



Wrestling coaches look to future after second successful year

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BENTONVILLE — If everything goes as planned, there will be big changes in the future of Arkansas wrestling.

But first the sport has to get sanctioned by the Arkansas Activities Association.

Coming off a successful season that saw 41 schools participate — and another successful state tournament this weekend — coaches and wrestlers are hopefully to gain sanctioning this summer.

Benton County wrestling coaches praised the Arkansas Wrestling Association for another well-run tournament — held at UALR's Jack Stephens Center — and are hopeful the AAA will help wrestling take the next step.

“That’s my hope and my dream,” said Bentonville coach Bill Desler said. “We just have to wait until they finalize it.”

The AAA’s 19-member Board of Directors voted to sanction wrestling for the 2008-09 season provided at least 40 schools were participating.

That goal was accomplished.

So teams are already looking forward to next year when more teams will likely join the sport for its first official year in the state.

The Bentonville Tigers, the twotime defending champions after easily repeating this weekend, will be strong again. They’ll lose just four seniors.

“We should be really good from 103 (pounds) up through 171,” Desler said. “We’ll just have to work on the big boys.”

Rogers and Gentry, who had good showings at the state meet with young teams, will also return stronger.

Pioneers coach Nika West, who saw his team finish third in the Class 1 A-4 A division of the state tournament, hopes the sport continues to grow in Gentry and across the state.

“The smaller schools are coming along great,” he said.

“I think the sport is going to continue to grow within the smaller schools. Everybody’s

promoting it and doing their best to get the word out. ”

West added that small-school state champ Central Arkansas Christian is moving into Class 5 A next year, making more room for schools like Gentry.

But how the wrestling postseason will be set up next year remains a mystery.

Desler said as the sport continues to grow, it might require a qualifying round before the state tournament. “ Next year we could have over 50 schools wrestling, ” he said. “ I don’t know if they do (a small-school division) but we may have to have qualifier even if they’re separated. “ We can’t really have a bracket of 30 kids and expect to have it done in two days. ”

•• • All three Benton County schools had standout performances during the weekend in Little Rock. The Tigers saw three wrestlers finish as undefeated state champions, including seniors Josh Anderson and Scott Hovious. Anderson, who won last year’s heavyweight state title, finished the year 12-0 at 189 pounds. He had to battle more agile wrestlers at the smaller weight class and missed half the season because of knee surgery. Hovious won the 215-pound title and went 28-0. Bentonville junior Cody Conklin also went 28-0 in the 160-pound class. He won his second state title after winning at 152 last year.

Desler was also happy Ben Nichols (third at 171) and Adam Irons (second at 125) medaled a place higher than their seeds.

Both of Gentry’s state champions were impressive through the weekend, West said.

Sophomore Robert Henderson (16-16 this year) had three pins on the way the 160-pound title. He pinned his semifinal opponent in six seconds, “ which is barely enough time to go out there and shake hands with the guy, ” West said.

Henderson was later named the Outstanding Wrestler for the middle weights. The award was so surprising that Henderson had to leave a team meeting and run back to the awards stage to accept it.

Sophomore Seth Johnson pinned his opponent in the 119-pound finals 30 seconds after getting a cut above his eye fixed by tournament trainers. “ Johnson was very impressive, ” West said. “ We got down there and he started working some moves. ” Senior Doug Switzer went 14-12 this season at 215 pounds. He beat the No. 1 seed in overtime to advance to the state finals, where he lost a close decision. The Mounties had three wrestlers earn medals but it was sophomore Jared Arthur’s 140-pound semifinal loss to Bentonville junior Colton Steen that stood out to Rogers coach Anthony Haubner “ I don’t know where it came from, ” Haubner said. “ He hadn’t wrestled like that all year where he went out and actually wrestled the match he was capable of. ” Arthur, who lost that semifinal decision by two points, finished fourth overall. Sophomore Kyle Kemp finished fifth, coming back from an injury to win his final match by a major decision.

•• • The experience from the state tournament will pay big dividends for the young programs. “ I was very pleased, ” West said. “ The team’s just been working hard lately

and they've just started to come together really good at the end of the year. I couldn't have asked for more. " The Pioneers will lose just Switzer and West knows they'll come back stronger next year. " I think we're going to be much stronger and be much more knowledgeable about the sport of wrestling and I'm really excited about next season. " The Mounties' experience will help two programs be stronger next year. Some of the Mounties that wrestled at this weekend's state tournament will go to Rogers Heritage next season. " The positive thing you're trying to tell them (during the state tournament) is now we know what we have to do next year, " Haubner said. " For a first-year group of individuals, I'm real proud of them. " We'll have experience coming into both schools. It's just something to feed off of. "

•• • Heritage High, which will open in August, has already named its head coach. Randy Steen, father of Bentonville's junior 140-pounder, will lead the War Eagles next year. Steen is also a wrestling official and worked at the state meet. " He's one of best officials in the state of Arkansas, " Desler said. " It's kind of hard to lose him. "

•• • Wrestling will continue through the spring and summer. Haubner said the Rogers team is trying to find a location to continue to learn and practice during the coming months. Bentonville will host three camps led by out-of-state coaches this summer, Desler said. One will be for high schoolers while the other two will be for both high school and youth wrestlers. Desler, named the Class 5 A-7 A Coach of the Year, was also asked to take a team made up of the Arkansas state champions to a national tournament during the summer.

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