



Pennsylvania coaches say wrestling needs football to lend a helping hand

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The path to building interest in wrestling in Arkansas may go through the football field.

That's what several highly successful former coaches from Pennsylvania and New Jersey told a handful of local residents interested in growing the sport during a teleconference held Wednesday on the campus of the University of Arkansas.

" I tell kids, ' I don't care how good a football player you are, '" said John Allen, a famous wrestling coach from New Jersey. " You can be a great football player if you wrestle. ' That's how much wrestling complements football. "

There are currently 18 schools in Arkansas that have wrestling as a club activity. On June 6, the Arkansas Activities Association (AAA) will decide if it will sanction wrestling as an interscholastic sport. Arkansas and Mississippi are the only two states in the country that don't have sanctioned wrestling.

" A lot of football coaches don't know what wrestling could do for football, " said Don Schuler, vice president of the Arkansas Wrestling Association — an advocacy group for the growth of the sport.

Schuler said that 40 to 60 schools in Arkansas need to make a commitment to the sport in order for it to gain a foothold in the state.

This past March, a state tournament that included 16 teams was held at Bentonville High School. Most of wrestling's grassroots in Arkansas are concentrated in the central and northwest sections of the state. The Arkansas School for the Blind in Little Rock has what is believed to be the longest-running wrestling program in the state.

But Bentonville coach Bill Desler said that he and some of the other coaches in the area would try to petition other schools to add wrestling.

Schuler has even entertained the idea of organizing traveling exhibitions to curry interest.

" If we get around 24 teams, [the AAA] will sanction it, " Desler said. " There are people in Arkansas that want the sport in this state. People who come in from Iowa, Nebraska, North Carolina and Nebraska — they want it for their kids. "

But John Kauffman, who coached Fayetteville's club team last year, wondered if the superintendents and athletic directors are listening. None of them showed up at the teleconference.

“ What’s funny is that there is no one here that is not intimately familiar with wrestling,
” Kauffman said.

Fayetteville football coach Daryl Patton made a brief appearance, but left soon after he learned technical difficulties had delayed the start of the teleconference.

Ultimately, it could be people like Patton who determine the viability of wrestling in Arkansas.

“ Football will bring players into the wrestling program, ” said former Lehigh University coach Thad Turner. “ These sports really do complement each other. ”

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