Iran Hopes to Use Wrestling To Warm Relations With U.S.

By Daniel Pearl

The U.S. and China began warming relations in 1971 with "ping-pong diplomacy." History may record that the U.S. and Iran did the same in 1998 with "pin-down diplomacy."

Iran has been maneuvering for many months to bring American wrestlers to Iran for an international tournament of about a dozen teams in mid-February. If it comes about -- and it looks as though it could -- more cultural exchanges might follow, something Iranian President Mohammad Khatami made clear, in a TV interview last week, that he wants.

The State Department has expressed official indifference. A U.S. official notes that no government approval is necessary: "You just get a visa, call Iran Air and go," the official says.

'We Want to Compete'

The top official in U.S. amateur wrestling says he thinks the interests of sport should prevail. "We're not going there as a political pawn. We're going there because we want to compete," says Larry Sciacchetano, president of USA Wrestling, whose 13-member executive board is likely to make a final decision by week's end. "Maybe it's too simplistic that sports ought to be above politics. Maybe it's naive, but that's what I think."

Politics have kept all but a few Americans from Iran for years. While there is no travel ban, Americans can't do business with Iran because of Washington's allegations that the country supports terrorism. The travelers Iran is seeking -- Mr. Khatami mentioned "professors, writers, scholars, artists, journalists and tourists" -- also wouldn't be allowed to bring home any souvenirs from the country.

Among the few Americans who have visited Iran recently: Several prominent skiers went last year on a trip sponsored by a ski magazine; and an American International Olympic Committee official traveled to Tehran in December to watch the Islamic women's games, according to Olympic and diplomatic sources. But American athletes haven't competed officially in Tehran since the 1979 revolution, when 16 U.S. wrestlers preparing to compete for a Christian-outreach team fled the wrestlers' village and holed up in a tiny apartment before getting a flight out of the country.

"We're sitting here with both excitement and apprehension," says Mitch Hull, director of national teams for USA Wrestling, an Olympic Committee affiliate based in Colorado Springs, Colo. "There's always going to be some kind of slight concern with safety," especially with no U.S. diplomatic presence in Iran.

Maple-Leaf Disguise

On the other hand, he figures, Iran has sent wrestlers to the U.S. three times since 1995,
though there are plenty of extremist groups here that are hostile toward Iranians. Mr. Hull says Canada's wrestling federation told him its wrestlers haven't had problems in Iran -- and offered to provide warm-up suits with maple-leaf flags for the Americans.

On Tuesday, USA Wrestling officials met with Iran's United Nations representative in New York to make sure that the Iranian Wrestling Federation's invitation from last year really came from the government. They were told that it did, and that the wrestlers would be treated like guests in someone's home. (They would, however, stay in a hotel.)

If the U.S. team shows up, the Stars and Stripes will be displayed with other nations' flags for the first time (without being burned) since the Iranian revolution. And if a U.S. wrestler wins a gold medal, 12,000 fans in Tehran's Azadi Stadium and millions more watching on television will hear "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Wrestling was a natural choice for Iran as an opening play. The sport is revered in Iran. In ancient times, Persian warlords nominated wrestlers to resolve disputes without bloodshed. Parents still tell their children to be as sportsmanlike as Gholam Reza Takhti, the Iranian wrestler who died mysteriously under the last shah's regime and for whom next month's tournament is named. Many matches are televised -- from a far enough distance to assuage concern about women's seeing men in immodest attire.

Favorable Politics

Mohammad Reza Taleghani, head of Iran's wrestling federation, said Saturday that he had made "long and painful" efforts in Iran to get the U.S. team invited, and that the new president's policies finally made it possible for him to deliver an invitation during September's Freestyle World Championship in Russia. He also gave the U.S. an ultimatum: Iran wouldn't send a team to the Freestyle World Cup in Stillwater, Okla., this April unless the U.S. team came to Tehran for February's tournament. Iran also will host this year's World Championship in September. (U.S. wrestling officials say they didn't object to Iran as host, though some European countries did.)

That wasn't the only route Iran pursued. Monsoor Barzegar, former coach of Iran's national team, came to the U.S. in June for a five-month vacation. He visited his old wrestling buddy Ken Khosroabadi, a naturalized U.S. citizen who owns a gas station in Ashland, Ore. Mr. Barzegar visited the usual tourist spots, like Disneyland and Las Vegas, but also went to a wrestling camp and started attending Southern Oregon University wrestling practices three times a week. Mr. Barzegar, who has a move named after him, showed the young wrestlers some tricks, says Mr. Khosroabadi, who translated "he was telling me they have beautiful bodies but they don't know the moves." Ultimately, Mr. Barzegar invited the wrestlers to Iran for the tournament.

Southern Oregon's wrestling coach sent a letter to Iran asking for more information, and also checked with USA Wrestling. That organization said it could allow only one team to go.
Passive Response

So now, the pressure is on to decide quickly on the national team, especially since it can take several weeks to process visa applications. USA Wrestling officials watched President Khatami's interview with CNN on Wednesday, and were encouraged that the timing for a trip would be good. They also are putting in calls to Washington this week to see what the political implications would be. When the issue first came up in November, the State Department said it had "no objection." "That's somewhere in between 'we approve' and 'not on your life,' " says Steve Bull, the U.S. Olympic Committee's Washington representative.

Just a few days after that, Mr. Bull got a call of encouragement from Bruce Laingin, who was the top-ranking official among the hostages in Iran in 1980. Mr. Laingin, now president of the American Academy of Diplomacy in Washington, won't say how he heard about USA Wrestling's talks with the State Department.

He does say that "I've been an advocate of a dialogue with Iran since I left." A wrestling match could create the same kind of "track-two diplomacy" that ping-pong tournaments created with China, he says, even if, in his view, "ping pong is more universal, more popular."