matches are chiefly singles, which is to say, one-on-one, Mexico puts much more emphasis in tag-team matches, where two teams of two or three *luchadores* compete with each other.

And how does a lone referee keep track of this? Well, normally only two *luchadores* will wrestle at any given moment, with the rest of their teammates waiting in a corner on the apron (the small area outside the ropes) until they are tagged in. A tag-in occurs when a *luchador* touches their teammate with any bodypart (often with a high-five!), allowing the touched *luchador* to become the legal wrestler on that team and to enter the match. The partner who has tagged out can now wait by the corner, trying to catch a breath.

Only the legal wrestler can score a fall for their team, and attempts to do so by other non-legal teammates will be disregarded by the referee, who will promptly usher the non-legal *luchador* back to his or her corner. However, as you can probably guess by now, the increased bodycount creates a perfect atmosphere for the *rudos* to take turns distracting the referee and engaging in their cheating antics.

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## And the masks?

Ah yes, the masks. They are without a doubt the most distinguishable, unique feature of lucha libre, and you probably wonder where it all started.

You already saw, dear reader, that lucha libre is both sport and performance. But it is also art, history, culture, and identity. Lucha libre is food for the soul!

Masks have been present in lucha libre since the very early 20th century, and the practical side of their origin is fairly simple: some luchadores preferred to hide their identity from the public or even their families, and a tight, breathable mask allowed them to do so. This is the practical origin, of course, but the cultural origins go much farther back than that.

Remember the Olmecs we talked about in Chapter One's pdf? Well, in 1933, around the time lucha libre was establishing itself as a nationwide phenomenon, an Olmec statue was unearthed in Veracruz, depicting a bald, bearded man with large muscles, wearing a loincloth and in a clearly offensive position. Unsurprisingly, the statue came to be known as El Luchador, and is now kept in the National Museum of Anthropology and History.

But dressing up in spectacular outfits for pride and intimidation is a not a novel concept in Mexico. The Aztecs possessed an elite military division called Eagle Warriors, whose armor and shields were decorated with large, colorful feathers, and whose helmets were shaped like an eagle's head, beak and all!

The Mayans took it a step further. Among their soldiers they boasted the powerful Jaguar Warriors, who dressed from head to toe in jaguar pelt armors, including the fanged head as a helmet. The Mayans adored the jaguar as a deity, a keeper of the underworld, and believed the usage of their pelts, fangs and claws to be omens of good fortune in battle.

Additionally, the mythical Aztec Calendar, whose image can be found anywhere from art to t-shirts to merchandise to coins, has recently been argued by historians to be, not in fact a calendar meant to be hanged, but rather a ring where ritualistic combat would take place. The result of said battles, mind you, was a bit more severe than modern-time lucha libre matches.

Now that you know all of this, you might understand the evolution of masks in lucha libre a bit better. Although at first they were simple designs in muted tones, they soon evolved into a variety of flashy shapes and colors, with ornaments and patterns representing warriors, heroes, deities and all kinds of supernatural entities. They were said to not only give the luchador wearing them the ability to intimidate opponents, but also to grant them a persona they could assume in battle, much like the previously mentioned warriors!

A masked luchador's real identity is sacred, and often a tightly-kept secret. Many masked luchadores will wear their iconic masks even outside the ring, in an attempt to preserve both their secret identities and the mystique of lucha libre. El Santo, for example, being Mexico's most iconic and popular luchador, continued to wear his mask in public after retirement, only removing it briefly during a televised interview a week before his passing: the only time in his life he was seen doing so in public. True to form, he was buried wearing his iconic silver mask.

Thus, the most important match in which luchadores can participate is a *lucha de apuestas*, or wager match, where they bet their masks or hair on the outcome. In a *máscara contra máscara* match, the loser will be forced to permanently forgo their mask and reveal their real identity to the world, often even stating their real name. A *máscara contra cabellera* match, on the other hand, features a masked wrestler versus a non-masked, usually long-haired, opponent. The loser will either forfeit their mask or their hair, as being shaved bald was historically considered a symbol of submission and humiliation.

Masks are so respected and important, in fact, that any attempt by an opponent to remove the other luchador's mask during a match is grounds for immediate disqualification!

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Word search: find the words from the list

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masks  
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tapping out  
knockout  
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