

Addition and growth of Kansas high school girls wrestling spurs consequential kinks

May 10, 2019 04:23 PM, Updated 11 hours 52 minutes ago



Girls wrestling voted in as a KSHSAA-sponsored sport

The Kansas State High School Activities Association (KSHSAA) has voted in girls wrestling as the 23rd sport in the state. By Hayden Barber

Doug Kretzer has been answering a lot of questions since April 26.

The McPherson High wrestling coach was the driving force behind the Kansas State High School Activities Association's adoption of girls wrestling at its latest board of directors meeting.

Implementation is official, but the work is not done. As coaches come to Kretzer wondering how girls wrestling will affect their programs, he welcomes it.

"You're not a very strong advocate of something if it's only up until you get your way," he said. "Anybody that needs help with girls wrestling with their program, I'm their guy."

The biggest question Kretzer gets is, "How do I grow my own program?" Coaches have watched McPherson's girls program build over the past three years — Kretzer's squads have won each of the unofficial state tournaments — and they want a piece of the pie.

He said it starts with marketing to all girls, not just the ones coaches believe would be good wrestlers. Then, program officials must present a good message of equality with the boys.

"You can only recruit them until practice starts," Kretzer said. "Then they have to want to be there."

But as girls programs continue to gain momentum across Kansas, more logistical challenges could present themselves. The most pressing: How to handle practices.



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Washburn Rural's wrestling room can hold about 60 athletes. The Junior Blues typically have about 70 boys wrestlers a year, and coach Damon Parker said 64 girls were at the first girls wrestling meeting May 2.

Parker said he won't make cuts, but not all 64 girls will be on next year's roster as many will peel off. But he also isn't done recruiting.

"If we get half of those girls, there's just not enough room to hold one practice," Parker said. "We'll figure it out as we go, but it's a good problem to have. ... We don't have our softball players practice with the boys."

Because his school's wrestling room won't hold all the wrestlers at the same time, Parker said he will likely have to hold two practices — something many coaches in Kansas are considering.

Parker said many of the girls coming out have never wrestled before while most of his boys have plenty of experience. The differences in coaching needed for these two groups would be vast.

Adding a second coaching staff is another potential solution, but there are problems with that, too. Parker said of all the teachers at Washburn Rural, only two have any wrestling experience and expertise: himself, and his son.

"If we're going to do this, we shouldn't do it half way," he said. "I'm a big believer that a girls sport should have a girls head coach. As this

continues to grow, we will have a qualified pool of candidates, but until that happens, current head coaches are going to have to step up."



McPherson senior Mya Kretzer won the 126-pound Kansas high school girls wrestling state championship Saturday. *Courtesy of Mya Kretzer*

Parker said he would have preferred the girls wrestling season to happen during the spring, not the winter.

Kretzer said that's not advantageous for the sport's growth. About 8,000 Kansas high school girls compete in the winter with three potential sports: basketball, bowling and gymnastics, which has only 15 schools competing.

Almost 18,000 girls compete in the various spring sports.

Parker said the fall would be an option, too, but many of the wrestling

coaches in Kansas work double-duty with football, which takes place in the fall.

"I think that's kind of a cop-out," Parker said. "It's our job as coaches to start banging on doors. If we have to compete for kids, we have to compete for kids. I would never surrender one of my kids to somebody else."

Parker said he would rather have it in the winter than not have it at all, but there aren't a lot of coaches, at least from his experience, who double as wrestling and baseball or track coaches.

Valley Center wrestling coach Tate Lowe focuses solely on wrestling. He has scheduled his first girls meeting for May 20. That will give him a better idea of his course of action, but has already considered bringing on an assistant who would also work as the girls coach.

"In three to five years, there is definitely going to have to be two separate programs," Lowe said. "Logistically it's going to be no different from a school with a boys and girls basketball program."

As numbers are expected to jump, the possibility of scheduling more girls tournaments is being discussed.



Valley Center prepares for the Class 5A wrestling tournament. The Hornets finished third in 2017. Hayden Barber *The Wichita Eagle*

Lowe said he would love to add a girls division to his host tournament, but that could clash with another school's girls event. That would potentially divide the pool and weaken the numbers at each tournament.

Parker said that if more girls tournaments pop up, that requires more coaches, who will already either be at practices or other tournaments.

These various challenges will likely mean longer hours for the state's wrestling coaches, but Parker doesn't see that a bad thing.

“We have to treat this just like a boys program in its infancy,” he said. “It’s not something that we have to do. It’s something that we get to do.”

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