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Pat Smith, Arkansas Wrestling Academy  
Four-time NCAA Champion

# Learning from the BEST

Wrestling Icon Building Arkansas Prep Tradition One State Title at a Time

Tanner Mann, Little Rock Central

Justin Arnall Little Rock Central

Tyler Kurz, Cabot

Sylvan Hills Guard Goodwin  
Racking up Offers, Helping Bears to Wins



By Nate Olson | Photo by Scott Ward

**J**ustin Arnall is a walking advertisement for the **Arkansas Wrestling Academy**. Arnall went from beginner to champion in a few months of working with Academy director **Pat Smith**, a former four-time NCAA Champion at **Oklahoma State**.

"The first time I met Pat, he told me to go out there and wrestle, and I got my butt whipped every day," Arnall said. "Then all of a sudden, it started clicking. (Smith) told me to keep my head up when I lost. I got down, but he got me to keep my head up."

Arnall began working with Smith before his freshman season last year. A few months later he won the 7A/6A 103-pound title.

"I was going to school practice until 6:30, then working with Coach Pat on technique at 6:45," Arnall said. "He slows it down to where if you have any questions, he can help you. He goes over it step-by-step."

"If I hadn't worked with (Smith) I wouldn't have won a state championship. He sped up the learning curve for me."

Smith has made his presence felt in three years, as he helps Little Rock businessman **Greg Hatcher** build the sport. The Academy wall is littered with names of wrestlers who have won state titles. **Central senior Tanner Mann** has worked extensively with Smith and already has two state titles at 119 pounds. At press time he was 25-0 in the 130-pound weight class and earned Outstanding Wrestler honors at the **CAC Meet and Conway Duels**. He is ranked as one of the top seniors in the nation by USA wrestling and has recruiting interest from **Army** and **Tennessee-Chattanooga**.

"This resource out here is golden, said Tanner's mom, **Kristi**, whose sons **Tyler** (freshman starter at 145 pounds for Central and a youth National Champion) and **Tucker** (8<sup>th</sup> grader at **Horace Mann** and sate runner-up in 12-and-under age class.) also wrestle and train at the nearby facility. "They are getting the best. We have daily access to one of the legends of the sport. It's shown in the boys' performances quickly. They have achieved things that boys wrestling for 10 years haven't done. It's because of Coach Pat."

Along with Arnall and Mann, **Cabot** sophomore **Tyler Kurz** (112 pounds) is a Smith student as well as **Little Rock Christian's Nicholas Kurfess**

(103 pounds). Both are defending state champions.

"It's an honor to get to learn from (Smith)," said Kurz, who transferred from **Reed Springs, Mo.** "When I got here, I thought I had a lot of moves, but (Smith) has taught me so much."

Smith came to Little Rock from Oklahoma State where he assisted his brother, **John Smith**. Smith had hoped to open a wrestling academy in Tulsa, Okla. but was lured to Arkansas by Hatcher.

Smith's sister **Carol Hardin**, whose daughter **May Pat Hardin** played soccer at **Mount Saint Mary**, knew Hatcher because his daughter **Haley**, who played at Central Arkansas **Christian**, played club soccer. Hardin and Hatcher became

"I did something different and took a leap of faith. I took the path least traveled, and I am glad I did," he said. "We love Arkansas, and I am amazed at how fast wrestling has grown in three years."

In August of 2007, the Academy opened. Hatcher remodeled one of the Blue Birds basketball gyms on the program's expansive grounds in Western Pulaski County. The facility was complete with mats, weight equipment, pro shop and locker room.

In addition to molding wrestlers by teaching lessons and leading teams into summer competitions, Smith is also a recruiter. He and Hatcher meet with perspective high schools to convince them to add the sport. Hatcher has spent thousands of his own dollars to provide mats for the start-up programs.

"We've come along way," Smith said. "We have added a lot of programs, and we have two college programs (**Ouachita Baptist** and **Central Baptist College**). It's great."

Smith has seen many firsts, as he helps develop the sport. He hopes his youth program, which includes 15 All-Americans, can produce Arkansas' first big-time college wrestling prospect.

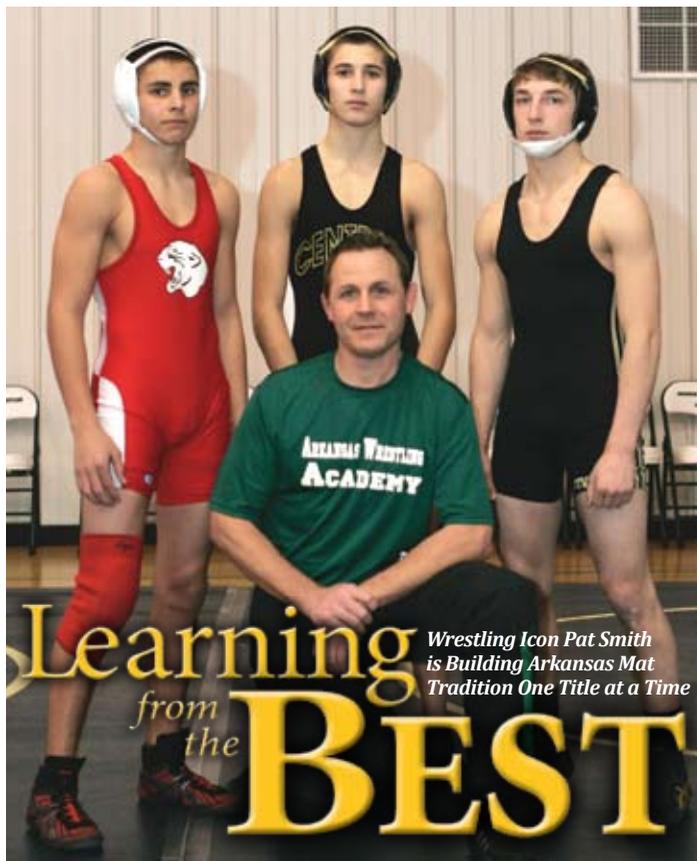
"We are trying to get them started when they are young, so they are on an even playing field with other kids across the nation," Smith said. "By the time this youth group leaves, they will have some national-type wrestlers with an opportunity to get full rides to attend college. That's what I sell to parents. We want to not only make kids into state champions, but get their education paid for."

In a short time, Smith has helped organize one of the more respected state tournaments in the nation, added numerous high school programs and encouraged the addition of college programs. He dreams of the day wrestling is as popular in Arkansas as it is in neighboring states.

He'll continue to do his part by promoting, recruiting and developing some of the nation's top talent.

"I plan on making Arkansas my home," Smith said. "I have a three-year-old and a one-year-old son," he said. "We see them going to high school in Arkansas. We love it in Little Rock. The people in Arkansas aren't any different from the people in Oklahoma."

"We are behind a lot of the states. I want to catch up to them. It is gong to take time, but if we keep improving, it will happen. It's unbelievable how much we have accomplished in three years." •



Wrestling Icon Pat Smith is Building Arkansas Mat Tradition One Title at a Time  
 Four-time NCAA wrestling champion, **Pat Smith** (kneeling) has helped grow wrestling in Arkansas at the **Arkansas Wrestling Academy** in Little Rock. Pictured are three of Smith's defending Arkansas State champions (Back row from left): **Cabot's Tyler Kurz**, **Central's Justin Arnall** and **Central's Tanner Mann**.

friends, and she mentioned her brother was contemplating a change, and Hatcher reacted quickly.

"I came over here for the day, and after talking to him, I walked away impressed," Smith said. "He was looking for a guy to coach his club. I was amazed with his vision. I went back and thought about it for a week. I thought this was a chance for me to give back to a sport that has been so good to me."

Three years later one of college wrestling's giants is happy he left the state where he was revered.