

## Wrestling Explores New Regions in an Attempt to Gain Interest

By J.R. Ogden

Cedar Rapids (Iowa) Gazette

**T**he numbers are almost staggering, but of little surprise to those attending NCAA Division I Wrestling Championships. Wrestling is growing.

"College is the only area where there's been a problem and that's not based on interest, for sure," said Gary Abbott, director of communications for USA Wrestling, the sport's national governing body.

Youth organizations, middle schools, high schools and international participation is up. College wrestling, especially at the Division I level, continues to face major hurdles, however.

Title IX has been blamed for the demise of many college wrestling programs. But there are other reasons. Wrestling doesn't generate much, if any, money for major universities. Plus, there still are weight concerns. Most of that, former Iowa wrestling coach Dan Gable said, is misinformation and the wrong people making the decisions.

"I just want to make sure wrestling people have input in wrestling issues," said Gable, who has spent countless hours promoting wrestling across the country since his retirement five years ago.

While college wrestling remains a concern, there is good news. The National Federation of State High School Associa-



Dan Gable

tions reported that 9,404 boy's teams and 244,984 individuals participated in wrestling in 2000-01.

That's nearly 400 more teams and 6,000 more athletes than the previous trend.

Participation at the high school level has increased every year since the 1991-92 season. Girl's wrestling is another area of huge growth. The national federation reported 896 schools offered girl's

wrestling in 2000-01 and an all-time high 3,932 girls participated.

USA Wrestling recently added a girl's division to the ASICS Junior National Championships, held in Fargo, North Dakota, each July. Female wrestlers in grades nine through 12 can participate in the tournament. The organization now hosts national championships in FILA Cadet, Junior FILA Junior and University divisions.

"We're very excited to add women to the Junior National program," USA Wrestling executive director Rich Bender said in a statement. "It is an important step as we form a much needed development structure for our future Olympics."

Several years ago, Gable went to Texas to help promote high school wrestling in that state. Wrestling has since been made an official high school sport and numbers are on the increase in the Lone Star State. The hope, he said, was the high participation at the high school level would eventually lead to Texas college's offering the sport.

"Texas is a big reason" for the large high school increase, Gable said. "It's such a big state, a big area. Being able to develop the sport - it's a natural."

New York is an area Gable also would like to see developed. High school wrestling is strong, but major college programs are few.


"There's not enough opportunities for New York kids to go on in college and stay in New York," he said. "A school like Syracuse has no reason whatsoever to drop wrestling."

USA Wrestling had a record 131,107 athletes in 2000-01. That shattered the 1993 standard of 127,589.

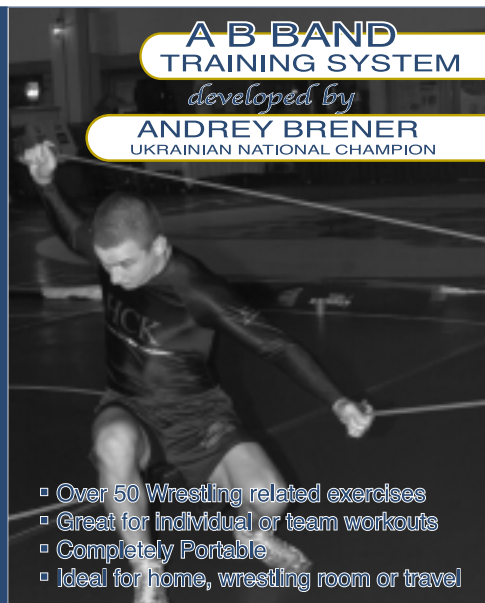
"Every year we're growing," Abbott said. "Last year, we had a record number of participants in USA Wrestling and most of our numbers are youth."

"And, obviously, there are a lot of other athletes in the sport that are not USA Wrestling athletes."

International wrestling also is growing, but a recent decision by FILA (International Federation of Associated Wrestling Styles), the sports international governing body, could hurt those numbers. FILA will eliminate one weight class from international competition. Men's freestyle



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and Greco-Roman now will have seven weight classes in events like the World Championships and Olympics.

The new weights are 121-pounds, 132, 145.2, 162.8, 184.8, 211.2 and 264. The previous weights were 119, 127.75, 138.75, 152, 167.75, 187.25, 213.75 and 286. This decision has left some wrestlers without a weight class, including U.S. national champ Chris Bono, an assistant coach at Iowa State. For the almost 5-foot-4 Bono, the 152 division was a perfect fit.

"They're trying to retire me," said Bono, who competed in his first World Championships late last year. "If I can't make 145 and I start taking my licks at 163, my career is over."

Things like this concern wrestling officials, including Gable, who has made it his life's work to keep wrestling strong.

"There are some areas that can still be developed," he said. "How long will it continue to grow and prosper with adverse affects going on above the high school level?"

"Will that stuff trickle down? Where's the future?"

Those are answers Gable and others hope to discover in the near future. Moving the NCAA wrestling championships around is a way to promote the sport in new areas. The event has been a huge success in Iowa (Iowa City, Cedar Fall Ames),

Minneapolis, Minnesota and St. Louis, Missouri. The Division I championships sell out in advance nearly every year and attendance records often fall.

"My focus is to not let us slide any more at the collegiate and international level," Gable said. "I'm trying to do whatever I can."

Bringing the popular NCAA event to New York can help. The tournament also has left the Midwest for local Penn State, Cleveland and Carolina in recent years.

"I'm not saying it's a bad idea, but I'm not saying it's the most practical," Gable said, noting attendance numbers could suffer in some areas. "I think it's OK. I don't know if I would have done it right at this particular time."

Iowa Coach Jim Zalesky, who has directed the Hawkeyes to three NCAA titles in his first four years at the helm, also worries about attendance in non-traditional sites, but is eager to see what happens.

"It's something we need to try," he said. The Division I championships return to the Show-Me State each of the next three years - Kansas City in 2003 and back to St. Louis in 2004 and 2005.

Many of the nation's top teams have taken their shows on the road to different parts of the country, hoping to promote the sport in different areas. This year, for instance, defending NCAA champion

Minnesota went to Virginia for a pair of duals with Virginia Tech and James Madison. Iowa wrestled Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, Hofstra in Hempstead, New York, and Princeton in Blairstown, New Jersey. And Oklahoma State visited Oregon to wrestle both Oregon and Oregon State.


"The top programs have to go outside their conferences, outside the places they usually go," Zalesky said. "Sometimes you have to take the product to them so young kids get to see what college wrestling is all about."

National media exposure also could be a big help. Wrestling is covered well in certain areas, but is mostly ignored by major cities.

Getting the NCAA semifinals on television, as well as other collegiate events, is something Gable and others are working to establish.

"The (NCAA) semifinals (on TV) would be a boon to the sport," Gable said.

Gable said TV can help in other ways, too. Showing someone like Iowa State's NCAA champion Cael Sanderson, for instance, in an edited fashion would help.

"They know how to show golf," Gable said, noting networks don't show an entire hit-by-hit round of golf, but edit the good shots and good rounds. "Edit it to make it more exciting." 

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