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WRESTLING: Former champion gives sport a boost

By Wesley Lyle

Pat Smith has left his mark on wrestling.

From being the first collegiate wrestler to win four NCAA titles to helping introduce the sport to a state, his impact has been felt.

Smith was in Montgomery recently to conduct the All-American Wrestling Camp at St. James. About 65 wrestlers in the seventh through 12th grades learned from Smith during the three-day clinic.

"It's amazing just to meet a four-time NCAA champion," said rising St. James senior Chris Henry, the defending 1A-4A state champion at 103 pounds. "I've learned a lot. There were some things I already knew, but he shared a different way of doing it. He showed us a better technique and a more efficient way of doing it."

This is the second time Smith has conducted a clinic at St. James but the first time since the late 1990s.

"The kids are learning a lot and so am I," St. James wrestling coach Craig Duncan said. "The way he is able to break it down, step-by-step, and show you why it works is great. Learning from a four-time NCAA champion has been an enjoyable experience."

The camp is one of 20 that Smith will conduct this summer. From St. James, Smith was headed to Seattle.

"I enjoy every minute of it," Smith said. "I like to watch the progress of the kids. To see a kid come out and get better, and to see his excitement when he realizes it, that's what it's about."

As a freshman at Oklahoma State in 1990, Smith won his first NCAA title. With the title, Smith joined his older brothers Lee Roy and John as NCAA winners, marking the first time three brothers had won Division I wrestling titles.

Smith added more titles in 1991, 1992 and 1994, becoming the first collegiate wrestler to win four NCAA crowns. Smith ended his collegiate career with a 121-5-2 record, including 98 straight matches without a loss.

After spending 10 seasons as an assistant wrestling coach at Oklahoma State, Smith began his latest endeavor. Smith was contacted by Little Rock businessman Greg Hatcher about starting the Arkansas Wrestling Academy.

"What he's doing in Arkansas is impressive," Duncan said. "He is a great ambassador for the sport. They picked the right guy to get things going."

One of the goals in Little Rock was to help introduce the sport to the state. According to Smith, Arkansas and Mississippi are the only two states where wrestling is not a sanctioned high school sport.

The goal was to change that. Within the past month, Smith said the Arkansas Activities Association (similar to the Alabama High School Athletic Association) voted to sanction the sport for the upcoming season.

"Last year, the AAA told us if we could get 40 schools to participate, they would sanction wrestling," Smith said. "We had 34 teams this past season, which was viewed as a club season, and we currently have 45 schools set for next season."

Smith said the challenge of introducing the sport to a state was the second-hardest thing he has ever done, just behind winning four NCAA titles.

"I wanted the challenge," Smith said. "It was a chance for me to step outside of the box and do something different. We've worked hard to make it happen. We've still got a long way to go, but we're heading in the right direction."
