

Wrestlers call presidential candidates to the mat

by Caryn Rousseau
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Washington Correspondent

WASHINGTON (TMS) -- If viewers are lucky they just might get to watch presidential candidates George W. Bush and Al Gore arm-wrestle on national television this fall. That is if the candidates answer the World Wrestling Federation's "Smackdown Challenge" that WWF stars Mick Foley, Chyna, Lita and Kurt Angle announced Tuesday. The candidates would be given five minutes during a live WWF broadcast to present their views on issues important to youth ages 18 to 34.

"This is a serious invitation," WWF star Mick Foley said at a press conference. "We hope they take it seriously."

Even though people may have different opinions about the WWF, it is hard to argue that a lot of people watch it, said Ali Fischer, president of the United States Student Association.

"We've issued this call more than enough times," Fischer said. "I hope the candidates will go to a lot of different forums for youth."

WWF also joins more than 60 youth organizations including Youth Vote 2000 in asking the candidates to dedicate one of three official debates sponsored by the Commission on Presidential Debates to youth issues.

"Politicians need to do their part and stop ignoring youth," said Julia Cohen, executive director of Youth Vote 2000. "There is a cycle of mutual neglect between the youth and politicians that must be broken."

The hope is that youth will moderate and attend the debate, Cohen said. The dedication of one-third of presidential debating time to youth issues is not a waste, says Russ Freyman of Neglection 2000, a year-long study on the mutual neglect between young people and candidates.

"They have to be concerned and receptive because this will be a close election," he said. "The youth vote

could swing the election."

Freyman has the numbers to prove interest in a youth debate. A Neglection 2000 poll cites 77 percent of registered voters support making youth issues the focus of a presidential debate.

"The macro level issues are the same," Cohen said. "But it's not about K through 12, it's about higher education. It's 'will I graduate and have a job with health insurance?'"

The WWF has been visible throughout the 2000 presidential campaign with appearances at both conventions.

WWF, MTV, Youth Vote 2000 and Project Vote Smarts are sponsoring the "Smackdown Your Vote" campaign as a nonpartisan voter registration initiative that has already registered 40,000 people.

Even one of the WWF's most prolific stars admits to being put off by politics and wants to make a change. "Politics intimidated me for a long time," Chyna said. "I wish I had made myself aware before."

Bush, Gore camps debating debate over debates

by Dan Balz
The Washington Post
September 4, 2000

ROMEO, Mich. — The quadrennial debate over debates is a familiar and often-ignored ritual of presidential campaigns, but Texas Gov. George W. Bush is gambling that he can turn it into a weapon to recharge his candidacy and regain the offensive against Vice President Al Gore.

Gore's campaign believes the opposite and some analysts agree. They argue that Bush faces potential criticism for a proposal they say could significantly limit the audience and that he might appear defensive over Gore's reputation as a fierce debater.

Bush advisers were nonetheless gleeful Sunday as their candidate offered his challenge to Gore to join in three debates, only one of them sponsored by the Commission on Presidential Debates, which has sponsored the events since 1988.

With Gore on tape eagerly accepting offers to debate on NBC's "Meet the Press" and CNN's "Larry King Live," the Bush team believed they had Gore caught in a bind of his own making. "Now we set the pace," one Bush adviser said.

The Bush team argued that Gore had spent the spring and summer claiming he was ready for any debate and calling on his GOP rival to accept some of the invitations on the table. "We called the vice president's bluff," Bush communications director Karen Hughes said.

Gore immediately rebuffed the proposal, with his campaign chairman William Daley saying the vice president would consider other debates, but only after agreement on the commission's long-scheduled three presidential and one vice presidential debates.

Hughes said Monday she was "surprised" that the news media were not doing more to hold Gore to his pledge to debate, and Bush pressed the case at a campaign rallies in Illinois and Michigan. Bush said Gore had made clear he was ready to debate "any time, anywhere," but now is balking.

"That must depend on what the meaning of 'any time' is," Bush said at the Romeo Peach Festival Monday afternoon. "I'm going to take the man at his word. I'm assuming he's going to show up. Unless it's the same old tired double talk out of Washington, D.C. It depends on what the definition of 'is' is."

Bush's decision reflects two realities: One is his desire to blunt Gore's momentum by shifting the focus away from the details of health care or Social Security and back to questions of character, leadership and credibility. The other is a belief that the forums with CNN's Larry King and NBC's Tim Russert would prove far more hospitable to his style.

Thomas Mann of the Brookings Institution, who called Bush's proposal "too clever by half," said he doubted the Texas governor could convert Gore's rebuff into a major issue of cred-

ibility among voters who pay little attention to debates about debates. "My impression is that, to ordinary people, that's just not a plausible argument," Mann said.

Some Republicans said Monday they worried that Bush was making a mistake by largely throwing aside the commission's tradition of 90-minute debates in prime time, carried on all the major broadcast television networks. The NBC and CNN debates would run 60 minutes and there is no guarantee that other networks would air them at the same time.

"I think on this one, Gore has the upper hand," one GOP strategist said.

Bush officials defended their decision as a way to inject variety and dif-

ferent formats into the debates and derided past commission forums as "phony," "canned," and "stilted."

Hughes said the commission debates often reward the candidate "who can memorize a 60-second statement" rather than someone who can withstand tough follow-up questions from "a respected journalist."

Few doubt that Bush and Gore will eventually settle on a schedule for at least some dates. Daley said Monday that he would accept the commission's invitation to meet with the Bush campaign to talk about the debates.

Fleischer said Bush's team would talk to the commission at some point, but only about the one commission debate they have accepted, on Oct. 17.

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