

Area wrestlers qualify for state's first national team

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ROGERS - Wrestling success in Arkansas has been focused in Little Rock and northwest Arkansas.

Those two areas came together Saturday to form the state's first national team, ready to wrestle at the ASICS/Vaughn Junior & Cadet National Championships in July.

Forty-two wrestlers from across the state - mostly coming from those two hotbeds - battled for spots on the state team during the Arkansas Junior Freestyle Wrestling Championship at Heritage High School.

The top three wrestlers in each of the weight classes advanced to represent the state at the national tournament, set for July 17-25 at Fargo, N.D. The tournament was open to rising ninth-graders through recently-graduated seniors.

The state team has 39 wrestlers, including 13 from Heritage's War Eagle Wrestling Club and four from the Bentonville Wrestling Club.

Another 18 wrestlers come from Pat Smith's Arkansas Wrestling Academy, a club team made up of wrestlers from central Arkansas schools including North Pulaski, Little Rock Central, Little Rock Catholic, Central Arkansas Christian and Little Rock Christian.

Heritage coach Randy Steen and Smith organized Saturday's tournament and were pleased with the results.

"I was surprised on how evenly spread out by weight class (the tournament was)," Steen said. "And unlike a lot of other tournaments, there were no real weak sisters in this thing. We had pretty much the cream of the crop from the state of Arkansas.

"(I think there are) five kids that are going to go up there and win three or more matches."

The national tournament will feature the best wrestlers from 49 states - Mississippi does not have sanctioned wrestling - and will be a big test for the Arkansans.

"This is the toughest tournament, I think, in the world," said Smith, who was a four-time NCAA individual champion at Oklahoma State. He now teaches at the AWA. "It doesn't matter what level you're at, whether its youth, high school, college, international - this is the toughest tournament in the world.

"It's just another step we have to take for our state. We got sanctioned and the next step is to get our kids into freestyle (wrestling) just to be able to compete with the other states."

Smith said the national tournament also gives wrestlers a chance to compete in front of college coaches, who flock to the big tournament. A good showing at the tournament can earn an athlete a scholarship.

"That's how our kids are going to get the exposure," Smith said. "These coaches are not going to come into the state of Arkansas and go to the high school state tournament. We're just not there yet."

Smith and Steen said Fort Smith Southside's Richard Kirksey (171 pounds) stood out during Saturday's tournament.

They said Dexter Carter (152) and Tanner Mann (119) of AWA and Heritage's Paxton Fowler (119) and Cole Bundy (130) also have the ability to win some matches at the national tournament.

"It was a good eye-opener just to see what we're made of right now," Bundy said of Saturday's state tournament. "I like how we're combining the northwest and Little Rock (wrestlers). It'll be a good team."