

# Coach pins down details for national tourney

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Correspondent

Since August, Marty Bartram has been in a constant state of planning.

The head coach of the Rhinos Wrestling Club has been busy contracting hotels, soliciting sponsorships and sending e-mails to more than 500 wrestling clubs across the country—all in preparation for the National Elementary and Middle School Folkstyle Duals tournament.

The National Duals, scheduled for Nov. 21-22 at the Crown Coliseum, is the Rhinos' first crack at holding a USA Wrestling-sanctioned national tournament.

Bartram and the Rhinos are no strangers to organizing large tournaments. In January, the team put on its fourth annual Rhino eXtreme, an event that has grown since its start in 2005 from 186 athletes to boast an attendance in 2008 of more than 500 wrestlers.

Now the Rhinos are taking on the organization of the National Duals in an attempt to bring more notice to the wrestling scene in Fayetteville.

The first eXtreme was held at Jack Britt High School, but the tournament has since moved to the Crown Expo Center after a steady growth that Bartram said prompted the Fayetteville Area Convention and Visitors Bureau to purchase wrestling mats.

"The Visitor's Bureau invested a lot of money into wrestling mats so that we could hold large events in the Crown complex," Bartram said. "My goal is to provide as many large events in Fayetteville as I can. In order to make it cost effective in a facility like that, you have to run a national tournament."

Bartram said that the bureau purchased 10 mats in 2006, at a cost of approximately \$6,000-\$8,000 each, as a way of drawing competitors to Fayetteville for large meets.

"We entered into a partnership with the goal of trying to position Fayetteville as a site for wrestling tournaments, championships and events," said bureau president John Meroski. "A key component of that is to have top-notch wrestling mats that the athletes can compete on. So we looked at it as a very good investment to be able to bring millions of dollars of visitor spending into the community over the next several years."



Staff photo by Raul R. Rubiera

Coach Marty Bartram helps David Hargitt, 8, a member of the Rhinos wrestling team, with weightlifting.

## Collegiate tourney

The process of bringing the National Duals to Fayetteville started with Bartram checking the availability of the Crown facility to hold the event. Once he established that a weekend in November was open, he set to work planning a tournament very different from the youth competition that would eventually be scheduled.

"We started with the concept of holding a collegiate tournament," Bartram said. "I've been approached by a number of college and university coaches within the state about hosting an event because we have the mats and we have the facility here."

Bartram started planning the collegiate tournament, going so far as to having the tournament approved by the NCAA. But as the sole planner, he said the event turned out to be too large a step for him.

"I realized that it was just a bridge too far for what basically amounts to a one-man show as far as coordinating it," Bartram said.

After scrapping the idea of a collegiate tournament, Bartram took a different approach to deciding what kind of event to hold.

"We looked at what tournaments were not being conducted," Bartram said. "On the USA (Wrestling) Web site, the middle school and elementary folkstyle tournament was not being done."

USA Wrestling, the governing body of the sport that organizes the national and Olympic teams, focuses mostly on freestyle and Greco-Roman events, leaving a hole in the schedule of folkstyle meets. Bartram received final approval for the event in August and has been planning ever since.

## YourSport

"I started laying on hotels to bid before I was even approved in August," Bartram said. "We got those contracts done, had a Web site built and ready for approval to publish it. Since then, it's kind of been a matter of paperwork. There's an entry form that has to be done. And then, it's all about advertising from that point on."

Bartram considers himself solely responsible for running and paying for the tournament. He does not use funds from the Rhino Wrestling Club to pay for any aspect of the event, instead relying on the \$500 team entry fee and sponsorships from local businesses to cover the cost.

## 'Big deal'

The event should draw club teams and all-star teams from across the country. By holding the event early in the wrestling season, Bartram is hoping to catch a lot of middle school wrestlers, who are allowed to participate in one multi-team tournament each year.

The Rhinos will offer to pick up any individual wrestlers who do not have a team with which to enter the tournament. Bartram will swap out his planner hat for his coach's hat during the competition, as the Rhinos will enter one elementary team and one middle school team.

Bartram will even get the chance for a little fatherly pride when his youngest son, Samuel, takes to the mat in the 12-year-old, 85-pound weight class.

"He's at 83 pounds, and he doesn't have any body fat to lose," Bartram said. "He gets to eat ice cream before he weighs in, and he's just as happy as a clam."

Bartram is hoping to have at least 16 teams registered for the event, the number required to

break even on the cost of the tournament. At 25 members per team, there should be at least 400 wrestlers on hand to compete.

While the tournament will most likely be smaller in size than the Rhino eXtreme, Bartram said holding a national event is "a big deal," one that could secure a spot for Fayetteville in the national wrestling scene.

"Having a national tournament in our hometown is fantastic," Bartram said. "My personal goal, our team goal, and hopefully, the city's goal is to make our county the center for wrestling in the state."

"We're seeing a growth in the sport here that's on par with what most people think of as wrestling states such as Pennsylvania, Ohio or Iowa. We're hoping the community as whole will reach out to help us out with it."

The event is not a national championship, but USA Wrestling is considering adding a championship folkstyle event in the elementary and middle school age divisions. Bartram said that organizing the Nationals Duals should help put the Rhinos in a good position to be awarded the chance to hold any future championship event in the division.

It might be a few years before a national championship event is established, but Bartram plans on growing the National Folkstyle Duals in much the same way he grew the Rhino eXtreme, by guaranteeing at least five matches for each wrestler and awarding trophies to at least the top four teams.

"When you're traveling 12 hours, you want to get your money's worth," Bartram said. "If we have 16 teams this year, we know we'll grow by at least four teams next year. Just like any other business, the first year is the hard thing. People that come will go home happy. Get them in the door, and we'll keep them."