

Newcomer appreciates Arkansas' start-up sport

BY MARTY COOK ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Cody Conklin was reluctant to move to Arkansas this past summer.

Finding wrestling in Arkansas helped ease his mind on the move. Now, he wants to help make state history at the high school wrestling state championships, which begin today at Bentonville High School.

Wrestling is a nonsanctioned sport in Arkansas but its backers hope the state meet, which has 16 schools participating, will help persuade the Arkansas Activities Association to make it an official sport.

When Conklin's mother took a job in Northwest Arkansas, he was worried his budding wrestling career was over. Then he learned that wrestling would be a trial sport this year. Conklin wants to do his part to make wrestling permanent in his adopted state.

"I definitely think the sport will stick in the state," said Conklin, who moved to Bentonville from Manhattan, Kan., in August. "It will find its place. Even if I don't place [in the finals], I can look back and say I wrestled the first year.

"It'd be awesome to look back in 20 years and say I was the first state champion and tell my kids about it."

Conklin, a sophomore, looks to be a pretty good bet to win the 152-pound weight division. He is 23-1 this year, with his only loss to an Oklahoma wrestler in his first match of the year.

Since then, Conklin has won 23 consecutive matches, 20 by pins and the other three by technical falls, meaning Conklin won by 15 or more points.

"He's a technician," Bentonville Coach Bill Desler said. "A good wrestler doesn't think about it, and I don't think he really thinks about it. He just goes out there and does it. He does one move right after another. It's something that's ingrained in him.

"That's what we want to do with these younger kids, get it ingrained in them."

Desler said wrestling will be helped by schools starting youth programs. He said he can spot wrestlers who participated in wrestling at a young age before resuming the sport in high school.

Bentonville has a handful of those wrestlers who have moved to the area from states where wrestling is an established sport.

Conklin has been wrestling since childhood in youth clubs in Kansas.

He said he was concerned that wrestling in Arkansas would be too easy with his experience and background, but he said he is impressed with the level of competition.

"I call my friends [in Kansas] and they say, 'Oh, Mr. Arkansas All-Star,'" Conklin said. "Actually, I'm very impressed. I didn't think I would have competition. I'm impressed with how everybody is improving over the year."

Conklin's talent is real and his gaudy record isn't just a result of fledging competition, said Desler, who coached in wrestling-mad Nebraska for 12 years before moving to Bentonville four years ago.

"I could see him being recruited from anywhere from Oklahoma to Nebraska," Desler said. "I think he's that good."

Conklin is not overconfident about his chances at the state meet.

He believes his chief rival will be Fayetteville's Jon Felker, whom he pinned in the second period of their previous match.

That's not to say he's overlooking anyone in his weight division.

"I go in with the attitude that anybody can be beat out there on the mat," Conklin said. "It's how you perform on the mat. I don't like it at all when people say, 'Cody, dude, you're going to win.'"

"You never know. On any given weekend, you can get on your back and get pinned."

WRESTLING STATE CHAMPIONSHIPS

WHO Wrestlers from 16 high schools competing in 14 weight classes WHEN 5 p.m. today and 9 a.m. Saturday WHERE Bentonville High School





Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/MICHAEL WOODS

Bentonville wrestler Cody Conklin (top) has won 23 consecutive matches this year and hopes to make state wrestling history at the high school state championships today. He is the favorite to win the 152-pound weight division.