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Cowboys' Owens denies he tried to kill himself.
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Big blast by Pujols ends skid

NATIONAL LEAGUE

CARDINALS 4, PADRES 2

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ST. LOUIS — The St. Louis Cardinals count on Albert Pujols for big hits. His latest might have saved their season.

Pujols' go-ahead three-run home run with two outs in the eighth inning was the difference in St. Louis' 4-2 victory over the San Diego Padres on Wednesday night, ending a seven-game losing streak during which the Cardinals' National League Central lead shriveled to 1½ games.

"You work on a zero for a



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/STEPHEN B. THORNTON

Central Arkansas Christian Athletic Director Doug Killgore instructs students Cory Menne, 15, and Alex Rogers (right), 14, in the proper start position during a wrestling demonstration at the school Wednesday morning. CAC is one of a number of schools that plan to take up the sport.

Supporters roll out mat, hope wrestling takes hold

BY NICK WALKER
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

High school wrestling has been pinned in Arkansas for decades, but it is trying to get off the mat.

Little Rock businessman Greg Hatcher unveiled the Arkansas Wrestling Association and a plan to get wrestling sanctioned as a varsity high school sport during a news conference Wednesday at the Central Arkansas Christian gymnasium in North Little Rock.

Hatcher said at least nine schools — Central Arkansas Christian, Little Rock Hall, Fayetteville, Bentonville, Pulaski Academy, Arkansas School for

the Blind, Gentry, Russellville and Brinkley — have committed to wrestling this year; they will be joined by Little Rock Episcopal Collegiate and Conway in 2007. At least 15 more schools have expressed an interest, including both Springdale high schools, Hatcher said.

"I keep getting e-mails from people all over the state who are excited about this thing," Hatcher said. "People who came here from other states where there is wrestling are excited and offering to help in any way that they can."

Representatives from the nine schools will gather in Little Rock on Tuesday to schedule

meets for this season. Hatcher also hopes to schedule officiating and coaching clinics.

At least 16 schools will have to sign up for wrestling before the Arkansas Activities Association will consider sanctioning it. Nine schools have applied for trial sports status so far, meaning that their athletes must meet AAA requirements for eligibility, but they will not be able to wrestle for a sanctioned state title.

AAA Executive Director Lance Taylor said 16 teams doesn't guarantee a sport's sanctioning.

"That's just a minimum to See **WRESTLING**, Page 9C

Wrestling

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have a state championship," Taylor said. "Before you get sanctioned, it has to go before the governing body and the board votes on it. I don't know if there's a magic number for the board to decide."

Indoor track and field is not sanctioned by the AAA, even though more than 50 teams compete each February in the Arkansas Track Coaches Association State Championships at the Tyson Indoor Track facility. Winners at that meet are unofficial state champions.

That's not to say that Taylor doesn't get behind the idea of wrestling.

"Any kind of participation, we're for," Taylor said. "Studies show that any time you get kids involved in extracurricular activities, it helps kids."

Arkansas and Mississippi are the only two states in the country without sanctioned high school wrestling. More than 250,000 boys compete annually, making it the sixth-most popular sport for boys based on the number of participants, according to the National Federation of High School Activities.

Hatcher has promised to supply mats for the first 20 schools that sign up for varsity wrestling. Mats cost about \$10,000.

"If a school's problem with starting a wrestling program is the cost of the equipment, we're going to take care of that," Hatcher said. "And, the total cost for a singlet, helmet and shoes for a wrestler is going to be less than \$100. We're not going to let the cost be a reason for schools not to offer wrestling."

Arkansas School for the Blind has fielded a varsity wrestling team for more than 30 years, said Athletic Director Ken Fowler, the school's former wrestling coach. Many schools in the state have had programs on and off.

"In the late '80s, there were a lot of schools that had club teams," Fowler said. "We would have 30-35 matches a year when the schools were participating. Nowadays, we're lucky to have 8-12 matches."

Fowler said he is optimistic that the commitment made by Hatcher and the athletic directors involved will help the sport become sanctioned this time. He estimates there have been three previous attempts to get wrestling started in the state, each with varying degrees of success.

"The one big difference that I am seeing now is that the schools are receptive," Fowler said. "I don't know what has made them receptive this time, but they are. And, I think that will go a long way towards making this successful."

Fayetteville Athletic Director Dick Johnson said it comes down to public demand.

"With all the industry in Northwest Arkansas, we have people moving into the state every day from states that have wrestling and their kids want to have that here," Johnson said. "We think of ourselves as a democracy, and the sentiment for wrestling has swelled to the point where we can't ignore it."

Fayetteville and Bentonville started club programs in the past few years. That meant students who wanted to participate could use the school grounds and the school's name, but they had to pay for everything themselves.

Brinkley Athletic Director Aaron O'Brien said his school became interested in the prospect of adding a program that would give football players something to do during the off-season.

"I'm trying to get our athletes to where they are competing year round," O'Brien said. "Kids need to be competing all the time. ... In the northern states, where they've been doing this for a long time, it's beneficial to their athletes and that's how we approached it."

Pulaski Academy Coach Kevin Kelley sees it the same way.

"When I was in Texas, it went hand in hand with off-season football," said Kelley, who will coach the Bruins with the assistance of Mike Bailey, a former college wrestler. "On top of that, it's a great opportunity for kids that don't participate in other sports to get involved."

Bentonville Coach Bill Desler coached wrestling at Nebraska schools in Lincoln and Omaha for 12 years. Desler has coached a club-level team at Bentonville for the past two seasons.

"The kids right now are just so excited," said Desler, a resource teacher at the school. "They wanted to start when school started, but we're trying to mirror the regular season."