

AAA to wrestle with sanctioning

BY NICK WALKER ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

The Arkansas Activities Association's board of directors today will vote on a proposal to sanction wrestling as a state championship sport.

It might all come down to a matter of interpretation.

Last summer, the board voted 13-6 in favor of sanctioning wrestling for the 2008-2009 season if 40 teams declared and committed to the sport.

When the 40 teams had to be committed to wrestling is where the interpretation comes in.

Board President and Warren Superintendent Andrew Tolbert, who served on the board last year, said that it was his recollection that wrestling had to have 40 participants by the state tournament at the Jack Stephens Center in Little Rock on March 14-15, 2008.

Thirty-three high schools participated in the 2008 state wrestling tournament, but 45 schools have either begun wrestling or are slated to begin wrestling in 2008-2009.

"The 40 had to be done in the 2007-2008 school year," Tolbert said. "When you look at, if you don't meet that number, the deal is off the table. People had concerns about the number, and that was the contention at the time."

Arkansas Wrestling Association President and Little Rock businessman Greg Hatcher, who has spear-headed the push for wrestling and hosted the past two state wrestling tournaments, said that he believes the agreement was for the start of the 2008-2009 season and that he's lived up to it.

"You've got to remember that I was at that meeting and we only had 18 schools," Hatcher said. "[The board] gave us two years to get it ready. I had all of 2007-2008 and until 2008-2009.

"That's why schools like Rogers were important because they weren't able to commit until 2009. We couldn't get a school in June to commit for the following year, but they could for the next year. We've now got 45 schools ready, including every school in Class 7A."

Tolbert said that since he is just one of 19 members on the board, he didn't want to speculate as to what the board would do today.

"I think we'll be reminded of what we agreed upon last year and then we'll decide what to do after the presentation," Tolbert said.

Mike McSpadden, president of the board last year and assistant superintendent at Alma, said that he also was of the opinion that the 40 had to be participating this year, not committed for next season.

McSpadden also said that this type of situation was something he wanted to see avoided when he voted against the proposal last year. McSpadden, Harrisburg Superintendent Danny Sample, Izard County Consolidated Superintendent Fred Walker, Cutter Morning Star Superintendent Carl Hughes, Bradford Superintendent Donald Swiney and West Memphis deputy superintendent Wesley Barry were the six board members who voted against the agreement.

"My concern was for both the AAA and wrestling," McSpadden said. "The AAA had never set a number that you had to have to be sanctioned before. Fast-pitch softball, bowling, soccer — they all came to the board with a proposal and we evaluated the interest and the numbers for each sport individually. Once we felt comfortable with each sport, we voted to sanction.

"Greg was insistent that we give him a number. My fear was what happens if there are 39 schools, but there's an excitement and a strong commitment to the sport. Then they couldn't get sanctioned and the AAA's hands were tied."

Despite the confusion, Hatcher is confident the board will approve the sanctioning, saying that today will be a "celebration of the sport of wrestling."

"We will have there the president of the National Wrestling Coaches Association and lots of dignitaries from the sport who have flown in from all over the nation," Hatcher said. "It's going to be a big day."



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette file photo/STEVE KEESEE

High school wrestling supporter Greg Hatcher returns to face the Arkansas Activities Association board of directors today in an attempt to have the sport sanctioned.