

University of Iowa Wrestling Media Conference

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Gary Barta

Tom Brands

Men's Wrestling Press Conference



STEVE ROE: Thank you, everyone, for being here. Today we'll have athletic director Gary Barta and head wrestling coach Tom Brands with some comments, then we'll have questions after the initial comments.

We'll get to Gary Barta.

GARY BARTA: Thanks, Steve. Thanks, everybody, for coming today on short notice.

It is both an exciting and historic day for Iowa athletics as we announce the addition of women's wrestling to our sports lineup. I think everyone here is fully aware of our history and tradition on the men's side. It's part of the fabric of Iowa, part of the University of Iowa's DNA when you look back historically at conference championships and national championships, Olympic gold medal, everything from Gable to Brands, anything in between.

What you may not be as familiar with is the explosive emergence of women and girls wrestling not only across the country but also throughout our state. I'll share a little bit with you about what's going on there.

Certainly the most recent big news was the Olympic gold medal that Tamyra Mensah-Stock earned. That was exciting. There are now 45 NCAA Division I, II and III wrestling programs in the country, almost a hundred if you include junior colleges and NAIA. That's what's happening at the collegiate level.

In 2020 the NCAA gave the designation to women's wrestling as an emerging sport, which means it now has momentum, it's gaining in terms of program sponsorship and it's something that the NCAA is behind.

Then at the high school level, there are 32 states who have sanctioned girls high school championships. In the state of Iowa, the Iowa High School Coaches Association sponsors the championship. I know our friend Josh Schamberger is here. The Coralville community hosts that event.

Last year more than 600 girls in the state of Iowa participated in high school wrestling. Members of our Hawkeye Wrestling Club, we started sponsoring women in our Hawkeye Wrestling Club in 2017. I mentioned Josh. He and his team and the community have hosted numerous Olympic trials for men and women, and then as I mentioned the high school championship.

Our decision to add women's wrestling is historic and exciting for a lot of reasons. We are the first Power 5 institution to add women's wrestling. We're going to begin the search. Here is sort of the process. We're going to begin the search for a new head coach this fall, so basically immediately. Then after we have that coach in place, we'll begin the recruiting process in addition to getting the staff put together. Then we'll have student-athletes on our campus as early as next year with our first year of competition in the 23-24 season. You'll hear from Tom about that in just a minute.

I would be a fool not to tap into the expertise, the reputation, the understanding of the sport to not have Tom Brands directly involved in this process. Of course, I will have him involved, everything from finding, identifying, hiring the new coach, getting our program up and running. But once it is up and running, he and I both agree it will be a self-sustaining entity. It will be on its own, standing alone on its own merits.

Before I get into a few more things, I mentioned Josh. Josh, thank you. We've been together on a lot of wrestling events in this community and the community has embraced them. Nationally we have great support from the National Wrestling Coaches Association, Mike Moyer and his group. Terry Steiner for those of you who follow wrestling is a familiar name because of his wrestling at the University of Iowa, but now currently he is the head coach of the U.S. women's national team. Just great, great support.

Before I open it up for questions, I want to answer a fair question, and an obvious one. First, the why women's wrestling? I've just explained to you why. I think that probably makes a lot of sense at the University of Iowa. So why now? Let me give you some context into that before I go into detail.

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Before COVID we had been watching the explosive growth of girls and women's wrestling. We had been keeping an eye on it. Frankly, Tom was in my ear three, four, five years ago saying, C'mon, boss, let's go. Let's get women's wrestling added. We were not ready to do that yet, but we were watching it.

The other trend we were watching, I just got back from a national meeting yesterday, last night, but the other trend we were watching three, four, five years ago was the trend where more women are going to college than men. That's a national trend. We were seeing it on our own campus.

Many of you know, I think most of you, we've also been planning for and designing a new wrestling training facility. The support from our alumni on that has been amazing. We'll go forward to the Board of Regents, and upon their approval sometime this winter, our plan is to start construction this spring, early summer on that new wrestling training facility.

When we started designing that probably about two years ago we intentionally included women's facilities in that training center with the anticipation that at some point we might add that sport.

We always have been committed to Title IX, we continue to be. As we were looking ahead after those two trends, the emergence of women's wrestling and the growing trend of more women enrolling in college, this looked like at that time, again pre-COVID, this was something we would be doing sometime in the future.

If you think about it, men's basketball and women's basketball complement each other, baseball and softball complement each other. At the University of Iowa, men's and women's wrestling are going to complement each other.

Along comes the pandemic. We halted all conversations about adding women's wrestling. We went into crisis mode. I'm not going to go through the process, you all have heard me talk about it. But the crisis mode included cutting salaries, operating budgets, positions, then ultimately having to cut some sports. Then we had to borrow \$50 million from the university to make up for that. That all happened.

Then in the fall of 2020, a Title IX lawsuit was filed against us. We began the process of defending against those claims.

Prior to discontinuing the sports, when it comes to Title IX, we've been engaging with experts all along the way. Many of you might recall we had the Office of Civil Rights on our

campus for about four years. Their findings were non-conclusive. They didn't find anything where we were in violation.

As we were considering cutting sports, we brought in a Title IX expert. That expert confirmed we were in compliance with Title IX before we made the decision to cut the sports, and that Title IX expert confirmed (with) the sports we were cutting, we would be in compliance with Title IX.

Along the process we reinstated women's swimming permanently. We hired a new head coach, Nathan Mundt, who is doing a terrific job in running our women's swimming program, bringing that program back up.

Finally, as part of the Title IX lawsuit settlement, we agreed to add a women's sport. Our decision was to add the sport of women's wrestling. Again, at the University of Iowa, we believe that sport makes the most sense in terms of adding.

We are committed to Title IX, always will be, always have been.

I'll just tell you, this is the bottom line, were it not for COVID we wouldn't have cut sports. Were it not for the Title IX lawsuit, I wasn't ready to add women's wrestling yet. But I can tell you that why the timing may be challenging, the decision is awesome. We're excited about it. We're ready to go forward.

Before I get any questions, I want to recognized a few external people. I want to tell you over the last year and a half or so, there's been people on our staff who have worked tirelessly in getting to this point. Barbara Burke, our deputy director of athletics, who does many things. She's the chief operating officer of the department, but she also directly oversees wrestling and Tom Brands. That's quite a job for those of you know Tom. I say that with a smile on my face.

Senior associate athletic director Lyla Clerry who works on many things in our department. She's been directly involved in all of our Title IX reviews, working with our experts. I'm grateful for Lyla and the work she does.

Matt Henderson and our senior staff, everybody on our staff, then certainly central administration. Finally, our head coach Tom Brands. As I mentioned, he's been in my ear now for a couple years saying, Boss, when are you going to add women's wrestling? We started sponsoring women in the Hawkeye Wrestling Club several years ago. He's been an advocate for a long time. He certainly is an expert in the sport.

I'm going to have Tom come up in a little bit and talk about his perspective, why this is important to our program, why this is important to the sport of wrestling. After Tom is done, I'll come back up and you all can ask questions of me.

TOM BRANDS: Awesome. Barbara Burke was mentioned. She has to be mentioned again. What a catalyst and what a boss! I've had some great bosses in my career. She tops them all. I told all the other ones that as well, not just because the relationship is strong, but because of the forward thinking, the problem solving ability, impact. She shares vision for things that are impactful.

You talk about impact, you have an unbelievable historic, exciting announcement that the University of Iowa is adding women's wrestling to its intercollegiate program. There's nothing more impactful than that or exciting.

There's certain things that you have to slow down when you're at the podium here to make sure you get it in so you represent it right.

Our guys are here. We have six out of 10 returning All-Americans here. A couple said they had to go to classes. That's support right there. Not scripted.

There's other things you have to slow down and acknowledge as well. Women's wrestling is awesome! It's great for the women. There is little girls all across the country and the planet that are going to see this. It's that impactful.

Let me tell you something about how it impacts the men. It makes the men's program stronger. Women's wrestling from its inception has always made men's wrestling better, it always has. There is a correlation there, and that's documented.

There's high-powered organizations out there, merging sports status was mentioned, the committee on women's athletics and the NCAA, well positioned, powerful, organized people there. Kyra Berry, Lori Ayers, Sally Roberts at Wrestle Like a Girl. If you're in the women's wrestling world or you're a women's wrestling fan, then you know these names, you know that we have solid leadership there. It has to be said.

All that being said, we will not change how we run our program. Our program will be run the same. The women will have their own practice times. The women will have their own head coach. The women will have their own structure. The women will run their program as they see fit.

We will hire a coach, it will be the best coach in America. And look out because when these steps start being taken, we're at the first step here, but you look down the natural next steps, and that next step is the coach we hire, it's going to be their program.

The stakes are high for the new coach. We're going to wrestle the best competition in the United States. We're going to recruit unbelievable young talent that is already winning age group international championships and medals at the cadet and junior level. That's going to be our recruiting pool. Being the first is huge. Being the first is impactful. That's where we're at.

Last thing I'll say, it doesn't just make the men better. That's a big deal to us, but I'll tell you what, it makes the entire athletic department at the University of Iowa better. Thanks.

GARY BARTA: You can see the excitement of this day has been building for a while, but having this guy by our side, I can't wait.

Q. As you may or may not know, when wrestling suffered in the '80s, they blamed Title IX women's sports. Is it ironic that women's sports is helping men's sports grow?

GARY BARTA: I don't know about irony. That's what you just heard Tom Brands say. We're not talking about cutting wrestling programs, we're talking about adding women's programs.

What's exciting to me is 600 girls in the state of Iowa participated in high school wrestling. We won Olympic gold in wrestling. I don't know about irony, but the excitement of taking men's and women's wrestling and having them complement each other is terrific.

Q. Have you talked to any other Power 5 programs, especially within the Big Ten, will they be following suit?

GARY BARTA: I can't predict. I have had conversations across the country as I've been watching this build. I can't predict if others will. I certainly hope so. I anticipate that it could happen, but I don't have any predictions today.

Q. How much will it cost start-up-wise and annually for the budget?

GARY BARTA: I'll get to the answer in a roundabout way because there's not an existing Division I program, some of that's going to be based on our experience on the men's

side. To get started in year one, we'll have the cost of the coach's salary and then begin the recruiting process year two, that will include probably some assistant coaches and some scholarships. The sport of women's wrestling allows for 10 scholarships. Then of course our operating, our travel. Somewhere in the vicinity probably in that year three of half a million dollars is what we're anticipating.

Fortunately we have a big head start with support we've received that will take care of all those first three years and probably more than that. Certainly we're going to keep raising money.

As it comes to fundraising, as I mentioned, the incredible support we received in raising money for the building, we've received already over \$20 million for the building. Tom came to me a few years ago and said, We need to have the best wrestling training center in the world, not in Iowa, not in the country, but in the world. Our donors have been amazing.

Thanks to Kevin Collins and his team, Tom, all the hard work, our donors, this is the first project I've ever been involved with where the donors have put up the money and architects have to catch up in designing the facility because the money came first. That's the kind of support that's amazing.

As I mentioned, even going back a couple years ago, we had included the women's facilities in that training center in anticipation of someday getting to this point.

Q. Of the agreement on the settlement terms, beyond adding women's wrestling, is there more to it, anything you can discuss?

GARY BARTA: The agreement is done. The paperwork is still being finalized.

In general, I mentioned it was about Title IX, and specifically it was about adding women's sports, the counting of women's sports. We had already agreed to reinstate women's swimming permanently, and part of the agreement was to add an additional women's sport. We chose women's wrestling for all the obvious reasons.

Beyond that it's really continuing to monitor and make sure we're in compliance with Title IX, which we would always do even without an agreement. That's the gist of it.

Q. I think it was in this room last year, but it was suggested that a lot of Power 5 schools around the country would be dropping sports. Iowa is one of, to my knowledge, a very few that did. Why here?

GARY BARTA: Well, I can't speak for other schools. I can tell you faced with a \$50 million deficit at the time, potentially as high as \$75 million, that's what we needed to do.

I'm expected to be self-sustaining. It was our decision collectively, certainly mine from a responsibility standpoint, to set the course for how we were going to manage that crisis and deficit. The decision we came to was to eliminate those sports.

Q. I know Tom just talked about how the women's coach will be the best in the country. What place are you looking for to find that person?

GARY BARTA: The great thing about being in the Big Ten, being a national program, it will be a national search. We don't have any preconceived candidates that have already been selected, but we're aware of a lot of very qualified candidates. It will be a national search.

Q. Considering Iowa's history in this sport, will you talk to Tom on advice for hiring a coach, and will it be in a similar style of how Iowa likes to wrestle?

GARY BARTA: I would be a fool not to rely on Tom's expertise as we go out and search for a head new coach. So, yes, he'll be directly involved. Barbara Burke is the one that oversees the sport administratively and myself. We'll all be included.

To the last part of your question, I don't know exactly how to answer it other than we're going to go find the best coach. As Tom said, we want to win. We want to win championships. We're going to look for the coach that we think can get us there and agrees to be a part of the win, graduate, do it right principle and philosophy.

Q. How do you get Iowa high schools incorporated into having the sport?

GARY BARTA: The Iowa high school association has its rules about how many sports to sponsor. My understanding is it's not that far apart. It will be up to them to get it officially sanctioned. And to that point, already just having 600 girls that are participating is a great start. Having the championship that was held here, that has been held here, I've not been to it personally, but I received feedback from Tom and Barbara and others that it's been incredibly successful.

Q. What do you think this means for girls across the state and across the country?

GARY BARTA: Anytime there's advancement... I've been

doing this for 33 years. I have watched and been a part of the growth of women's sport, most recently with my daughter, watching her play in high school, as she was going through that process. Going all the way back to when I was a student-athlete in the early 1980s and watching the growth of sports for girls and sports at the highest level all the way up to the Olympics has been amazing. This is just another positive step in that direction.

As Tom mentioned, for us to be the first university at the Power 5 level to add women's wrestling, I just feel great to be a leader in that area.

STEVE ROE: Coach Brands. We'll have questions for coach.

Q. You've been around a long time. At what point did you not fall in love with women's wrestling, but it made you notice?

TOM BRANDS: This isn't Tom Brands, this is Iowa Hawkeye wrestling that backs this. Terry is in my ear. I could say it's about time, jokingly. There is a lot of reasons why you do it. Those reasons are because they're just as hungry as these guys are to win championships. There is no separation. The hunger, desire and drive, now you get to do it at an institution where other big-time institutions are going to follow and we're the trailblazer. We've been the trailblazer before. We have the first black national champion, Simon Roberts. That's important.

It's not, Oh, they get their chance now. It's, they are going to be going to school to enjoy the goods of college life, which is the do it right part. They're going to be going to a big-time college to get a degree, that's the graduate part. They're going to be going to a program that is going to have the best facilities, the best coaching and the best environment, the best fan base. That's the win part.

This isn't Tom Brands being onboard. This is what you do.

Q. Talking about other schools, have you talked to any other coaches who might want to push their program to do the same thing?

TOM BRANDS: I think there are several that are close, without speaking for them.

Q. You've seen plenty of women's wrestling. In fact, right here in this arena. What has it done? What have you seen, the effect?

TOM BRANDS: Well, you talk about trailblazers, you think about Tricia McNaughton, Tricia Saunders, Townsend Saunders, and you hear the stories of Zeke Jones who

trained with her as a kid. I think Jones is the head coach at Arizona State. A world medalist, a world champion, Olympic silver. He wrestled at Arizona State for Bobby Douglas. Tricia McNaughton was one of his training partners, and that was in the '80s.

Here you have a trailblazer.

I'm not answering your question on what it means necessarily, but you see that it's always been there. Just because we're doing it now doesn't mean that all of a sudden they're ready for it. They've been ready for it just like men have been ready for it. That's how I look at things most always.

Q. What does this mean for the sport? What's been your full circle thought process?

TOM BRANDS: A lot of things happened why wrestling went that way. We got rid of those reasons. We got leadership at the time it was FILA, now it's UWW where the leadership is strong. The leadership is doing some things that actually make wrestling more exciting for television, for fans.

You've seen it go back to where it needed to be with the rules and the timing, so on, so forth. It is an exciting format now. Because it was dropped from the Olympic program, probably the best thing that happened to get the format back to where it was, exciting for fans and television, so on and so forth.

The other thing that goes along with that is you look at women's wrestling at the collegiate level, it's freestyle. That's exciting. That's not me endorsing freestyle, changing men's wrestling.

We have the best gig in wrestling. We have a sold-out, six-session, three-day tournament that over 100,000 people attend. Collegiate wrestling is strong. That's not an argument to go to freestyle, I'm not saying that.

Women need to run their own show and make their own decisions. I'm on a board for one reason, because there's some unreasonable people that come in with opinions that try to strong arm what these women need. When you have Terry Steiner, who knows what he needs, he's a head coach, doing a great job, in fact, had the best tournament for the women's Olympic team in history. History isn't that long, but the trend is going this way. He knows what format needs to be there.

Sally Roberts, the emerging sport status people, committee on women's athletics in the NCAA, they know what's best. If they decide to change, they change. My job to be on that

board is to not be a yes man, but to back up what common sense says is already working.

You look at the trend of women, you talk about it locally in numbers, all the fanfare, Josh, all the things he's done in this community with his team, awesome. Look also at the success at the highest level. Look at the success of cadet and junior age division in the United States. Then look at how that transcends in the Olympic level. That's a strong statement for why you do this.

I'm telling you, the University of Iowa, like it is for our men, you're looking at some guys over there that have already won some international world championships age group-wise, and you're looking to some others that aspire to that senior level.

Like our men, that women's program will be funded in the RTC/international arena.

Q. Regarding the future of the coach for the women's team, what recommendations will you make to Gary and will it need to be a woman?

TOM BRANDS: I'm not making any recommendations. I'm in collaboration or concert with Barbara and Gary. We will make decisions as we go forward.

Gary said it best as we were talking here, this is the first step of many. It's exciting now. But look out because I'm telling you, the next steps are really exciting. This is actually dull for me. This is exciting, but the next steps are more exciting.

Q. With the growth of high school wrestling for females over the last three years, how much more help will that be for the program if the sport were sanctioned at the high school level?

TOM BRANDS: I think in the state of Iowa, it's a no-brainer. I know there are people in this room that are working hard. Let's not skirt the issue. There's a little squabble going on in who's going to own it, which organization.

Get over that squabble. You know what, partner up, let's get some common sense here and get a high school tournament for these girls. They've earned it enough, and they need it. I need it. Schamberger needs it. Put it in that new arena over there. That's where I would go with that. Just do it, let's get together and do it.

Thank you, appreciate it.