

Wrestling With New Format

The wrestling community is outraged. Coaches, wrestlers and fans are miffed about a ruling that has changed the significance of the state wrestling tournament in Syracuse.

The New York State Public High School Athletic Association voted in January, 1994, to disallow CHSAA and Public School Athletic League schools from participating in the NYSPHSAA wrestling tournament in Syracuse. The ruling was put into effect this season and the first state Federation tournament is scheduled for March 5.

"We felt that any sport that all three associations competed in should crown their own champion first and then move on to a Federation tournament to crown an overall state champ," said Floyd Jones, assistant director of the NYSPHSAA. "Now wrestling will have a CHSAA, PSAL and NYSPHSAA champion. Those three will wrestle for the 'true' state title in a Federation tournament this year."

The Federation holds state tournaments for boys and girls basketball, girls tennis, girls and boys swimming, indoor and outdoor track, gymnastics and now wrestling.

In the past, the 11 sections of public schools throughout the state sent a champion to the NYSPHSAA state tournament in Syracuse and the CHSAA and the PSAL were invited as guests to join those sectional representatives by sending their association's titlists. That put 13 competitors in the NYSPHSAA tournament at each of the 14 weight classes, and for the past 14 years that was the way the NYSPHSAA state tournament was run.

Instead of a Federation tournament, all would compete in the NYSPHSAA tournament, with the CHSAA and PSAL champs going against sectional public schools champions from throughout the state.

The irony of this whole issue of whether the Federation tournament is necessary is that there were never complaints from the CHSAA and the PSAL to change the format. Those factions didn't mind wrestling against 11 of the state's toughest wrestlers — one from each section in the state; they preferred it that way.

"We are disappointed in the change," said Chaminate coach George Dlugolonski, the CHSAA state chairman. "We really liked being involved in the NYSPHSAA tournament. It was a great chal-

lenge and the kids worked hard to make it there. There really was no need to change things and create a state Federation tournament."

The reasoning behind the decision to exclude those associations from the NYSPHSAA tournament was to enable it to crown its own public schools state champion, according to Sandra Scott, executive director of the NYSPHSAA. Scott said since the Federation is the overseer of the PSAL, CHSAA and the NYSPHSAA, all three champions would come together and have a Federation tournament to crown a winner.

What this Federation tournament will do is expose just how weak the CHSAA and PSAL are in the sport. Instead of leaving alone a system that worked well, the pencil pushers created a potential disaster.

A look at the numbers shows how much of a farce a state Federation tournament will be. You can be virtually assured that the representative from the public schools will win just about every time.

Since 1981 the CHSAA and the PSAL have totaled one state champ — Robert Murphy of Chaminate in 1986. Since 1981, when both entities were admitted into the NYSPHSAA tournament, the CHSAA team never has finished higher than ninth place in the team standings and the PSAL finished last all but four years — when it finished 11th or 12th. In the 14 years there have been champions crowned in 14 weight classes for a total of 196 champs. There are six place-winners in each of those weight classes every year — that's 84 place-winners a year. That makes 1,176 place-winners since the CHSAA and PSAL came into the tournament. The CHSAA has 27 place-winners and the PSAL has 9 of those 1,176. They have little or no impact at the NYSPHSAA tournament.

"This isn't about winning and losing," St. Anthony's coach Kevin Smith said. "First of all, I wouldn't say we've had no success because we always finish higher than a few sections from the public schools. The CHSAA is more competitive each year. Our kids want to wrestle the best in the state in the NYSPHSAA tournament. We don't like this decision at all."

One would think the CHSAA and the PSAL would love the decision to hold a state Federation tournament. It certainly makes the path to a state crown for a CHSAA or PSAL wrestler much easier. Having to wrestle only the NYSPHSAA champion instead of going through four or five matches in the NYSPHSAA tournament significantly increases the odds of winning. There are 28 wrestling pro-

grams in the CHSAA and the PSAL compared to 568 public school programs.

"I don't know how the public schools are going to react to this," Smith said. "There is a lot of displeasure about the format. I believe once we go through it once it'll never happen again."

The Federation tournament will feature 14 weight classes with the champions from the NYSPHSAA, CHSAA and the PSAL competing the day after the NYSPHSAA tournament.

That will reduce the 33rd annual NYSPHSAA wrestling championships March 2-5 to a qualifier for the Federation tournament. When the wrestlers win on that Saturday night to capture the NYSPHSAA title, they will be forced to maintain weight and wrestle the Federation tournament the next day at Fowler High School in Syracuse.

"To wrestle the Federation tournament the next day is ridiculous," said Sachem wrestling coach Jack Mahoney. "Our state champs aren't going to have anything to do with it after two days of a grueling tournament."

Public school coaches and Catholic school coaches are upset. No one wanted the change. If there are advocates of the new procedures for crowning a state champ, they haven't come forward.

The state wrestling championships for the past 32 years have been exciting and entertaining. The chance to improve each year was the challenge for the CHSAA. The quest to crown the PSAL's first state champ has always been a storyline.

And now this.

"We were 100 percent opposed to the change for us," said state wrestling chairman Reed Hawke. "I've read and heard that some kids will not participate. I don't see how this could improve what we have. But we have no choice."

"People are fearful that we are fixing something that isn't broke," said Walter Eaton, an assistant director for the NYSPHSAA. "We feel we are serving our member schools correctly by allowing them to determine a champion among themselves first."

The round-robin Federation tournament is slated like this: One wrestler will draw a first-round bye. The winner of the first match will sit and watch the loser wrestle the bye. If the bye wins his first match, he eliminates his opponent and wrestles the first match winner for the state title. If the bye wrestler loses, the winner of the first match is the state champ.

In effect, the state champ could be sitting on the bench when he is awarded the title — how exciting.

ANALYSIS

Gregg Sarra

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