

Wrestling boom gets big boost

Hatcher, Smith to start academy

BY NICK WALKER ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

There was only one high school wrestling program in Arkansas a year ago.

In a little over three months, the state will have its first wrestling academy.

Arkansas Wrestling Association President Greg Hatcher announced Monday that four-time national champion wrestler Pat Smith, a former Oklahoma State assistant, will be in Little Rock in August to start the first Arkansas Wrestling Academy.

"Having Pat come here to start a wrestling academy is huge for the sport in this state," said Hatcher, who has helped start 18 high school wrestling programs in Arkansas since late September. "Him coming here is like Larry Bird or Magic Johnson coming to Little Rock to start a basketball school."

The academy will be based out of Hatcher's Mighty Bluebirds complex at 6800 Pinnacle Valley Road in west Little Rock. There is an extra gymnasium at the complex that Hatcher had been renting out. He said they will remodel the gym for wrestling, including the addition of a pro shop that will sell wrestling apparel and videos.

The idea of starting the wrestling academy came together with the help of soccer.

Smith's sister is Carol Hardin, whose daughter Mary Pat Hardin plays soccer for Mount St. Mary. Hatcher's daughter, Kelsey Hatcher, plays soccer for Central Arkansas Christian, and both girls play club soccer.

"I got to be pretty good friends with Carol, and she told me that Pat was looking to get out of coaching," Hatcher said. "So I contacted him about starting up a wrestling academy."

Smith said he was looking to do clinic work instead of continuing in the travel and recruiting grind of college wrestling.

"I've been wanting to do this for the last three or four years," Smith said. "I have friends that do it. I've been fortunate to be there for the 11 years and five NCAA titles while I was at Oklahoma State, but it was time to do something different."

So Smith traveled to Arkansas about a month ago to visit with Hatcher and was sold on the idea of beginning his academy in Little Rock. He said that he wasn't deterred by the lack of wrestling tradition in the state.

"To be honest, [the lack of wrestling] actually added some excitement," Smith said. "I decided this was a way to help the sport grow. Arkansas is a perfect spot for this. To be a part of this is something positive, and that intrigues me."

According to Hatcher, membership in the wrestling clinic will be \$100 a month, and each wrestler will receive eight training sessions a month. Teams will be able to bring Smith in for training sessions at their school for \$200 an hour. The academy will be for wrestlers ages 5 and up.

Smith was the NCAA champion in the 158-pound weight class from 1990-1994 while wrestling for Oklahoma State. He was the first four-time NCAA champion and won 98 consecutive matches during his college career.

Hatcher said that it's not just the wealth of experience Smith brings to the table, but also all the experience of his brother and friends in the wrestling community.

"He'll be bringing [Oklahoma State Coach] John [Smith] and all the people he knows — the Olympic and college wrestler — to give clinics and lessons, Hatcher said.

Those looking to see what the academy will be like can experience Smith's coaching July 20 and 21 at the Bluebirds facility where Smith will host a weekend wrestling clinic. The cost for the event will be \$65 per person.