

Women's wrestling brings sporting equity to Missouri Baptist school

June 19, 2008

ST. LOUIS (ABP) — This fall, Missouri Baptist University in suburban St. Louis will join a handful of other schools nationwide in offering a women's wrestling program.

MBU officials hope the program will help more of the small liberal-arts institution's student athletes become Olympians.

Athletic Director Tom Smith said he believes the new program will give the university more national exposure and draw more women to its programs. "It will help our gender side," he said.

Women's wrestling became an Olympic event in 2004. MBU administrators have been thinking about adding the sport for the past couple of years.

Since women athletes overall tend to be more disciplined than their male counterparts, Smith noted, he hopes the wrestling program will enhance the school's academics as well.

Women's wrestling is more prevalent in high school than at the college level. Few universities have a good program, Smith said. In some high schools that do not offer women's programs, female students participate on men's teams.

The new sport will provide more opportunities for women on the campus, Smith added. Like other MBU sports, scholarships will be offered on the basis of skill.

“We want to be in that position to present an Olympic athlete,” Smith said. “It really is a competitive sport.”

The university already has women signing up to participate.

Erica Poe, an incoming freshman for the fall term, said he’s excited about being able to wrestle on a college women’s team.

“This will be my first year,” she said.

To be on a women’s wrestling team that is. She wrestled on the men’s team as a student at Warsaw High School in Warsaw, Mo. Only one other female student also participated on the 30-man team.

Poe was excited when she found out MBU was offering a team. Otherwise, she would have had to go to college out of state. “I wanted to help build up a program,” she said.

Smith, the athletic director, said he anticipates having 10-15 members on the team the first year. He thinks the new sport will draw women from across the country since so few programs currently exist.

Although school officials said they had some concern over how conservative Baptists might react to the concept of a women’s wrestling team, Smith said he hasn’t heard much from Baptists in Missouri.

It “places a certain level of responsibility on us to do it responsibly,” he said. “I have not heard a whole lot of negativity in the church arena.”

As long as the wrestling isn’t co-ed, pastors contacted for this story seemed to have no objections to the idea.

The publicity the program will generate initially for MBU is one of its benefits. “I think it is going to generate a real strong curiosity for the athletic programs,” Smith said. He thinks the first few meets will be highly

attended.

The National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics, of which MBU is a member, does not include women's wrestling. The new team will compete in the Women's College Wrestling Association, which has about 15 member institutions.