

Wrestling gains a hold

Sanctioning gets OK if 40 schools unfurl mats

BY DOUG CRISE ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Wrestling received a vote of confidence and a challenge from the Arkansas Activities Board of Directors on Wednesday.

The 19-member board voted 13-6 to sanction wrestling for the 2008-2009 school year with a stipulation that 40 or more schools must be committed to wrestling by that time.

Little Rock businessman Greg Hatcher had been pushing to get wrestling sanctioned for 2007-2008 but took Wednesday's vote as a victory.

"That'll give confidence to the schools to jump in and know they've got a sanctioned sport coming," Hatcher said.

Hatcher, president of the Arkansas Wrestling Association and the driving force behind wrestling's sudden emergence as a club sport, gave a 20-minute presentation on behalf of wrestling. He was accompanied by national wrestling officials Mark Scott and Mike Moyer. Scott is director of state services for USA Wrestling, and Moyer is executive director of the National Wrestling Coaches Association, of USA Wrestling.

"This is a great day for wrestling," Moyer said.

Hatcher said he was confident that 40 schools would be wrestling in time for 2008-2009 and that the Arkansas Wrestling Association would continue buying mats, scheduling events and training officials.

Eighteen schools participated in 2006-2007 and Hatcher said four more — Episcopal Collegiate, Little Rock Christian, North Little Rock and Prairie Grove — are "really close" to finalizing programs of their own for 2007-2008.

Six board members voted against the motion: Alma Assistant Superintendent Mike McSpadden, West Memphis Deputy Superintendent Wesley Berry, Harrisburg Superintendent Danny Sample, Cutter Morning Star Superintendent Carl Hughes, Izard County Consolidated Superintendent Fred Walker and Bradford Superintendent Donald Swiney.

McSpadden, who serves as the board's president, explained his dissenting vote as not an opposition to wrestling, but rather to a hard and fast number.

"That would be my objection to putting a number on Greg," McSpadden said. "What if we say 40 and he comes in with 39? The board needs some flexibility."

Hatcher said there would be "no question" that the Arkansas Wrestling Association would continue buying wrestling mats and putting up money for 20 more programs.

Hughes told Hatcher that those additional 20 schools likely would be enough to open the door for wrestling.

"If you get those 40 schools, I believe this board will get the sport for you," Hughes told Hatcher. "I'm just saying, get what you say you're going to get."

"I think it's obvious that this is something gaining momentum," McSpadden said.

Hatcher told the board that he wanted to turn administration of the sport over the AAA.

"We don't want to run it," Hatcher said. "You guys can run it. We need a good dictator. ... You don't have to do anything but fire me."

Safety concerns were brought up, with Hatcher telling the board that wrestling's focus on grappling rather than head-on contact, coupled with the weight class system, would help prevent injuries.

"If you told me to wrestle the best wrestler in the world, I would not be scared," Hatcher said. "I would probably lose, but I would not be scared. If you told me to fight Jermain Taylor, I'd be scared."

The board's questions focused less on safety and more on statewide support. Hughes at first moved to table the sanctioning vote until the board could see what other schools sign up for the sport, prompting a debate about the proper timeline for making wrestling official.

Fayetteville Superintendent Bobby New then made his own motion to sanction the sport with a "sunset clause", meaning wrestling would get the go-ahead if the right number of schools sign on.

New's motion eventually became the board's final decision.

"I'm fine with the sunset [clause]," Hatcher said. "Put your money where your mouth is, Greg. Do I think 40's the right number? I don't. [But] I'm not scared of 40."

Other items

The board voted 19-0 to give Conway Christian School membership in the AAA, pending approval from the Arkansas Nonpublic School Accrediting Association.

Pending approval, Conway Christian would be the only new AAA member to field varsity sports during the 2008-2010 classification cycle. The school plans to field a football program, and would use the University of Central Arkansas' Estes Stadium for its games before completing its own field after 2008.

AAA Executive Director Lance Taylor said the school was toured by AAA officials, and that it met all criteria for future membership. Board member Johnny Tyler, a former principal at Conway High School, vouched for the school's growth during the meeting.

"They're making a big push right now," Tyler said.

The board reported a profit of \$211,122 from the state basketball championships, which were held at the Hot Springs Convention Center.

The Convention Center's seating capacity of 6,500 represented a drop from the space at North Little Rock's Alltel Arena, the site of the 2006 championships. Of the 2006 games, three drew more than 6,500 fans, whereas only one game in 2007 cracked the 5,000 mark.

Nonetheless, Taylor said the pull from the 2007 championships was greater than that from the 2006 games. One factor was that the 2007 championships involved 14 games rather than 10 because of the new seven-class system.



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Greg Hatcher, who has been advocating high school wrestling, said Wednesday's vote will encourage schools to start programs.