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Brick Factory Funds an Obscure Sport

By Khristina Narizhnaya

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Belt wrestlers taking part in a Gainanova-sponsored competition in Podolsk outside Moscow on Saturday. **Khristina Narizhnaya**

PODOLSK, Moscow Region — Taking a quirky Central Asian sport to the Olympics is no easy task.

But the newly elected president of the remade International Belt Wrestling Association plans to honor her late husband's legacy and do just that.

"Athletes need support," said Lyudmila Gainanova, a delicate blonde. Then, quoting the children's novel "The Little Prince," she added, "We answer for those we have tamed."

Since Gainanova was elected president in February, she has been working non-stop to revitalize the association, organize competitions, market the sport and attract financing.

Gainanova is the association's sole sponsor and pays 1 million to 1.5 million rubles ($36,000 to $54,000) per competition, out of her own pocket. There needs to be at least eight

competitions per year to get the sport off the ground, plus other expenses in between, Gainanova said.

Plans to develop the sport include broadcasting matches on television and the Internet and using profits from a brick factory, which is still under construction in the Tatarstan republic, to support the association.

The sport needs to grow before it can join the Olympic family, director of the Russian Olympic Committee Marat Bariyev said.

"It needs to be very popular, for the audience, for young people," Bariyev said.

That is where the association comes in. "Without the association, the sport simply won't develop," Bariyev said.

Over the weekend, Gainanova invited sports marketing professionals from Israel to the year's first competition to assess belt wrestling's Olympic prospects and get advice on improving its prominence.

There is a lot of potential because of quick action and the passion exhibited for the sport, said Mylan Tanzer, owner of Israel-based sports communications firm Spark Media.

Indeed, spectators are kept on their toes as they watch two opponents grip each other by red belts as each tries to wrestle the other to the ground. Often violent flips and loud grunts embellish the matches, which last anywhere from several seconds to four minutes. Both men and women compete.

The growing interest in wrestling and mixed martial arts sports worldwide adds to belt wrestling's Olympic potential, Tanzer said. Ultimate Fighting Championship is now broadcast on cable sports network ESPN, for example.

Belt wrestling is more than 2,000 years old. It originated during harvest festivities in Tatar and Central Asian villages. Over the years, belt wrestling nations, such as Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, formed their own federations for the sport. The All-Russian Belt Wrestling Federation was formed in 2003.

In 2005, Rif Gainanov, a Greco-Roman wrestling champion, founded the International Belt Wrestling Association, uniting all federations and establishing a set of rules and standards for the sport.

The association flourished for four years, attracting members from Africa, the Middle East and Europe, and even securing a spot in the 2013 Universiade, a worldwide sport event where university athletes compete. After Gainanov died in 2009, the sport went into decline and the association suffered internal tensions and financial malfeasance.

Since the beginning of this year, the association has changed administration, re-registered with the Justice Ministry and is developing a new web site.

For now the association and its members must work to help the sport form a fan base, said Serob Andreasyan, president of the Armenian Belt Wrestling Federation.

"If a big house has a small foundation, the building will collapse," Andreasyan said. "But if a house has a foundation like this," Andreasyan spread his arms wide, "it will never fall."

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