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## Newly Sanctioned High School Wrestling Debuts Around State With Full Schedule

By Philip Seaton - 9/29/2008

Wrestling has officially found a home in Arkansas.

When the 40-plus schools begin the season on Nov. 17 as an officially sanctioned sport by the Arkansas Activities Association, Arkansas will become the 49th state to officially sanction the sport, leaving only Mississippi as the only state not to sponsor the sport.

The Arkansas Wrestling Association, led by Greg Hatcher, spearheaded the movement to get the sport officially sanctioned.

"When I moved here we didn't have wrestling," Hatcher, the organization's president, said.

Hatcher, a three-time captain of his Alma (Mich.) College team in the 1980s, had become a staple of the Arkansas sports scene through his work with the Little Rock Marathon, the Shootout of the South 7-on-7 football tournament and the Mighty Bluebird Soccer Club. But while he put his energy into those sporting events, there was something missing: wrestling.

"I had it on my to-do list," Hatcher said.

For state sanctioning, Hatcher had to find at least 40 schools who would take up wrestling. But the organization did more than just talk schools into adding the program. The group purchased wrestling mats for the first 40 schools that signed up.

At close to \$9,000 a mat, the Arkansas Wrestling Association took one of the biggest financial burdens in starting a program away from the schools.

"We had some help," Hatcher said of raising the funds. "We had several people and businesses make some donations to help us out."

### First Contact

Don Schuler of Bentonville got involved almost as an afterthought.

His son was a starting defensive end on his ninth-grade football team, but at 5-foot-4 and 120 pounds, starting on the varsity football program was going to be a challenge.

"I was talking with a guy I knew in the grocery store one day about my kids," Schuler said, "when this kid came up to me and asked me if he thought my son would interested in wrestling. They were trying to start a program at Bentonville."

He didn't realize that his involvement would go further than just being a proud parent.

"When another parent backed out of the committee to help out the program, I stepped in," Schuler said. "I just started talking to people that would listen."

One person that did listen was Lee Roy Smith, the executive director of the National Wrestling Hall

of Fame.

"He told me about a guy that would probably want to help," Schuler said. "He told me to get in touch with Greg Hatcher."

That was in January 2006.

"He was real nice," Schuler said of his first contact with Hatcher. "We talk back-and-forth for a while, but he had some other things that he was working on at the time. Finally he called me in June [2006] and said, 'I'm ready let's starting doing this.'"

### **Magic Number**

The original magic number for the Arkansas Wrestling Association, or so they thought, was 16 schools.

But that number only guaranteed the sport could host a state tournament.

"The first year we had 19 to 20 schools that competed, and 16 at the state tournament," Schuler said. "We were excited about that, and thought that would be enough to get us over the top."

But it wasn't, and Hatcher set about to find out what the magic number would be to get the sport officially going in Arkansas.

"Greg kept pushing them for a number," Schuler said. "They voted and said we needed 40 [schools]. So we went out and recruited 45."

The AAA kept its word and voted to sanction the sport last June.

"The AAA has been great," Hatcher said. "They have been training officials, and providing insurance and clinics."

The group had 33 teams compete last season finishing up with the state tournament at the Jack Stephens Center on the campus of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock.

That facility will again host the state tournament on Feb. 13-14, which will wrap up the season.

"Once it started happening, kids starting coming out," Schuler said. "We had almost 400 kids at the state tournament last year."

### **Wrestling Academy**

Pat Smith knows wrestling.

The 38-year-old was the first four-time NCAA wrestling champion in the sport's history during his collegiate days at Oklahoma State University. He would later become an assistant coach at OSU and was inducted into the National Wrestling Hall of Fame in June 2006.

"To be coached by Pat Smith, for those that aren't familiar with the sport, it would be like having Magic Johnson coach you," Hatcher said.

That's quite a lofty resume for someone to locate to a state that has little wrestling background.

"Greg contacted me, and I came over for a visit [to Little Rock]," Smith said. "He gave me his ideas for the state of Arkansas and wrestling. I thought it would be a great challenge and a way to give

back to a sport that has been good to me."

Though Smith said he does miss the intensity involved with college wrestling, he said he loves working the kids.

"They are learning wrestling and this is helping them get excited about the sport," Smith said. "I love what I am doing. Hopefully I will be here for many years to come."

Smith said the quality of wrestling is obviously not as it is in Oklahoma.

"Of course it would not be up to the same level as there, they have had wrestling as a sport for a long time," Smith said. "I thought the quality level here was good. Though the kids looked like first-year wrestlers, they competed hard and with a lot of heart."

Smith began his wrestling academy, which is held at the Mighty Bluebird Facility off Cantrell Road in west Little Rock, in September 2007.

"I am extremely pleased with our numbers right now," Smith said. "It is only going to grow and grow. It's a great sport that teaches a lot of discipline and builds character."

### **Future Growth**

Already the youth wrestling programs in the state have produced one national champion.

The growth is not limited to youth teams. The Arkansas Wrestling Association would like to see collegiate wrestling in the state.

"It's a great sport and a fun thing to do," Smith said. "I think some colleges are going to have to look at adding it."

But while the sport has suddenly exploded on to the scene in the state, Schuler said if not for the work of one person things might be different today.

"Greg might tell you different, but without his help, we might have been able to do this," Schuler said, "but it would have taken us 25 years to get it done."

For information about wrestling in the state or Pat Smith's academy, visit [Arkwrestling.Com](http://Arkwrestling.Com).

### **High Schools Participating in Wrestling:**

Academics Plus Charter School  
Little Rock Central  
Little Rock Christian  
Shiloh Christian  
Arkansas School for the Blind  
Conway  
Little Rock Hall  
Springdale  
Augusta  
Mountain Home  
Springdale Har-Ber  
Barton  
Des Arc  
Mountain View  
Union Christian  
Beebe  
England  
North Little Rock

Valley View  
Bentonville  
Episcopal Collegiate  
North Pulaski  
Van Buren  
Fayetteville  
Pulaski Oak Grove  
Bismarck  
Fort Smith Northside  
Pulaski Academy  
Brinkley  
Fort Smith Southside  
Pulaski Robinson  
Bryant  
Gentry  
Rogers  
Cabot  
Rogers Heritage  
Little Rock Catholic  
Jacksonville  
Russellville  
Central Arkansas Christian  
Jonesboro  
Searcy

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