

Youths grapple for Extreme tourney titles

By Jaclyn Shambaugh

Correspondent

Though the field for this year's Rhino Extreme wrestling tournament shrank in size for the first time since the event's inception in 2005, tournament director Marty Bartram said the level of competition was better than ever. "I would challenge any youth tournament in the state to match the level of competition we have here," Bartram said. "There may have been a few less wrestlers in the (youth) division, but the level of competition was definitely higher than last year."

The Extreme, held Saturday at the Crown Arena, drew competitors from the length of the East Coast and as far west as Michigan. And with 336 wrestlers spread out in 60 weight classes, the Extreme was no small tournament. In addition to three divisions of youth wrestling, the tournament also offered a rookie tourney for first- and second-year wrestlers and introduced for the first time an open division for 18-and-over wrestlers.

The open division attracted the attention of the University of Alabama's club wrestling team. Coach Doug Ravenelle said that his team failed to register for the National Collegiate Wrestling Association on time and opted to wrestle in the USA Wrestling circuit as a lastminute alternative.

"They showed up about 1:30 this morning and plopped on my living room floor," Bartram said.

"This was the closest and soonest tournament for us to come to," Ravenelle said. "It's not bad. There's more to offer than I thought in terms of the competition."

Jay Whittaker's son Cole has been wrestling with the Rhinos for two years, and he agrees that the quality of competition is the key selling point of the Extreme.

"As far as North Carolina goes, this is one of the more competitive tournaments," Whittaker said. "And I definitely would say that the size of the tournament is not an indicator of how competitive it is."

Whittaker, watching a match between Wake Forest Daredevil wrestler Nick Mutio and Florida Heatwave competitor Zach Sherman, used the 70-pound matchup as an example of the tough field at the Extreme.

"Nick's a state champion," Whittaker said. "He doesn't lose. That's really good wrestling."

Nick is, in fact, a two-time state champion, but the 10year-old fell to Sherman in the quarterfinal bout in a 70 decision. Nick's father, Ed, is in his sixth year as head coach of the Daredevils.

"They wrestle hard in this tournament," Ed Mutio said.

"We look forward to coming down to Fayetteville every year. We try to look for the best competition. And when the competition comes to North Carolina, we welcome that."

The defeat of a few state champions was probably inevitable at the Extreme with the field loaded with some of the top wrestlers in the Southeast.

"There were several national champions there," Bartram said. "And in the youth division, I'm sure there was not a bracket that didn't have a state champion in it."

Sherman was the eventual winner in the Division 1, 70-pound class. He and teammate Ryan Kuse, the 91-pound winner in Division 3, each wrestled in two weight classes at the tournament.

With a guarantee of three matches for every wrestler, both Sherman and Kuse said that the format made the Extreme well worth the 11-hour car ride.

Also making the most of the tournament were the members of the Georgia National Wrestling Alliance, which finished first in the Extreme Division team standings.

GNWA wrestler Quinn Miller took first place in the 103-pound class of Division 1.

"I like that there's different people instead of just wrestling the same people from Georgia," the 11-year-old said.

"We try to come up here to wrestle different people and get a look at some different kids," Perry said. "Also, we know that some teams come down from the Northeast to wrestle here, so we get to get a hold of them."

Not all of the day's prizes went to out-of-state competitors. The Rhinos won the rookie tourney and finished second in the team standings.

"We took second to a very good Georgia team," Bartram said. "We're happy with that."

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Photo by Jaclyn Shambaugh

Jacob Butler (in red) squares off against Rhinos wrestler Cole Whittaker in the Rhino Extreme on Saturday at the Crown Arena. Butler, a member of Hoke County's Wolverine Wrestling Alliance, defeated Whittaker in a 3-0 decision in the quarterfinal match and went on to take third place in the Division 1, 70-pound weight class.

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