

It's time for state to jump on wrestling bandwagon

Don Schuler of Bentonville is a proponent of high school wrestling and has been a leader in trying to bring the sport to Arkansas.

He called a local sports talk show to discuss the subject, but all he got was a story from one of the hosts about the fake wrestling with the predetermined outcomes.

That's the stigma backers of high school wrestling in our state will have to overcome.

There are few similarities between high school and professional wrestling. High school wrestling matches skilled athletes of similar weight in a contest of strength and quickness. Professional wrestling, while entertaining to some, is about as legitimate as Paris Hilton's singing career.

Flying leaps off the ropes

Rick Fires



aren't allowed and no one breaks a chair over the back of an opponent in high school wrestling. More importantly, the referee never turns his back on the action.

Guess the only two states in the nation without high school wrestling?

That's right, Arkansas and Mississippi, the bosom buddies who seem to be at the bottom of all things positive in the country.

Significant progress was made this past week in Arkansas when nine schools pledged to field wrestling teams this season.

Bentonville, Fayetteville, Gentry and Russellville will be joined by Central Arkansas Christian, Pulaski Academy, Little Rock Hall, Brinkley and Arkansas School for the Blind in putting teams on the mat.

At least 15 other schools have shown interest in starting teams in the near future, including Springdale and Springdale Har-Ber.

"It's been slow going, but we're further along than we've ever been," said Schuler, whose son, Christian, is a sophomore wrestler at Bentonville. "We've received tremendous help from Greg Hatcher, a businessman in Little Rock who promised to buy mats for the first 20 schools to sign up for wrestling. It takes 16 teams to make wrestling a sanctioned sport in Arkansas, and we're hoping that'll happen in the next year or two."

The increasingly diversified population of Northwest Arkansas makes the success of high school wrestling a real possibility. The sport is popular on the high school and college level in neighboring Oklahoma, and some newcomers have been surprised to learn it's virtually nonexistent in Arkansas.

Bentonville and Fayetteville wrestled mostly out of state while fielding club teams a year ago. The wrestling season begins in November and lasts until March, and the sport is relatively inexpensive after the initial cost of \$10,000 for a mat.

"We've got 13 wrestlers back from last year and I've had about 15 kids say they'd be interested in joining the team," said Bentonville Coach Bill Desler, who coached wrestling in Nebraska for 12 years. "We'll have enough

to fill all 13 weight classes that you need for high school wrestling."

"It's a great sport in that you compete against people your own size. If you're not big enough for football or tall enough for basketball, you can compete against someone your own size in wrestling."

Many teams use wrestling to enhance their football programs. Arkansas linebacker Sam Ojjubutu was a wrestling champion in high school in Georgia before he became the Razorbacks' best defender.

Tory Cherico wrestled in high school in Missouri before he became an All-Southwest Conference nose guard for the Razorbacks. Cherico helped coach wrestling for 13 years in Texas before taking a job as Bentonville's defensive line coach last spring.

"Wrestling was a club sport in Texas before it was sanctioned, and now it's the fastest-growing sport in their high schools," Cherico said. "I'm a big advocate of high school wrestling, and I used it myself to make me a better football player. You learn to use leverage against an opponent, and it helps with your hand and eye coordination. It's a very demanding sport but one with a lot of benefits."

Cherico will help in an advisory role for wrestling at Bentonville while tending primarily to his football duties. Perhaps soon, coaches will be hired full time for wrestling and help with football.

It's a sport whose time has arrived, even in Arkansas and Mississippi.

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