

The Morning News

Local News for Northwest Arkansas

On The Mat And Ready

By [Brandon Harris](#)

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SPRINGDALE-Ahead of schedule? Try “already finished.”

The battle to make high school wrestling a sanctioned sport in Arkansas is all but over, and the only thing keeping the Arkansas Activities Association from giving its official stamp is time.

From the day Don Schuler first contacted Greg Hatcher almost two years ago until now, prep wrestling has transformed from a mere idea into a reality that will be in full-effect at the beginning of the 2008-09 academic year.

“I wouldn’t say we’re ‘ahead of schedule,’” said Hatcher, president of the Arkansas Wrestling Association. “We’re done, we’re finished. We have 40 schools and it’s going to be awesome.”

The AAA voted in June to sanction wrestling as long as it has 40 teams competing by the beginning of the 2008-09 school year. At the time, there were just 18 schools committed.

But six months later and about eight months ahead of schedule, wrestling has met the requirement with participating schools reaching from Northwest Arkansas, to Little Rock, to Jonesboro. There are seven youth wrestling programs, and legendary wrestler and four-time NCAA champion Pat Smith have started the Arkansas Wrestling Academy in Little Rock.

The movement began in January 2006 when Schuler, AWA vice president, contacted Hatcher about getting the sport started in Arkansas high schools. Hatcher, a Little Rock businessman and former wrestler, created the AWA the two went to work calling school superintendents and athletic directors across the state.

Bentonville, where Schuler’s son wrestles, was one of the first to set up a program.

“It just came to a point where my son loved it so much and I loved it so much that I couldn’t bear to see

it not happen,” Schuler said. “I started making every phone call I could possibly think of.”

Schuler called superintendents, he called principals and he called athletic directors. And, for the most part, the reaction was slow and administrators were hesitant.

There was concern about safety, as wrestling has long carried a stigma that it forces massive amounts of weight gain and weight loss, and there was concern about funding a sport that had almost no history in the state and wasn't guaranteed to attract the numbers necessary to make it a viable investment.

“I had an athletic director who gave me 40 reasons why he wouldn't have wrestling in the school, and finally, after I had refuted everything, there were only two that were really legitimate — Title IX and financing,” Schuler said. “But Title IX isn't really an issue anymore. The very last thing he said was, ‘How many people do you have wrestling at Bentonville?’ I told him we had 15 that came every day, and he said that was embarrassing.”

Schuler took exception to the comment, as he had become accustomed.

“I told him we've got 15 kids that come out two-and-a-half to three hours a day for four days a week and go to tournaments every weekend we can find one,” Schuler said. “They raise money to buy singlets, headgear and mats that we need. They've been great ambassadors to this sport, and yet not a single one of them knows whether they will ever be able to put a Bentonville singlet on with a Tiger on their chest and wrestle — not a single one of them.

“Now you tell me if that's not a success.”

There was also resistance from football coaches wary of wrestling taking away from their players' offseason training, affecting their athleticism and making their offensive linemen look more like wide receivers by the time the season was over.

Wrestlers are divided into weight classes, and sometimes may gain or lose a few pounds to compete in a certain class. Schuler said many football coaches tend to blow the concept out of proportion, further fueling their opposition.

“It seemed a lot of people in Arkansas didn't know what high school wrestling was all about,” said Bentonville coach Bill Desler, who coached in Nebraska prior to moving to Northwest Arkansas. “They either thought it was like professional wrestling or that you had to lose a lot of weight, and that's not the case at all.

“And football coaches are worried about their players getting smaller, but they're not getting smaller — they're getting stronger. Wrestling is the perfect compliment to football.”

Gradually, the argument has worked. Pulaski Academy football coach Kevin Kelley, for example, is also

the school's wrestling coach. The same goes for Harding Academy coach Tommy Shoemaker and several other football coaches across the state.

"People were understandably a little skittish about adding wrestling," Schuler said. "But then 16 teams became 20, 20 become 25 and ultimately 25 became 40."

With a growth in the number of school participating has come a growth in the number of wrestlers on the team. Bentonville, which had 34 wrestlers a year ago, has 60 this season. Gentry, which fielded a team of just six wrestlers last season, has tripled its roster to 18 under first-year coach Nika West. Rogers, in the first year of its program under Anthony Haubner, has 35.

"Just from what I've seen and what I've heard, wrestling has taken a whole new turn," West said.

The Difference-Makers

It's taken wrestling just two years to develop and receive sanctioning in Arkansas. In Texas, it took almost 15 — and even that was fast.

Wrestling's remarkable growth has been attributed to a lot of things, but perhaps no impact is more evident than that of Hatcher. In a drive to accelerate the growth of the sport, Hatcher offered to purchase wrestling mats — by far, the biggest expense in starting a program — for the first 40 schools to commit to the wrestling programs.

"When you do that, you're helping overcome one of the biggest burdens — finance," Hatcher said. "We're also rewarding those who get up and get on the move in starting a program. All it takes is a few schools rolling to get this thing started."

Mats cost about \$10,000 each. But outside of the mat, wrestling is a relatively inexpensive sport. The only other expenses are singlets, headgear and shoes.

"You have to thank Greg Hatcher," AAA executive director Lance Taylor said. "When you have someone who's willing to buy 40 mats at \$9,000 a piece, it makes it easier on the school to pick up the sport because of the cost. Schools look at that. When you have someone as generous as Greg was, it made it a lot easier for schools to commit to wrestling."

Northwest Arkansas was one of the first areas of the state to fully commit to wrestling. All four major cities — Bentonville, Fayetteville, Rogers and Springdale — have youth wrestling programs, and Springdale High, Springdale Har-Ber, Fayetteville and Bentonville were among the first schools in the state to start wrestling at the club level.

Northwest Arkansas is also home to a proportionately large number of residents who aren't native Arkansans. Large companies like Wal-Mart, J.B. Hunt and Tyson Foods have brought in employees

from across the country who grew up in a school system where wrestling was the norm.

“It’s different than other sports in that essence to where you add it and it’s something people don’t know about,” said Annette Scogin, athletic director for the Springdale School District. “People know about wrestling in Northwest Arkansas. It’s just part of their culture because they’re from other states.

“People come into our schools and look at our schools, and that’s definitely a question. They want wrestling because they’re used to it from where they’re coming from.”

In March, the sport will have its second-ever state championship meet in Little Rock in the Jack Stephens Center where all 40 schools will be represented. As many as 3,000 people are expected to attend, Hatcher said, and it could be even more.

It will be the final event before the scheduled AAA takeover.

“Texas shot off like a rocket, but we’re going faster than they ever imagined,” Schuler said. “People don’t understand how fast this thing is catching on.”

Upcoming Wrestling Tournaments

Date Tournament

Jan. 5 Russellville Tournament

Jan. 12 Bentonville Tournament

Jan. 12 White River Invitational (Des Arc)

Jan. 19 Central Arkansas Christian Tournament

Jan. 26 Fayetteville Tournament

Feb. 2 Arkansas School for the Blind Tournament

Feb. 9 Mountain Home Tournament

March 14-15 State Tournament (Little Rock)

Source: Arkansas Wrestling Association

Participating Wrestling Schools

Academics Plus

Arkansas School for the Blind

Augusta

Barton

Beebe

Bentonville

Bismarck

Brinkley

Cabot

Central Arkansas Christian

Decatur

Des Arc

England

Episcopal Collegiate

Fayetteville

Fort Smith Northside

Fort Smith Southside

Gentry

Harding Academy

Jacksonville

Little Rock Catholic

Little Rock Central

Little Rock Christian

Little Rock Hall

Mountain Home

Mountain View

North Little Rock

North Pulaski Pulaski

Oak Grove

Pulaski Academy

Pulaski Robinson

Rogers

Rogers Heritage

Russellville

Searcy

Springdale High

Springdale Har-Ber

Sylvan Hills

Union Christian

Valley View

Prospective Wrestling Schools

Batesville Southside

Bauxite

Berryville

Bryant

Camden Fairview

Conway

Dardanelle

Dollarway

Dover

Dumas

Fountain Lake

Hackett

Hot Springs

Huntsville

Gosnell

Gravette

Lamar

Magnet Cove

Little Rock McClellan

Melbourne

Little Rock Mills

Mount Ida

Morrilton

Pea Ridge

Prairie Grove

Stuttgart

Western Grove

West Fork