

Wrestling gets victory, proviso

40 schools must declare by Aug. 1

BY NICK WALKER ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Wrestling did not receive the official stamp of approval it was looking for Wednesday, but it's in the mail.

The Arkansas Activities Association's board of directors voted 13-4 Wednesday to sanction high school wrestling as a state championship sport for the 2008-2009 cycle, contingent upon the receipt of letters from at least 40 school superintendents declaring for the sport by Aug. 1.

The board had been scheduled to review whether wrestling had met the requirements set forth at last year's summer workshop, when the board voted 16-3 to approve wrestling as a sport if 40 or more schools signed up.

There had been some contention as to exactly when 40 schools had to be committed.

Board president and Warren Superintendent Andrew Tolbert said before the board discussed the matter that there was some confusion as to whether the number was supposed to be met before the state wrestling tournament in March or whether the wrestling association had until the fall to get the 40 schools committed.

On Wednesday, Arkansas Wrestling Association President Greg Hatcher gave a 30-minute presentation to the board, listing the 45 schools that had either begun wrestling or are committed to begin wrestling this fall and giving a slideshow presentation on the sport.

Some clarification was needed at Wednesday's meeting, according to Fayetteville Superintendent Bobby New, who proposed the resolution last year and the compromise this year.

"I take the credit for last year's poorly worded motion," New said. "I went through about five drafts trying to make sure that this year's was tightened up.

"I think this is a hybrid. It says to the board, we expect 40 schools and it gives [the wrestling association] a little more time to get the letters gathered."

New, whose school is one of the 33 that participated in the state tournament this year, said he won't even need a stamp for his letter.

"I guess I can just get to writing while I'm here," New said.

Seventeen members of the 19-member board were in attendance for Wednesday's vote, with North Little Rock assistant superintendent Bobby Acklin and Harrisburg Superintendent Danny Sample both absent. The four members of the board who voted against the proposal were Izard County Consolidated Superintendent Fred Walker, Wynne Superintendent Carl Easley, Glen Rose Superintendent Nathan Gillis and Jessieville Superintendent George Foshee.

Walker, for one, said his reason for voting the proposal down was that he wanted the board to go ahead and vote.

"I wasn't a fan of the [40] number last year and I didn't like it this year," Walker said. "I thought that procedurally, we just needed to go ahead and vote."

Hatcher said as much, asking to interject during the board's discussion.

He was quickly shot down, though, by the questioning of Bergman Superintendent Joe Couch.

"Did you have 40 schools wrestling either at the club level or at the state tournament?" Couch asked.

Hatcher admitted there were not 40 schools wrestling this past year after explaining that 45 schools were already committed for next year. Aug. 1 is the cutoff date to get the letters to the desk of AAA Executive Director Lance Taylor, the sport but will be sanctioned the second that Taylor has the 40th letter in hand.

Taylor said the letters will serve two-fold.

"First, it shows us that there are at least 40 schools that are committed to wrestling this fall," Taylor said. "Second, those letters will serve as a declaration for wrestling."

Hatcher said that he can understand the confusion, and being a businessman, he has been on

both sides of this situation.

"It can be difficult on both sides of the table," Hatcher said. "The important thing is that we've got to get these letters drafted and in the mail."

In other news, the board approved the dates for the 2008-2009 state football championship games. The six games will move back to two weekends after being spread out over three weekends this past season.

All the games will be held at Little Rock's War Memorial Stadium. The Class 6A game will be held at 7 p.m. on Friday, Dec. 5. The Class 7A and 5A games will be held at noon and 6:30 p.m., respectively, on Saturday, Dec. 6.

The Class 4A-2A games will be held the following weekend, with the 3A game Friday night at 7 p.m., and the 4A and 2A games at noon and 6:30 p.m. the next day.

St. Vincent de Paul, a K-8 private Catholic School in Rogers, was approved sanctioning as a AAA middle school at the workshop and Conway High School and Bryant High School were named as the sites for the 2008-2009 state dance and cheer championships, respectively.



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/STEVE KEESEE

High school wrestling advocate Greg Hatcher gives a thumbs-up after the Arkansas Activities Association board of directors voted in favor of sanctioning the sport, provided enough schools participate in 2008-2009.