

Tight budgets, gender balancing put chokehold on college wrestling

By Mike Hendricks

Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. — Joe DeMeo spent 17 years building the wrestling program at the State University of New York into a small-college powerhouse.

"Everybody was so proud of it," he said. "We had Olympic athletes, world caliber, and national champions."

The university suddenly dropped wrestling as a varsity sport in 1994 to balance the finances and gender equity of its athletic program.

DeMeo considered that nothing less than a tragedy, but what happened to him and his Great Dane wrestlers is being repeated across the country.

From a peak in the early 1970s, when there were more than 9,000 wrestlers on nearly 400 college teams, the sport has steadily declined at the intercollegiate level. Last year, there were 257 schools with wrestling teams and 6,345



BACK POINTS:

Get more information about college wrestling on the Web.

Furman in South Carolina; and North Carolina A&T.

The sport that dates back to ancient Greece has developed into a popular target on campuses as the 21st century approaches.

Colleges say they are under pressure to comply with Title IX, a 1972 federal law that prohibits sex discrimination in schools that receive federal funds. That means colleges and universities must give women equivalent opportunities

wrestlers, according to the NCAA.

Louisiana State, Clemson and Tennessee wrestle no more. Fort Lewis College in Colorado and Western Montana College ended wrestling last year, joining a list that includes Illinois State; Rowan, Rutgers-Newark and Kean in New Jersey;

on the playing field, as well as in the classroom.

Albany State, which is upgrading its athletic programs toward Division I, added women's golf and field hockey at the same time it dropped wrestling.

DeMeo, who has spent 39 of his 55 years in the sport, does not see the logic in eliminating his team.

"It is one of the cheapest sports to operate," he said. "The purpose of the law is to give opportunity to women, not take away from men."

Sonny Greenhalgh, the Seton Hall coach who wrestled on Syracuse's undefeated team in the 1960s, said he is worried about the future of the sport.

"Wrestling is the first place they look. There is not an offsetting female sport," Greenhalgh said. "It is not a big spectator sport, and they won't get ostracized by the press for dropping it."

"I think you'll see a lot of programs go. I'm afraid for my own program."

Syracuse's current wrestling team is the last the school will field. Syracuse elevated women's softball to varsity status, while announcing it was cutting wrestling and men's gymnastics.

"Wrestling is one of the strongest sports in the country in high school. What's going to happen to all these kids that want to go to college and participate in their sport? They can't," DeMeo said.

Wrestling remains steady at the high-school level, ranked as the sixth most-popular sport in the nation by the National Federation of State High School Associations.

More than 220,000 athletes wrestle on teams at 8,500 high schools, an increase of nearly 2,000 schools from the early 1970s, the federation said. More than 1,000 of those wrestlers are girls.

In upstate New York alone, Colgate, Potsdam State, St. Lawrence and Clarkson, in addition to Syracuse and Albany State, have dropped wrestling in recent years.

Across the country, Bill Dotson has witnessed the erosion of his sport out West.

During 17 years coaching at the New Mexico, Dotson has seen fellow WAC and Big 8 opponents Hawaii, Utah, UTEP, Colorado State, San Diego State and Colorado drop wrestling. Twice, New Mexico has nearly taken away the team's varsity status.

Wrestling survives at New Mexico on a shoestring budget. Dotson has no money for recruiting or to pay assistants. He can only offer scholarships to New Mexico residents.

In addition to the financial and gender issues, the distances between schools adds to wrestling's dilemma in the West, he said. The Lobos, for example, faced a 12-hour bus ride in a snowstorm for a dual meet at Wyoming.

Outside of the Big 12 Conference, Dotson said, only 13 Division I wrestling programs survive west of the Mississippi River.