

## **Wrestling Last Frontier...*the inner cities***

*By Al Bevilacqua*

Amateur wrestling was established 5000BC. The history of the sport is well documented throughout history and folklore. The last remaining frontier of wrestling exists in the urban and inner cities of this great country.

There have been some attempts to reach out to the inner cities in the past, and two legendary men of the United States Wrestling Federation, Chris Poff and Bud Linholm, had the vision and the will during the early 1970's to attempt to breach the gap of introducing schoolboy wrestling in the urban cities. Their vision were shared by many, but the resources of the fledgling organization was not there to properly support and promote such a major project.

During this period of time, attempts were being made in Chicago, New York City, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Los Angeles, Boston and many other urban areas to begin schoolboy wrestling. These two men attempted to penetrate this huge market of millions of people that encompasses nearly sixty per cent of today's population. With the exception of a few schools in New York and Chicago with organized high school programs, many cities today still do not have any school wrestling programs. The lack of wrestling in the largest urban centers of the country has hurt the sport, especially in the area of sponsorships and mass media communications. Sponsors and advertisers want to reach as many "eyeballs" as they can and seek this type of demographic profile when investing advertising dollars. In advertising jargon it is called, "more bang for the buck".

To mainstream wrestling, and gain the acceptance of the mass media and Corporate America, we must penetrate the large urban areas. That is the key for securing sponsorships, advertisements, media recognition and the financial resources to bring the sport to the final and highest level of amateur sport.

To this end, USA Wrestling, the national governing body for the sport on the international level, has instituted a portion of its Capital Campaign for the Millennium, to its "*Beat the Streets*" program. The program is designed to penetrate the inner cities community based programs such as the Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCA and YWCA and many other non-profit groups whose mission is to provide worthwhile and wholesome activities for inner cities youth.

This technique has been quite successful with other sports such as boxing, soccer and most recently ice hockey. The NHL recently began penetrating major Southwestern cities such as Los Angeles and Phoenix, which have professional hockey teams in the area. They have become actively involved in community based programs and provide funding, coaching and equipment for the millions of inner city youths. The goal is twofold, to increase their fan base and to develop future hockey stars.

There is an opportunity for wrestling to provide the same coaching and equipment as well as grass roots funding to launch such a program in New York City. The Metropolitan Wrestling Association, a local area organization founded in 1985 by Setrak Agonian of Woodside, New York. Setrak is a former boxer who was introduced to wrestling shortly after he immigrated to New York in 1971. Through his close association with his mentor, Bill Farrell, he helped the USA Team in Bulgaria at the World Championships. Thus began his legacy to bring amateur wrestling to the capital of the World, New York City.

Through his efforts and the support of the Metropolitan Wrestling Association [MWA], the 2001 World Championships will be coming to New York City. The NYC2012 Committee, a non-profit organization created to bring the 2012 Olympic Games to New York City has chosen the Wrestling World Championships as its major project to market New York to the World.

New York City is the only major city in the World to never have hosted an Olympic Games. The entire political structure, mass media, advertising and marketing professionals are committed to both the World Championships and the Olympics.

The MWA is committed to providing a legacy from this event and is set to launch a "Beat the Streets" program shortly thereafter, with its fulltime Executive Director, Bill Crum, providing the organizational and administrative functions. Bill comes with an extensive professional experience with the Boys and Girls Clubs of Essex, New Jersey and a USA Wrestling Board Member as well. His charge by the MWA Board of Directors, made up of a members which reads like a "who's who" in amateur wrestling, is to use the momentum of the World Championships to bring this dream to a reality.

Enthusiastic wrestling people everyday witness the importance of a foothold in the major cities when they watch television or read national newspapers. They simply ask themselves, why is it that when thousand of commercials are aired everyday, many testimonials by athletic celebrities, they are not by any wrestlers? Why is wrestling always aired on cable television stations with less than 60% market penetration, aired at 1AM in the morning or 1PM during a weekday? Why were the 2000 Olympics, with the success of the wrestlers, given such poor coverage?

These questions are constantly being asked by the wrestling community and many successful wrestlers can not understand how a sport that does so much for kids in providing and building life skills, not be given an equal opportunity to gain access to mainstream America.

The importance of the 2001 World Championships in New York City is not only for the athletes, who are training to for their opportunity to be the best at what they do and to be a World Champion, but also for the image of the sport.

The underlying attempt is to market and promote the sport to heights it never has envisioned before and provide a legacy that will move the sport forward in the next millennium.

Throughout the life and training of a national or world class wrestler, he and now she, has to recognize the opportunities that are created by movements in a competitive match and then execute the correct skill at the precise moment to score points to win the match. Robin Williams, a former wrestler, in his Oscar winning performance jumped on top a table and implored his class to "seize the moment".

The match of wrestling's lifetime for the elevation and recognition of the sport is NOW! As Billy Baldwin, actor and former wrestler, so aptly announced at the recent Press Conference in conjunction with the annual National Wrestling Hall of Fame Dinner at the Hilton Hotel in Huntington, Long Island, " after listening for the past thirty years about how wrestling never gets a chance, its time for the wrestling community to put up or shut up."

When we successfully sell the 125,000 tickets to the World Championships, momentum will follow that will project Wrestling to become the next NASCAR. Stop and think, "did you ever conceive that when you shop in a major department store that you would see children's clothing with imprinted racecar drivers and professional wrestlers"?

The simple question is will be you be there in the action or by your computer waiting for the results and lamenting how long it takes to get these results.

**SIEZE THE MOMENT** and do not be shut out with being a part of history. Get the good seats now.