

Taking hold

Russellville High School finds success with wrestling

By Eric Moore STAFF WRITER

Wrestling is making its way to Arkansas, slowly.

One of the places leading the charge in central Arkansas is Russellville High School. Recently, the Arkansas Activities Association approved a measure that would sanction wrestling as a varsity sport in Arkansas high schools, providing that 40 schools sign up to take part.

During the 2006-2007 school year, the number of schools participating in wrestling reached 19. For Harold Taylor, one of the volunteer coaches at Russellville High School, the number is encouraging.

"It's a bittersweet thing," Taylor said of the participation requirements. "Some hope that there will be 40 before school starts and they might start it this year, but it's just a hope."

Taylor, who is originally from Oklahoma, grew up in an area where the sport of wrestling thrives. During his last tour of duty in the Army, he relocated to Russellville and found out that Arkansas was one of two states that did not have sanctioned high school wrestling, with Mississippi being the other.

While wrestling is not a high school sport in Arkansas yet, there are many students wrestling in the state through the Boys and Girls Clubs of Arkansas. Taylor enrolled his own children into the program led by Terry Davis, who would later become another one of the volunteer coaches at Russellville High School. Taylor calls him the "unofficial founder of Arkansas high school wrestling."

Davis is quick to point out that although he began the wrestling program in Russellville nine years ago, the Arkansas School for the Deaf has been wrestling for several decades.

"I moved here from Illinois where wrestling is big," Davis said. "I wanted to see if there was any interest so I ran some clinics and there was a lot of interest."

While Davis and Taylor have been instrumental in bringing wrestling to central Arkansas, they believe that if the sport is to be sanctioned by the Arkansas Activities Association, a great deal of the credit will have to go to Little Rock businessman Greg Hatcher.

The reason is Hatcher agreed to donate wrestling mats, which Taylor said is the largest cost for a new wrestling team, to the next 20 schools to begin fielding teams. The mats, which cost \$9,000, will display the logo of the school and will be delivered to the schools.

"Last summer Greg Hatcher got involved and founded the Arkansas Wrestling Foundation," Taylor said. "He agreed to be a sponsor, trying to get it sanctioned and then it just exploded."

Although Taylor and Davis are volunteering their time to the Cyclones wrestling team, both coaches will concede the head coaching position to Phillip Goodwin once the sport is sanctioned. Taylor and Davis will stay on the coaching staff under Goodwin to continue developing athletes at Russellville High School, hoping to duplicate the success of the 2006-2007 year.

Even though the Cyclones were only competing with seven of the 15 required wrestlers in the state tournament this year, giving up nearly half of the points for nonparticipation, the team finished third at the event.

"Ninety-nine percent of it is desire and determination," Taylor said. "It is a sport of influence. You try to influence the other guy to the mat."

For Taylor, there is no set physique for a wrestler. He looks for kids who were very athletic in junior high school, and earlier, who love sports only to find out they can no longer be competitive once they reach the high school level in football or basketball because of their size.

In wrestling, the athletes get matched against other athletes that are the same size.

The response from the administration in regard to starting a wrestling program has been encouraging to Taylor.

"The school has been incredibly supportive of us," Taylor said. "The principal loved the idea and welcomes it as another opportunity to give kids something to do."

For the parents of students who are concerned about the safety of the sport, Taylor is quick to point out that high school wrestling is not violent like some of the tournaments that have grown in popularity in recent years. While there is a chance for injury, as there is in all varsity

sports, wrestling organizations throughout the state have safety measures in place.

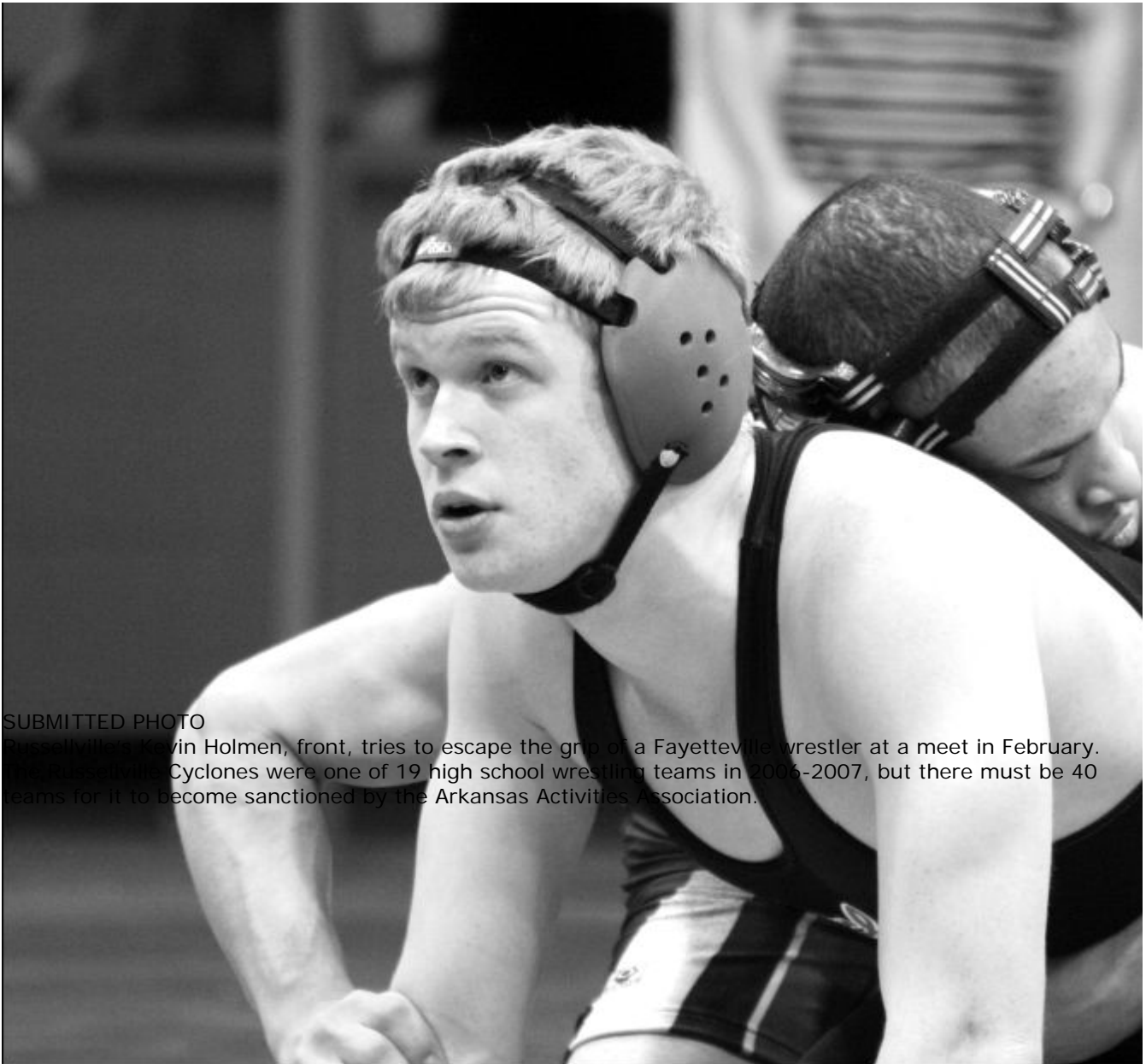
"It is still considered a trial sport here," Taylor said. "All the rules of eligibility, safety and certification is the same [as they are in sanctioned sports]. We are 100 percent complying to AAA rules."

Davis uses a Vince Lombardi-like approach to coaching his wrestlers. At the beginning of each year, he goes over the most basic of concepts with the wrestlers, regardless of their skill level, to ensure that nothing goes unnoticed.

"We start with very basic training," Davis said. "The kids seem to grasp it quicker. There is no natural-born wrestler, any kid can participate in this."

The ability of the sport to even the playing field is one of the reasons Davis loves the sport and is pushing for its inclusion in the Arkansas Activities Association.

"A lot of kids can't compete in other sports, but the sport of wrestling is for everybody," Davis said. "It's a fantastic sport and I'm excited to see the AAA sanction the sport."



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Russellville's Kevin Holmen, front, tries to escape the grip of a Fayetteville wrestler at a meet in February. The Russellville Cyclones were one of 19 high school wrestling teams in 2006-2007, but there must be 40 teams for it to become sanctioned by the Arkansas Activities Association.