



**Getting Over: A Study of the History, Industry, Performance Art &  
Cultural Impact of American Professional Wrestling**

Dissertation  
zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades des

Doktors der Philosophie

der Philosophischen Fakultät  
der Universität des Saarlandes

vorgelegt von

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# Introduction

In the American tradition of using revisionist fiction to tell cultural myths, professional wrestling is a genre of performance that can be loosely described as “revisionist sport.” It tells the story of a fictional sporting league and the fictional figures therewithin. These fictional figures chase self-actualization through the glory, wealth, and validation promised by a professional championship in a dramatized version of the sport of catch-as-catch-can wrestling. The enactment of American cultural values and/or their rejection permeates the narratives of the style from formatting of the foundational match to weeks-long angles and years-long arcs. The central theme of the genre is the insecurity of each of the performers, and their reactions to it in their quest for self-actualization. Viennese psychoanalyst Alfred Adler is credited with first asserting that false bravado is an expression of internal insecurity, which means that the bombastic displays of hypermasculine chest-thumping in professional wrestling are expressive of massive internal fears of inferiority among the characters (Ma, 2015). Despite their fears, babyface-heroes seek to walk the righteous path in a corrupt world to chase their principled, morally upright, and apparently deserved self-actualization; villainous heels reject the noble path and take any unethical shortcut to achieve corrupted validation and immoral success. This ethical paradigm dominates much of the storytelling in this genre. Due to the unending episodic nature of the style, most characters see shifts in their ethical alignments as time goes by. Likewise, the cultural values enacted by professional wrestling evolve, and so too do the personal qualities of the heroes and villains. When a particular character captures a cultural moment, the industry is at its most successful. The ethical flexibility of the archetypal characters has allowed professional wrestling to be a consistent and prominent part of American culture from the late-19<sup>th</sup> century until now. During this period, thanks to its customer-driven ethical compass and the early adoption of evolving media technology, the performance art of professional wrestling has grown to be a nigh-ubiquitous part of American culture, permeating, and influencing the worlds of sports, entertainment, business, and politics.

Alexis Tocqueville once famously said, “America is not a place, it is a dream” (Tocqueville, 1970). Dream is commonly used to refer to either an aspiration, or a vivid hallucinatory fantasy; both of these definitions are applicable to being “American.” At its core, Americanism is a performative action, displaying the cultural virtues that according to the



cultural mythos of the United States, will grant the people enacting them a pathway to achieve their aspirations justly and uprightly. This assertion, in and of itself, is a vivid, hallucinatory, reductive, and somewhat naïve fantasy about the road to self-actualization. However, performative cultural values of Americans are a deeply protected part of the society. For example, in the 2010's several professional athletes exercised their free speech to not engage in the performance of standing for the national anthem before sporting events that were completely independent of any governmental involvement, and their actions ignited year-long public debate, publicly outcry and controversy. This and a seemingly endless list of norms and behaviors are expected to embody a revisionist image of Americanness cultivated through multimedia myth making and centuries of cultural propaganda. One of the clearest and most uniquely American vehicles for the propagation and enactment of these cultural values is professional wrestling. Since its emergence in the latter-19<sup>th</sup> century, professional wrestling has been a popular, live, action-packed demonstration of the power of American cultural virtues and vices. As the cultural values of American society have evolved from the late-1800's to now, so to have the professional wrestling heroes and villains that enact them. Fittingly the images of the prototypical "American" at that cultural moment are as real as professional wrestling, which is to say that they both exist only in the metaphysical abstract as an aspirational fantasy.

According to performance theory, "reality" is a fabrication. Professional wrestling is a style of performance centered around the melodramatic stage combat of fictional characters. The cultural image of "professional wrestling" is unequivocally dominated and defined by the American performance art form. This form of performance has its own style of staging, its own character archetypes, its own unmistakable costuming, its own storytelling conventions, and its own unique style of physical narrative style. And if all goes well the outcome of every performance will be to project a fictional winner of a bout between two fictional characters competing for a prop or to settle some long-simmering and totally fictional grudge. The presence of "professional wrestling" is indeed so global that cultures readily understand the difference between competitive grappling and the stage combat-driven melodrama. The question then becomes, how and why did "professional wrestling" come to reference the performance art rather than the legitimate sporting contest?

The simplest answer is for profit. Verily, the story of this emergence is long and murky. Ostensibly, the now-accepted performance art of professional wrestling was based on the gradual evolution of competitive wrestling matches in a British style into fixed contests. For many of the facts here, there are no confirmed dates because of an intergenerational, international conspiracy of like-minded event promoters and athletic performers to present a more commercially appealing and monetarily successful public attraction. The code of this great public deception created an insular secret society of combatant-showmen, who would fight, lie, steal, and maim to protect the sacred code of *kayfabe*.

There is no official date of the first fixed match in this style, though it is widely believed to have happened in the latter-half of the 19th century (Hester, 2010). So, if we are to unravel the centuries-old global conspiracy, we must delve into the once-secretive institutions that created, promoted, sustained, and exported the Anglo-American performance art to the world. Understanding the global phenomenon of an emerging, though century-old, fine art requires taking a hard look at how we define theatre, sport, and the terms that govern the oft-maligned and long-misunderstood art form.

This study will demonstrate that professional wrestling is a distinct form of American performance art. It will show the complexities of its narrative methods and justify the end of its exclusion from widespread study, analysis, and respect of academia, as well as the exclusion of its performers from performance art communities. It will demonstrate that it has had a significant impact on American popular culture, sports history, and commercial media over the past 150 years. It is my hope that this study can have a positive influence on policies relating to the funding, study, and performance of professional wrestling. By academically establishing the artistic methodology of professional wrestling performance, it allows for the creation of complex, coherent, artistic analyses to be performed, thus establishing a holistic understanding of the art, which may yield revolutionary approaches and due credit to both traditions and innovations in its history. Further, the association of professional wrestling with established theatrical genres may yield greater prestige for the creators of professional wrestling as artists, rather than as pseudo-sportsmen with no games to play. This study can also potentially lead to grants for funding performances or ongoing promotions in the professional wrestling space. The establishment of the performers as actors and producers as technicians will also hopefully allow and/or encourage those individuals to receive or seek

proper training in those crafts, thus improving overall production and performance within professional wrestling. Furthermore, the norms of such training and of such artistic appreciation, may normalize the organization of laborers within professional wrestling as actors, producers, writers, and technicians to seek out and receive membership in appropriate labor guilds and unions for stage and screen professionals. In turn, unionization would create safer workplaces for the workers within the professional wrestling industry. All of the aforementioned potential benefits of the academic study of professional wrestling begin with properly recontextualizing out of the fringe world of exhibition fixed sports, and into its rightful place in the compendium of theatrical styles.

Professional wrestling is a style of performance that has undergone relatively little academic study, despite its commercial success and cultural impact.<sup>1</sup> This study fills that research gap by shedding light on the athletic theater of violent melodrama by properly contextualizing its relationship to other forms of performance and the undeniable barriers between it and pure sport. It will conduct a comparative analysis of the elements of professional wrestling and those of long-studied forms of theater. As a control group, this study will also conduct a comparative analysis alongside modern exhibition-style combat sport to determine whether professional wrestling is indeed a sport. It will demonstrate both that professional wrestling is a form of performance that amalgamates key elements present in several well-established forms of theater. It also shows that despite the shared aspects of professional wrestling and exhibition combat sport, it is solely a performance style in its current iteration.

While there has been scholarship on professional wrestling, it has been mainly focused on the cultural symbolism of particular characters, or brief glimpses into the bombastic theatricality of its presentation. This study will make the original contribution to scholarship in the field of cultural studies by providing the first holistic breakdown of the craft of American professional wrestling storytelling. It will also assert cultural insight into its broad resonance with American values, human universal experiences and the evolution of the craft as a

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<sup>1</sup> This impact will be demonstrated with detailed examples of professional wrestling and the personnel from within the industry in cinema, television, sports, politics, business, literature and other media. These include but are not limited to the cultural phenomenon of Wrestlemania, WWE executives in the Presidential Cabinet of the United States, wrestler-turned-best-selling-author Mick Foley, wrestler-turned-movie-star Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, and many more examples across the evolving cultural and media platforms of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries.

reflection of an evolving culture. It will establish the broad, multifaceted cultural impact of professional wrestling in sports, entertainment, business, art, and politics. The narrative structure of a match, its narrative psychology, and the cultural values it is designed to symbolize will be provided. The technical staging of professional wrestling performances, both large and small, will be broken down. The wildly different technical logistics for performances from live events in front of dozens of fans in firehouse garages to sold-out stadiums with live worldwide broadcasts will be discussed. The formatting of storylines in the short-term, intermediate-term, and long-term will be revealed, alongside case-studies of each. A sprawling history of the performance genre is provided to show neophyte observers how the craft has evolved and to show wrestling enthusiasts the context of their fandom. This history also establishes the current state of the art and industry of professional wrestling, and discusses the contemporaneous inflection point of the art at the time of this study's first publication.

This study will complete a multiphase analysis of the performance art of professional wrestling as defined above. It is divided into two main sections, *VOLUME I: Professional Wrestling Craft and Culture* and *VOLUME II: Professional Wrestling History*. In the first phase, the primary goal will be to create a consensus definition of "performance." I will consult scholarly works on the subjects from a number of acclaimed and respected experts and theorists.<sup>2</sup> This study will identify quick-reference lists of criteria based on various scholarly definitions of theatre and apply them to professional wrestling, seeking to ascertain whether or not it can be defined academically as "theatre" or "performance art." This is a key step in vindicating the evolving acceptance of professional wrestling as art. This section will also seek to establish a dialogue about the differentiation and prejudices of "high culture" and "low culture," so as to determine whether or not professional wrestling is art. In that section the performativity of *Americanness* will be contextualized in the presentation and cultural significance of professional wrestling. This final step in this phase will be to critique the art form for its style and for its shortcomings.

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<sup>2</sup> This topic is discussed in Chapter 1: Professional Wrestling as Theatre.

The second phase of this analysis will be to dissect the art form itself. This will involve unraveling its secret origins, its costuming, its esoteric lingo,<sup>3</sup> its staging conventions, its narrative devices, and most importantly its heretofore unstudied method of choreographed and/or improvisational stage combat character-narrative storytelling.<sup>4</sup> This section will also examine the modern phenomena of “performance sports” wherein theoretical athletic contests come to be used as for-profit narrative performances. This will be contrasted with presumably not-for-profit demonstration combat sports which are intended to prove athletic superiority, but not necessarily make any money doing it.

In the third phase, the cultural impact of professional wrestling will be examined.<sup>5</sup> The cultural intersections of professional wrestling, entertainment, sport and politics will be dissected. The emergence of performers as mainstream stars, and the loyal inter-generational global fan base that perpetuates the industry will be examined. Most importantly, this section will discuss how traditional American values have been reflected in the art form up to this point, and how the evolution of cultural norms and values in American life is reflected in professional wrestling.

Once armed with this basic understanding of the art form and its cultural significance, this study will dissect the evolution of the art form over various generations in the Part II.<sup>6</sup> This will include how the staging of the combat has changed, as well as how the characters have evolved, and the ever-growing cultural presence of professional wrestling both in the United States and abroad. An annotated glossary of the esoteric jargon that permeates all sources and discourse within the subgenre is provided as a necessary means for the reader to decode the discussion of professional wrestling. Importantly, this section will discuss how the style of professional wrestling differs in several cultures to be reflective of the unique traditions of that society. There will be a discussion of how this for-profit sport-come-choreography style has become a multi-billion-dollar global industry. This section will also examine the importance of name, image and likeness rights, intellectual property, content production, and

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<sup>3</sup> The section titled *Working Glossary* appears at the end of this study, following the references.

<sup>4</sup> This topic is discussed in Chapter 2: The Craft of the Work.

<sup>5</sup> This is covered in-depth in Chapter 3: The Unavoidable Presence of Professional Wrestling in American Popular Culture.

<sup>6</sup> This is examined in-depth in Chapter 5: A Subcultural History of American Professional Wrestling.

the role of professional wrestling in the evolution of paid media. Historians and towering figures of the industry itself will be consulted in this portion of the study. This expansive historical survey is necessary to demonstrate the analytical findings of the study in context.

The methodology of this study includes the use of both primary and secondary historical documentation regarding American professional wrestling. A number of oral histories (in the form of podcasts) from luminaries of the industry are consulted alongside autobiographies of professional wrestling figures as primary sources. Another primary source used is interviews conducted by the writer of this study with renowned experts on professional wrestling and performance theory. Earnings reports, corporate press releases, governmental documents, and public records, are also used as primary sources for research. Further sources include contemporaneous news articles about various happenings across the industry over time, flyers, posters, photographs, published match cards, programs of performances, taped broadcasts, and other evidentiary sources are used. Secondary sources including academic literature, scholarly articles, historical literature, reliable databases of events in professional wrestling, and retrospective journalism are also consulted for the study.

In the interim, let it suffice to say that professional wrestling is a widely known, though murkily defined institution of American culture. As such, setting about to define it is key to establishing its place and importance in American culture as a whole. Therefore, revealing the inner working of this style of performance will showcase the artistic symbolism reflective of American cultural values. And this uniquely American narrative, like most things American, originated elsewhere, immigrated to the United States, evolved therein, and was exported to the world as a reflection of the American Dream.

# VOLUME I: The Industry, Craft & Cultural Impact of American Professional Wrestling

## 1.0 Professional Wrestling as Theatre

This section will dissect the premise that professional wrestling is a subgenre of theatre. The controversy over this apparently intuitive premise is multifaceted. The factors contributing to this controversy fall into three general overlapping categories: the history of denial among performers that professional wrestling is a performance art, a socio-economic prejudice against fans of the art form, and the non-traditional presentation of performance. This section will demonstrate that though professional wrestling meets every detail of criteria as theatre set forth by a number of preeminent scholars, this cocktail of factors has led to the exclusion of professional wrestling from the artistic community for over a century.

This study will use both historical theatrical styles, and theoretical definitions of theatre as means by which to establish criteria for measuring professional wrestling as theatre. For the sake of thoroughness and academic rigor, this section will use a variety of theoretical metrics. The conventions of professional wrestling, which have been discussed at particular length in this study, will then be measured against each of those sets of criteria individually. The aspects of performance and presentation will be looked at through both literal and theoretical lenses. The literal elements of theatre will include the physical aspects of and tools for presentation. The theoretical section will examine how known and accepted theatrical conventions are expressed in the medium of professional wrestling.

The works consulted for the theoretical subsection come from a variety of scholars. Each of these works presents a differing theoretical definition to theatre. The elements of Professional wrestling will be measured against each of the criteria of this array individually. This process will be used to determine whether it meets a cross-sectional theoretical definition of theatre according to existing scholarship on the matter.

Professional wrestling will also be compared to three existing forms of theatre, as well as the theory of stage combat. Professional wrestling will first be examined in a comparative

analysis with classical Hellenic Greek theatre. This analysis will demonstrate the similarities and differences between the oldest form of western theatre and modern American professional wrestling. This subsection will also discuss the role of the audience in professional wrestling as an active character in the performance, rather than a static and unseen observer.

The second section of this comparative analysis of the presentational elements of professional wrestling with those of kabuki theatre. The comparative analysis here will focus in large part on the technical aspects and spectacular presentation of both genres. There will be a discussion on the elements of staging and choreography between these styles as well. This comparison will also allow professional wrestling's existence as a form of theatre to be tested and demonstrated against a non-Western perspective.

In the final segment of this section, professional wrestling will undergo a comparative analysis with the tradition of *commedia dell'arte*. The elements of these forms of theatre will be compared, contrasted, and discussed. *Commedia dell-arte* was chosen as it has the closest similarity to the melodrama and character elements of professional wrestling. This section will demonstrate the overwhelming similarities of character presentation between the two art forms. This analysis will also demonstrate and compare narrative devices, costuming and staging between the styles.

The following subsection will examine professional wrestling as stage combat. While stage combat is an accepted convention of theatre across many genres, the stage combat of professional wrestling is widely under-discussed. Verily, it can be argued that professional wrestlers are perhaps the most widely beloved and commercially successful stage combatants in the world. The skills required in professional wrestling will also be compared closely to those necessary for stage combat. The style of physical narrative used as a primary narrative device in the performance of professionals as compared with the ancillary presence of stage combat in other genres will be discussed.

This section will also provide an analysis of professional wrestling as a narrative structure. This will summarize previously reported discussions of both the plot structure of individual matches, extended angles, and full storylines. These segments of storytelling will be



measured against known plot structures, common screenwriting narrative arcs, and Campbell's elements of the hero's journey. This will establish the plot structure of professional wrestling, as it appears compared with other performance arts.

The next subsection will dissect the ancillary elements blocking professional wrestling from consideration by the general artistic community. The pre-established "kayfabe conspiracy" will be summarized, have the reasoning behind it discussed, its dissolution analyzed and finally its long-existing obsolescence acknowledged. This section will also address the socio-economic prejudices against professional wrestling being accepted as performance art. The prevalence of elitism and classism among academics, patrons, performers, producers, and members of the theatre and fine arts communities is strikingly high. Ostensibly the biggest factor preventing professional wrestling being acknowledged as a fine art is the prejudice of self-aggrandized gate-keepers of the artistic community against art that is perceived to be targeted towards the working class. The myth of a distinction between "high-culture," "low-culture" and "pop-culture" will be pointed out and discarded.

Finally, this section will acknowledge and discuss criticisms of professional wrestling as an art form. After establishing the comparative analysis with the elements of various theatrical styles and theoretical definitions of theatre, I will address limitations of the artistic style. This part will discuss the content within the medium, as well as elements of the culture among performers. It will also compare these limitations against those of other generally accepted styles of performance art. I will also discuss the evolution (or lack thereof) of the art form in response to these criticisms thus far in the medium's history. It will also discuss the hypothetical evolutions that may come in response to these criticisms hereafter.

## 1.1 The Squared Circle State: Comparative Analysis of Professional Wrestling and Historical Theatre Styles<sup>7</sup>

The aspects, technical stylings, and performance structure of professional wrestling will be discussed at length in subsequent sections. And though each successive generation of artists

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<sup>7</sup> A version of this subsection was previously peer-reviewed and published in *Journal of Arts & Humanities* Vol. 12, No. 3 (2023): April; pp. 22-32.

demonstrate a new evolutionary stage of the performance art, the performative structure remains largely the same. The stalwart aspects of the performance are therefore the institutions of the subgenre and are therefore apt examples for comparative analysis with other styles of theatre. This section will provide comparative analyses of professional wrestling with the following three theatrical styles: Italy's Commedia Dell'arte, ancient Greek drama, and Japanese Kabuki theatre. This portion of the study will also include a separate subsection comparing professional wrestling as a sport to demonstration martial arts. The goal of this section is to demonstrate the amalgamation of performance styles already present in professional wrestling. This section will also introduce the notions of "performance sport" which will be analyzed further in chapter 5: Sports, Entertainment & Sports Entertainment.

### 1.1.a Commedia Dell'arte

Though largely unknown to the public or the academic community, the aspects, technical stylings, and performance structure of professional wrestling have been firmly established throughout the late-20th and early 21st Century. The artistic medium has existed largely in its current form since the 1920's. The stalwart aspects of the performance are therefore the institutions of the subgenre and are therefore apt examples for comparative analysis with other styles of theater. However, due to decades of myth and attempted public deception, professional wrestling is seldom culturally considered, studied, or respected as artistic performance. This study will provide comparative analyses of professional wrestling with the following three theatrical styles: Italy's Commedia Dell'arte, ancient Greek drama, and Japanese Kabuki theater. Reliable primary and secondary sources will be consulted in the establishment of the norms of professional wrestling and the theatrical styles discussed herein. This study will also include a subsection dedicated to a competing theory of professional wrestling as demonstration martial arts or another performance field tentatively titled "performance sport." This article will demonstrate the amalgamation of performance styles already present in professional wrestling. Finally, this study will refute the persistent myth of professional wrestling as an exhibition sport and recontextualize it as theatrical performance.

The uniqueness of this study is that it measures professional wrestling objectively in a comparative analysis of several forms of theater and the modern sport that is most similar to it in practice. While there is no real debate that professional wrestling is purely sport, it is argued by many within the professional wrestling industry that it is a form of sport analogous to exhibition combat sports demonstration, while despite the well-known scripted nature of the performance style, the theater community is hesitant to embrace professional wrestling. In the hinterlands between sport and theater, professional wrestling languishes, understudied, and therefore often misunderstood.

The study introduces several historically studied theatrical styles and examines their shared performative, presentational and technical similarities with professional wrestling. The style of Commedia Dell'arte, Kabuki and Greek Drama were selected for several reasons. Firstly, the most significant among them being the use of theatrical elements shared with professional wrestling to contextualize the performance of the latter. Secondly, the selected forms of theater represent diverse standards of theatrical performance from different cultures, further contextualizing the global appeal of professional wrestling across cultural divides. Finally, while professional wrestling is rarely (if ever) counted readily among the fine arts, these traditional theatrical styles with whom it shares key elements are widely lauded. This contrast further demonstrates the importance of properly recontextualizing professional wrestling culturally. The study also addresses the competing hypothesis that professional wrestling is an as-yet unestablished exhibition sport with theatrical qualities, as shared with competitive martial arts demonstration.

The background literature used to conduct this analysis comes from a variety of primary and secondary resources. Chief among them is the personal interview of an internationally acclaimed, world's champion professional wrestler named Jason "The Gift" Kincaid by the author. This gives direct insight into the craft and presentation of the elements of professional wrestling from a renowned source. Further, this subsection uses podcast interviews from luminaries Jim Ross and Bruce Prichard who (respectively) served and serve as top WWE/professional wrestling executives from the latter 20th Century to today as key sources to give further information about the production and evolution of professional wrestling. The study also uses a number of reliable secondary sources to provide the long-established norms

of performance in Commedia Dell'Arte, Kabuki, and Greek Drama respectively. The study also provides the official competition rules for martial arts demonstration performance from a major American federation. Finally, the study uses a litany of reliable historians, journalists, and databases for general information and factual verification.

This comparative analysis demonstrates that the apparent gladiators stepping onto the hollow squared circle of the professional wrestling ring, are/were/will always be actors stepping upon the stage to play their part in a wildly popular niche drama. This paper contributes and provides evidence for professional wrestling to be categorized, studied, and analyzed properly in academic and cultural contexts. Firstly, the reality of professional wrestling as theater is contextualized in sections analyzing it alongside a diverse array of traditional theatrical styles. The myth of professional wrestling as any manner of pure sport is finally put to bed after nearly a century of unnecessarily stubborn debate by analyzing it in a section alongside exhibition martial arts, the most similar modern sport. Finally, the subsection will address its final conclusions, along with any gaps or limitations in the research.

Commedia dell'arte emerged in Italy in the 16th century, and remained prominent until the 18th century (Hale, 2019). Also called "Italian Comedy," the style featured an engaging amalgamation of the most visibly stimulating aspects of other forms of theatre. These visual stimuli were presented alongside consistent audience engagement through partially improvised performance scenarios. These scenarios were interspersed with stock characters, and proven crowd-pleasing jokes, dialogues, or musical interludes. This style of theatre is viewed as widely influential on a number of genres. Masked actors playing an array of stock characters would, in a given performance, play out a rough scenario of events. The stock characters would improvise their way through the set segments of the story, creating replicative, while not duplicative performances.

There is tremendous overlap between the standards of commedia dell'arte and professional wrestling (Hale, 2019). The most important similarity is that both forms of performance are built around a pre-set narrative structure, though that structure can be filled in through improvisation alongside rehearsed segments that are proven crowd-pleasers. Traditional American wrestling operates very similarly with in-ring action, dialogue, and storylines. American professional wrestling matches generally follow along the 7-Phase structure

discussed in chapter 3. However, there are dozens of well-known variations on this structure that are used in different matches and styles of match. For example, a tag-team match or a scramble match will have a structure that wrestlers are familiar with. No two professional wrestling matches are the same, just as no two commedia dell'arte performances are identical. This structure has general plot points, filled in by improvisation was the norm of professional wrestling throughout most of its history. Improvising the specifics of a pre-structured story to most interest the crowd was a staple of professional wrestling and of commedia dell'arte. This allowed performers in both to gauge what the crowd was responding to and tailor the performance as it happened to be most engaging. Veteran wrestlers describe this as the biggest benefit of “calling a match on the fly.”

Of course, on occasion, the audience will need a rehearsed-and-ready segment of the narrative to keep their attention; in commedia dell'arte, this is called *lazzi* (Hale, 2019). In professional wrestling, *lazzi* is called a “spot.” In commedia dell'arte, the performers might break into an entertaining song, a dance number, a rehearsed dialogue exchange, or a physical gag called *burle*. Whereas professional wrestlers will go through a series of cooperative maneuvers to re-engaging waning crowd interest or to pop a reaction. *Lazzi* and *burle* are important aspects of professional wrestling, as they often refer to physical comedy, or obscene gestures. Whether Ric Flair is having his tights unceremoniously yanked down mid-match, or if Stone Cold Steve Austin is brandishing his middle fingers to the crowd, the physical language of professional wrestling is overlapping with its 5-century-old Italian cousin. Physicality is essential in both theatrical styles, particularly because in commedia dell'arte, the performers wear masks, forcing them to use exaggerated movements. This is also true in professional wrestling, particularly in the lucha libre subgenre where masked wrestlers perform the most acrobatic style of wrestling. Masked wrestlers are compelled to perform exaggerated gestures with their body because they cannot sell maneuvers to the audience with just their facial expressions. Exaggerated gestures by unmasked wrestlers are also common, as wrestlers are encouraged to “play to the cheapest seats,” meaning to perform gestures that can be seen from the very farthest away seats in the building.

This is also present in professional wrestling promos and interview segments, as they were mostly improvised along one or more general bullet points up until recent years. In recent years and most notably in the WWE, both matches and promos have become more heavily

scripted so as to avoid televised botches or poor performance, though this development has caused many fans to feel that the presentation feels unnatural. Other professional wrestling organizations allow the performers more freedom in their presentation, and though their broadcasts are sometimes checkered with perplexing rants and meandering conjecture, the unpredictability is engaging to the viewers. Commedia dell'arte used these loose plot structures for similar reasons. Importantly, both genres make wildly liberal use of direct address to the audience as a plot device and tactic to encourage audience engagement.

Another important aspect of both genres is the use of stock characters. These familiar styles of characters, tweaked and shaped for the particular performer, allow for audiences to easily understand the role this character will play (Hale, 2019). As with professional wrestling, the stock characters in commedia dell'arte are seldom fully formed, three-dimensional. Ostensibly, both commedia dell'arte deal in caricature and gimmickry in their stock characters. Commedia dell'arte featured archetypes like the swaggering coward *Il Capitano*, the amorous childlike acrobat *Arlecchino*, the roguish villain *Brighella* who serves as *Arlecchino*'s today, the anti-hero *Scarramuccia*, or the handsome lover *Inamorato* and his beautiful would-be lover *La Ruffiana* (Hale, 2019). These are but a few of the many common stock characters within commedia dell'arte. While there are a number of direct correlations to professional wrestlers who present similar qualities to those archetypes (in the order of the above-mentioned archetypes, Seth Rollins, Shawn Michaels with Diesel, "Stone Cold" Steve Austin, John Cena and Nikki Bella), the use of known stock characters familiar to audiences is also important to professional wrestling. Here are some examples of stock characters within professional wrestling: *monster heel* (Kane, Vader, Brock Lesnar), *white-meat babyface* (Hulk Hogan, John Cena, Bruno Sammartino, George Hackenschmidt), *underdog babyface* (Rey Mysterio, Brian Danielson, "Diamond" Dallas Page), *cool heel/tweener/anti-hero* (the nWo, "Stone Cold" Steve Austin, D-Generation X), *narcissist heel* (Rick Rude, The Miz, Austin Theory), *wealthy heel* (Ted DiBiase, Ric Flair, Mr. McMahon), *odd couple* (William Regal & Tajiri, Booker T & Goldust, Owen Hart & Yokozuna, The Rock & Mankind), among many others.

Both genres rely on these tropes to fill the roles of familiar narratives. Individual performers often bounce between characters and archetypes over time in both genres. Due to the episodic nature of professional wrestling, a character or performer may go through several iterations of

their archetype over the years. For example, Brian Danielson would often be a scrappy underdog upon his debut with a promotion, then develop into a pompous heel later on. Hulk Hogan was the most famous babyface in the world, until he became a sleazy anti-hero as his “Hollywood Hogan” alter ego. Mick Foley played a wild heel named Cactus Jack, before becoming a deranged monster heel named Mankind, then becoming a goofy ladies-man babyface called Dude Love, then a babyface version of himself who could slip into whichever of his personae best suited his situation in the narrative.

Costuming is also a major factor in both genres. The ornate harlequin costumes of *commedia dell’arte* are perhaps the most visually recognizable aspect of the genre, as are the skin-tight, brightly colored, often-barely-there, iconic costumes for professional wrestlers. While *commedia dell’arte* use of white make-up with the *Pedrolino* archetype gave birth to the modern clown, professional wrestlers like Sting, the Great Muta, and the Road Warriors used face paint to seem more interesting or more menacing as needed (Hale, 2019). Both genres make use of props, particularly as weapons, though *commedia dell’arte* much more often tended towards comedic use of those objects (including the original namesake “slapstick”), while they were often used solely as improvised weapons.

*Commedia dell’arte* shares more narrative style with professional wrestling than any other genre of theatre. Direct address to the audience, loose narrative structures, stock characters, reliable rehearsed segments of an otherwise improvised performance, exaggerated physicality, as well as similar uses of props, colorful costumes, and masks; all combine to describe either and both of the performance styles. Indeed, professional wrestling serves as proof that the premises which *commedia dell’arte* was built upon during its peak years remain culturally viable today. It is also significant that the respected place of *commedia dell’arte* in performance history and academia serves as evidence that American professional wrestling belongs in that same category.

### 1.1.b Greek Drama

Greek Drama, as with most traditional forms of theater, shares many superficial similarities with professional wrestling. These mostly include the essential elements of performance shared by all forms of theater. Indeed, the Hellenic tradition of keeping graphic violence off-stage so as not to offend the gods is largely antithetical to the presentation of professional

wrestling (Jaramillo, 2022). However, the element which is most fascinatingly shared between the genres is the use of the chorus as a narrative device. In the theater of Hellenic and Hellenistic Greece, the chorus acted as a narrative device to help the one, two or three actors on-stage to tell the story (Haamer, 2015). The chorus would sing hymns to the Greek theater god Dionysius. Famed ancient actor Thespis is believed to have been the first actor to interact directly with the chorus, which could range from 12-50 actor-singers depending on the genre. While the character on stage in Greek tragedy and comedy represented the triumph and folly of royalty, the chorus served the dual role of representing the laypeople's relation to events, and of being the historical judge of the events taking place (Haamer, 2015). The genres of comedy, tragedy and short-form satire emerged, and each of the genres interacted differently with the chorus. The chorus influenced the reactions of the audience to the events onstage through their odes.

This use of the chorus is tremendously important in traditional and modern professional wrestling, with the distinct caveat being that in professional wrestling, the live audience is used as the chorus (Tate & Kincaid, 2022). In professional wrestling the live audience serves the same purposes as the Greek choruses by being both the historical judge and representing the reaction of the laypeople. This is somewhat self-evident, as the audiences almost invariably chant in response to, or sing along at different aspects and incidents with the performance, much as Greek choruses would. With top competitors and executives in a fictitious wrestling league standing in for the royal courts of Hellenic poleis, the live audience's reactions are designed to move the story forward. However, the challenge of this is that live audiences often have their own agendas, and unlike a designated chorus, cannot be counted on to express their designed feelings automatically. The techniques of controlling crowd reactions are a stalwart standard of the subgenre and are generally considered the master skill of performers. In televised or broadcast professional wrestling, the live crowd serves as the chorus to paint the emotions of the viewing audience at home. The reactions of the live crowd inform the home audience of the atmosphere of the events within the theater. To augment this, many professional wrestling promotions engage in "crowd noise sweetening" by playing canned cheers, jeers, and crowd reactions through the sounds systems of the live show to influence both the television sound and to nudge the live crowd toward the desired reactions.



This use of the audience as a chorus to paint the narrative of the live performance to the viewing audience became more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The WWE created the “Capitol Wrestling Center” as a bio-secure bubble for their performers (Okafor, 2021). Within this center was the “WWE Thunderdome” a tiered collection of LED screens where select fans could apply to live broadcast their fans live through video call. More than a thousand of these boards were installed in the area around the ring in tiers like those of an arena. This created the illusion of normalcy within the arena. The production gave prompts for positive or negative gestures for the live fans displayed on the Thunderdome screens to make, while artificial crowd noise was broadcast throughout the matches. In the early days of the pandemic, the WWE also tried having the employees at their Performance Center sit in the ringside area and give the desired reactions to the events of the show. AEW had their own bio-secure bubble with familiar faces during the pandemic during their residence at Daily’s Place in Jacksonville (Doyle, 2021).

Professional wrestling audiences do, however, sometimes reject what is presented to them. While this appears to counter the point that it is a point-for-point counterpart to the Greek chorus, as the chorus has a set reaction as part of the presentation, professional wrestling audiences acting as an independent live judge of the events in the ring reinforces the notion that they serve as both the gauge of the laypeople’s reactions and the historical judge of the events presented. Despite the familiar standards and formulas of the art form, audiences sometimes will reject a storyline, a character, or a performer for any number of reasons.

There have been many famous instances of this over the years. Notable modern examples often feature the live crowd’s rejection of a chosen white meat babyface. This led to the audience rejecting future top stars John Cena, Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, and Roman Reigns (Thompson & Ross, 2019). In each of these cases different creative approaches were taken. The Rock was famously turned heel, during which time his overpowering charisma and catchphrase-laden sing-along style promos made him popular and eventually the top babyface in both professional wrestling and entertainment. John Cena was kept as a youth-oriented babyface and top star, while being regarded as a heel by older and die-hard fans; for years dueling chants of “Let’s go Cena!” and “Cena Sucks!” would echo through arenas across the country. Despite one of the hardest babyface pushes in the history of professional wrestling and surviving a bout with Leukemia at the peak of his powers, audiences rejected

Roman Reigns as a hero. Eventually, he turned heel and at the time of this writing is amid the longest continuous title reign of a heel champion in WWE history and has sat at the top for the consecutive top two revenue years (including the first \$1 billion plus revenue year) in company history (Thurston, 2023).

Likewise, the live chorus of professional wrestling often chooses an unlikely hero whose popularity is too great to ignore (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Significant examples of this include Brian Danielson, Mick Foley, and Eddie Guerrero. Danielson, performing as Daniel Bryan, was too small, too unimposing, and too often vegan to be a prototypical top star. However, Danielson's engaging interviews, unparalleled in-ring performance, and ability to get any angle he participated in over, won over the crowd and propelled him to an unplanned main event victory at Wrestlemania 30. Guerrero was also undersized, Hispanic and struggling with drug addiction at the midpoint of his career; however, his charismatic "Latino Heat" character, world-renowned ringwork, and alternating lay passionate and comedic promos saw him rise to prominence as arguably in American professional wrestling history. Mick Foley was the resident daredevil of professional wrestling, whose utter disregard for his own well-being in the name of entertainment endeared him to fans; despite the pudgy Long Island grappler not fitting any previous mold of champion, the articulate wild man with a penchant for method acting and in-ring self-flagellation won rode a years-long wave of collective goodwill to becoming one of the unlikeliest top stars in professional wrestling history.

In Greek theater, the chorus acts as a stand-in for lay people and history (Haamer, 2015). In professional wrestling, the fans act as a chorus of laypeople and have a hand in writing the history of a character. While the ultimate skill in professional wrestling is to proverbially "hold the audience in the palm of your hand," the chorus always has their say (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Famed commentator and talent relations executive Jim Ross said on his Grillin' JR podcast, "Professional wrestling gives you immediate market research if what you're doing is working. If you're giving them something they want to see, and by God, they'll tell you, and vice versa. If you're willing to listen. They vote with their dollar." (Thompson & Ross, 2019) So when Danielson points two fingers to the sky and shouts "Yes!" With 20,000 voices at his back, or when the crowd shouts "Hell Yeah!" To affirm

their support for Steve Austin's proposed actions, the chorus speaks to and for the audience at large.

### 1.1.c Kabuki<sup>8</sup>

This section examines the similarities of kabuki theatre and American professional wrestling across various elements of the performances. Audience interaction, costuming, staging, and technical theatrics are shared elements of both. These shared elements serve as further evidence that professional wrestling is holistically a style of performance as acknowledged by the criteria of other forms of accepted theatre & performance.

The term "kabuki" is made up of three characters: *ka* meaning sing, *bu* meaning dance, and *ki* meaning skill; taken they mean "the art of song and dance" (Kabuki Theaters, 2022). Kabuki is said to have emerged in the 17th century in and around the Japanese city of Kyoto, where troupes of female prostitutes performed satirical plays about the absurdities of everyday life. The innovator who created kabuki was a Shinto priestess named Izumi no Okuni. This style of raunchy and suggestive style of theater became popular and was often performed at or near Japanese bordellos. With the sexual services of some performers available for sale following performances, women were outlawed from performing in 1629 and replaced with young boys for a time before it came to light that many of those boys were also engaged in prostitution. Eventually, only grown men were legally allowed to perform in kabuki theater, making it a curious eastern precursor to modern drag. Kabuki's three main subgenres dealt with mythic tales (*jidaimono*), contemporary stories (*sewamono*) and dance dramas (*shosagoto*); none of which overly relied on realism in their presentation. Many kabuki stories depicted the tragic clash between emotion, temptation, revenge, forbidden sexual desire, betrayal, and the morals of 17th century Japanese culture. Kabuki theater became an iconic part of Japanese culture, permeating cultural iconography, regularly appearing in various artistic forms of media in Japan and eventually being acknowledged as Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO. Kabuki's use of "abstractionism," in this case a kaleidoscopic view of the absurdities of contemporary morality, is believed to have heavily influenced western theater across many genres.

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<sup>8</sup> A full dissertation could perhaps be written on the relationship between the conventions of kabuki theatre and the norms of Japanese professional wrestling.

Like professional wrestling's roots inside shows and vaudeville, kabuki was considered a bizarre theatrical niche (Kabuki Theaters, 2022). As with kabuki, professional wrestling does not require strict realism in storytelling (if it did, every wrestling feud would end in Human Resources arbitration over workplace violence); merely the plausible affectation of real relationships and emotions played out through a colorful medium. Kabuki has its own style of stage combat called Tachimawari. The use of iconic colorful costuming in both genres is largely a superficial shared element. Also like in professional wrestling, characters often address the audience directly in kabuki. In a counter-intuitive norm, normally reserved Japanese fans of kabuki are permitted to cheer at dramatic moments or at the appearances of their favorite characters. The use of complex technical theater elements with lighting, stunts, rigging, sound effects, pyrotechnics, trap doors, and costume changes, performed by dedicated koken (stagehands) are used heavily in traditional kabuki and modern major professional wrestling productions. Kabuki's abstractionist view of morality is similarly demonstrated in the caricatures of professional wrestling's ethical binary, and constant engagement in mythologized stage combat over every interpersonal conflict.

Many Japanese wrestlers have adopted elements of kabuki theater to success in American wrestling (Herzog, 2019). Throughout the mid-20th century Japanese wrestlers across the United States would don kimonos and kabuki masks to establish their foreign identity. This character was first innovated by Akihisa Yone Yosemite Mero, who would take his place in professional wrestling history as "The Great Kabuki." The Great Kabuki would enter the performance area in traditional garb and perform some semblance of a kabuki dance routine. This made him a hated heel in the United States in the decades after the Second World War. Mera would also innovate the "Asian mist" attack, where he would spit apparently mystic green mist into his opponent's eyes to blind them during the match. This attack became iconic in both the United States and Japan. In the United States, it is widely associated with and used by Japanese professional wrestlers as an homage to Mera. Mera would become an NWA world television champion in the United States, a world tag-team champion for All-Japan, and an NWA United National Champion for the Japan Wrestling Association. The green mist has also been used in the United States by wrestlers like Masashi "Killer Khan" Ogawa, Yoshihiro Tajiri, and Keiji "The Great Mutoh" Mutoh (who also uses the attack in Japan). In 1989, The Great Muta debuted as the son of the Great Kabuki. Mutoh would go on

to become inarguably one of the greatest and most highly regarded Japanese professional wrestlers of all time by critics, fans, producers, and performers. Perhaps the most prominent contemporary use of kabuki imagery in professional wrestling is WWE performer Kanako “Asuka” Urai. The character of Asuka enters the arena in kabuki garb, wearing a kabuki mask. She also uses the green mist attack. Asuka is currently one of the most accomplished and respected female professional wrestlers in the world, having won all three iterations of the WWE’s women’s championship. As the prima donna of women’s professional wrestling, Asuka would win the first women’s Royal Rumble (alongside countryman Shinsuke Nakamura who won the men’s Royal rumble that year) and carried a 917-day undefeated streak. Asuka would form “The Kabuki Warriors” tag-team with fellow female Japanese professional wrestling star Kairi Sane. The tandem would claim the promotion’s world women’s tag-team titles.

Kabuki has influenced western theater broadly, and professional wrestling specifically. Perhaps the most significant shared element of kabuki and American professional wrestling is the relevance of cultural morality to the art form. In kabuki theater, the absurdity of morality measured against desire is often on display, thereby creating a discussion of cultural values. Meanwhile, this paper has already established that American professional wrestling is a device for telling morality tales from the perspective of cultural values. As art is reflective of culture, kabuki’s place as a subversive mirror to Japanese morality in the 17th century is most like reflected in the counterculture-driven professional wrestling boom of the late-1990’s wherein the traditional values exhaled in early iterations of the violent masculine melodrama were spurn in lieu of complex ethical ambiguity.

#### 1.1.d Modern Exhibition Sport

Scripted narrative stage combat is the core of professional wrestling’s presentation. The episodic melodrama of storytelling is the hallmark of the performance art. Beyond the simple display of stage combat, there are interactions and competing desires of distinct characters and constantly developing relationships. The stage combat aspect is a device for expressing character arcs.

However, due to the generations long and thousands strong kayfabe conspiracy, professional wrestling was presented as a legitimate sport for over a century. The periodic revelations that

these events were professional performance, rather than professional catch-as-catch-can wrestling created a perception that professional wrestling is fake. Indeed, any wrestling fan who has ever brought out their fandom is inevitably met with that revelation from someone nearby. Professional wrestling is still presented as a sport by many within the industry, particularly in Japan. This section will differentiate choreographed sport stage combat, and the performance art of professional wrestling.

Modern professional wrestling follows some distant facsimile of the rules for catch wrestling, though many traditional rules codified in the 1904 official creation of catch wrestling in England have been abandoned (R. Pashayev, personal communication, 21 December 2021). Even though some modern catch wrestling organizations attempt to shape their rules to reflect those of professional wrestling, there is no exact sport that corresponds to professional wrestling rules. The crossovers between professional wrestling, and boxing or mixed martial arts evidence the relation of legitimate combat sportsmen in the performance of combat sport.

There is a large subsection of sports which are choreographed exhibitions competing for the title of best performance. These include gymnastics, dance-sport, figure skating and cheerleading, among others. Many among this category are even Olympic sports governed the world over, and nationally by legitimate sporting federations. While professional wrestling is clearly an athletic exhibition, there is an even more closely-related subcategory of exhibition sports which demonstrate stage combat.

There is a large subsection of sports which are choreographed exhibitions competing for the title of best performance. These include gymnastics, dance-sport, figure skating and cheerleading, among others. Many among this category are even Olympic sports governed the world over, and nationally by legitimate sporting federations. While professional wrestling is clearly an athletic exhibition, there is an even more closely related subcategory of exhibition sports which demonstrate stage combat. Importantly staged combat is a sport. Most specifically, it is a sub-style of martial arts demonstration competition. These demonstrations have different names depending on the organization, which is presenting the

event, but they are most often called “Self-Defense Demonstrations” (USJJF, 2018).<sup>9</sup> These demonstration competitions are most often seen at karate, sport jujitsu, or multi-martial art events. Alternate names include “Duo Kumite,” or “Duo Jujitsu.” These demonstrations vary in their rules. According to the rules of the United States Jujitsu Federation (USJJF), there are separate subcategories of these competitions for “Duo” and “Self-Defense” competition. In Duo competition, teams of two will take turns making spectacular displays of stage combat with choreographed attacks and a predetermined winner of the stage combat. Self-defense demonstration competitions see a designated martial artist, or martial artists fend off one or more attackers in a free form display that must end by the designated time. In other instances, these demonstrations include the use of traditional and/or modern weapons. In all of these instances, after the groups have completed their routine, the designated judges score the performances and determine the winner or winners. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many of these competitions were made remote and allowed competitors to submit videos of their routines in virtual martial arts. These demonstrations often include elaborate and exciting moves either taken from, or which also appear in, professional wrestling. Acrobatics are also a recurring feature of both demonstration martial arts and professional wrestling. These types of competitions are overseen by local, regional, national, and international sporting organizations like the World Karate Federation, the International Wushu Federation, Jiu-Jitsu International Federation, the International Sport Karate Association, among dozens of others.

This type of system to judge professional wrestling as an exhibition sport was experimented with. The closest to competitive performance of matches as performance exhibitions in mainstream professional wrestling came in 1992 (Oliva, 2021). In 1992, Turner executive Kip Frey was placed as the head of the promotion and instituted several changes to improve WCW’s artistic and television production. To incentivize wrestlers on guaranteed contracts to perform their best in the ring, Frey instituted a “Match of the Night” bonus policy, which would give the wrestlers in the best match of the evening \$2,500 in prize money. This policy was well-received by the roster and was honored throughout Frey’s abbreviated time at the promotion. After only four months, Frey was replaced by miserly executive “Cowboy” Bill Watts who eliminated the program. Though it was short-lived, such a model of reward structure could theoretically be applied to existing professional wrestling companies to both

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<sup>9</sup> At the time of this writing, the author of this piece is a 1st Dan in Sport Jujitsu under the USJJF and has won a world championship for self-defense martial arts demonstrations.

optimize in-ring performance and establish an exhibition sport concurrent to the episodic theatrical performance. It is also possible that such a system could also be assigned some structure of points to determine season or year-end awards for top in-ring performers. Though professional wrestling is not the sport of wrestling, it is entirely possible for professional wrestling to be a sport all its own.

One example of this was the competition reality show Hulk Hogan's Celebrity Championship Wrestling, which saw a litany of celebrities trained to compete in professional wrestling, and a board of judges including Hogan, former WCW President Eric Bischoff, and famed manager Jimmy Hart (IMDb, 2008). Former NBA star and WCW performer Dennis Rodman won the competition over former boxer-turned-WWF performer Eric "Butterbean" Esch, and a litany of actors. The series ran for a single eight-episode season on Country Music Television (CMT) in 2008. In 2017, innovative Tennessee promoter Jerry Jarrett funded the filming of a pilot for a reality show titled *Olympus Wrestling*, where aspiring professional wrestlers would compete before a panel of judges (Jarrett, 2019). This version of the concept uses trained professional wrestlers from minor professional wrestling leagues across the country. Though the pilot was not picked up, the judging panel included a series of wrestling personalities including Jim Cornette, Robert Fuller and Stacy "Miss Kitty" Carter. At this competition, wrestlers were paired off and given both microphone time and equally timed out matches, though judges had the authority to stop any performances they deemed truly awful. These competitions demonstrated that though professional wrestling originated as fixed catch-as-catch-can wrestling matches, it has evolved into performative martial arts demonstrations. Professional wrestling could theoretically be an actual sport if: a scoring system like demonstration martial arts were used by impartial judges, competing teams of performers showcased equally time-limited performances, and if judging criteria was created to highlight the different aspects of the performances.

There are three key differences between professional wrestling and demonstration martial arts. Firstly, professional wrestling is meant to be a purely commercial endeavor wherein the performers are paid for their services, and sporting martial arts demonstrations are ostensibly a completely amateur affair, despite prize money being offered to black belt champions in some divisions in some contests. Secondly, martial arts demonstration contests are by-nature competitive on equal footing with the other demonstrations, while professional wrestling is



not. Professional wrestling matches in different portions of the card are designated to allow uneven levels of time, importance, seriousness, and allowed performance tactics. Because of this inequality of presentation, though wrestlers will often strive to have the best match on the card, the absence of an expectation of fairness in that informal competition prevents it from being empirically quantifiable. Thirdly, while sport is a contest of performance that exists from the beginning of the designated time on stage until the end with no narrative throughlines before or afterward, whereas professional wrestling is an ongoing episodic narrative within the world of the play that extends into both past and future performances. Martial arts combat demonstrations are static and stand-alone performances that typically have no defined characters other than tori (person completing techniques) and uke (person receiving techniques) (USJF, 2018). Much the same way that the Harlem Globetrotters contest a fixed basketball game against the long-suffering Washington Generals, or how the champion figure skaters at Disney on Ice use their sporting skills to retell Finding Nemo; professional wrestling applies narrative storytelling to a demonstration of an existing sport. If a sport version of competitive professional wrestling was created, the assessment apparatus for and acceptance of competitive stage combat demonstrations would already exist. As it exists now, professional wrestling is a style of performance art which uses melodrama to propel non-competitive narrative stage combat to the paying audience. It is, however, the narrative thread that connects extended stories that separate professional wrestling from its adjacent martial arts contests.

This subsection has demonstrated through comparative analysis that the conventions of professional wrestling justify its classification as a form of theater. Its study in the field of academia as an art form has been limited since the field of Performance Studies emerged in the 1940's/1950's. The decades-long conspiracy among performers in professional wrestling to keep the theatrical nature of the art form relatively secret is partly responsible for this. However, with over 30 years having passed (at the time of this writing) since it was established publicly beyond dispute that professional wrestling was a performance medium, academic analysis of it in that context has been limited. This comparative analysis examined several of the conventions of professional wrestling alongside the norms of other theatrical styles. The stylistic overlap of professional wrestling with these traditional theater forms has proven to be more than the superficial similarity of being scripted. Rather, this examination has shown that professional wrestling and traditional styles of theater share fundamental

standards of performance technique, storytelling, presentation, costuming, theater tech, character archetypes, improvisation, audience interaction, and the socio-cultural perception of performers. This has also been demonstrated from multiple cultural perspectives. Further, this examination has addressed the competing theory of professional wrestling as demonstration martial arts or “performance sport.” While there is sufficient precedent to establish sport professional wrestling as such, objective criteria for judgment, transparent sanctioning organizations, and public interest in non-theatrical professional wrestling has not emerged at the time of this writing.

The research in this subsection is limited in scope. The analysis measures the conventions of only three styles of theater, meaning that further comparative analysis of professional wrestling and theatrical styles is possible and necessary to expand the field of research. Another limitation of this article is detail, as it has also not provided an in-depth analysis of the cultural significance or influence of professional wrestling, or of the other theatrical forms discussed herein. Rather, this article focuses on the comparative analysis of storytelling devices shared by professional wrestling, Kabuki, Greek Drama and Commedia Dell’arte.

## 1.2 The Myth of Low Culture

Now that the conventions, standards, and application of professional wrestling as performance have been established, this study will establish the significance of professional wrestling in American culture. Philosophical and theoretical debate on the strata of sophistication in art and performance has been argued for centuries. Modern theorists have argued the cultural and socio-economic factors that have historically been used to delineate “high culture,” “middlebrow,” “low culture,” “pop culture,” other definitions/delineations of culture, and whether or not culture ought to be divided based on the presumptions or prejudices of social class or cultural hegemony. Volumes have been written and will be written on these debates. Cultural theorists from Matthew Arnold, Karl Marx, the Frankfurt School of Sociology, Modernists, Postmodernists, and many of scholars have written tomes on that debate. Without addressing these issues, this study would be incomplete. With professional wrestling established as performance, it is inevitable that questions of which of the classical strata of culture it should be categorized will arise. This subsection rejects classical theories of strata of culture and strongly asserts that professional wrestling falls

under the broad category of “pop culture” as defined by cultural theorist John Storey in his book *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, while simultaneously rejecting the existence of the necessity of the existence of artistic schema as proposed by sociologist Omar Lizardo in his article “The Question of Cultural Consumption and Stratification Revisited,” (Storey, 2018; Lizardo, 2008).

Storey created a six-pronged definition of popular culture which presents popular culture as a means of cultural proliferation of content and ideas (Storey, 2018). Storey maintained six historical definitions of popular culture:

1. Popular culture refers to the culture which is loved by many people. It has no negative undertone.
2. Popular culture is everything that is not high culture. It is therefore an inferior culture.
3. Popular culture refers to mass-produced material goods, which are accessible to the masses. In this definition, popular culture appears as a tool in the hands of the ruling class.
4. Popular culture is folk culture, made by and for the people. Popular culture is authentic, unique, and creative.
5. Popular culture is the leading culture, accepted by all classes. The dominant social groups create popular culture, but it is the masses that decide whether it stays or goes.
6. Popular culture is a diverse culture where authenticity and commercialization are blurred, and people have the choice to create and consume whatever culture they please. This is the postmodern meaning of popular culture. (Storey, 2018)

Storey’s definitions largely focus on the widespread consumption and the interaction of cultural consumption as an operation of the economic class. Storey’s first, fourth, sixth, and the democratic-consumption-leaning aspects of the fifth definitions of popular culture are supported in this study, as consumption of pop culture in a free society is democratized. The audience is thus free to vote with their money to decide what they consume. Meanwhile, Storey’s second and third definitions, alongside the social strata-based aspects of his fifth definition of popular culture are rejected, as they pre-suppose the necessity of artistic schema and cultural strata based on social hierarchy in defining popular culture. Lizardo asserts that economic, political, and symbolic power for the dominant ruling socio-economic demographics does not inherently affect the actual artistic, commercial, or symbolic value or a cultural work (Lizardo, 2008). Rather, the socio-economically dominant minority simply

projects a perception of artificial distinctions of artistic schema/cultural strata, which is a paradigm that the diverse majority can freely reject.

These approaches synthesize to reject the socio-economic and cultural prejudices of earlier theorists, in lieu of a democratized view of culture based on its consumption and the value of its messaging by the size of its voluntary consumption by a diverse array of people within a society. In short, the people decide what they value based on their own preferences, rather than through socio-political conspiracy, propaganda, demographics, or income. The value or quality of the artwork consumed by any/all of the aforementioned groups is not affected by those social, cultural, or economic factors. Rather, the value of culture in a free society is defined by the number of members of that society who voluntarily consume it. The distinction between “high culture” which panders to the highest socio-economic rung of a society, and “low culture” which is targeted at the masses is an esoteric fallacy based on classist bigotry. There is no definable metric by which artistic quality can be measured in such a way as to quantifiable or quantifiably differentiate art along. The fact that certain artistic media are traditionally popular among separate socio-economic strata is completely immaterial to quality, complexity or value of art. This study will not indulge a facile argument comparing the artistic value of one form of theatre against another with the goal of appeasing elitist gatekeepers’ desire to have some vote over whether or not this form of theatre is fine art. Acceptance of the upper strata of income has no bearing on artistic value. “High and low culture” is a demographic distinction propagated by the privileged class which has no veto power over what is and is not fine art. As there are no legal classes in the United States, American professional wrestling is doubly immune from this manner of discussion.

Let it be stated here unequivocally that no income class has a monopoly on art. No income class has veto power over what does and does not constitute good taste. No form of art is diminished by being loved by the working class. Neither Old World aristocracy, nor wealthy bourgeoisie posturing will change that simple fact. The wealth and sociology-economic class of the audience does not define the merit of art. Whether the board of the Metropolitan Opera at Lincoln Center likes it or not, the WWE sells more tickets by several multiples.

The metric of artistic influence within a culture has a causal relationship with how viewed, liked and accepted that art is within that culture. A minuscule minority of a population does

not outweigh the relevance of an art form to an exponentially larger segment of that population. Indeed, the true culture of a society permeates through the largest segments of that society. The interests of high society have absolutely no bearing on what is and is not “high culture.” But rather the interests and values of the largest pluralities and sometimes majority of members of a society is the defining metric of artistic relevance to culture.

### 1.3 Life’s A Work: Professional Wrestling and Performance Theory

Professional wrestling is a globally popular scripted storytelling medium. While it has been a publicly acknowledged fact that such demonstrations are not competitive sporting contests for over 30 years (at the time of this writing), the field of performance studies has yet to lay public claim or dedicate resources to the study of professional wrestling as a style of performance. It is therefore the purpose of this paper to determine whether professional wrestling is a form of performance based on established authoritative criteria. To achieve this, this study will establish separate sets of criteria for defining “performance,” “drama,” “theater,” “the play,” and other esoteric terms used to define activities which fall within the field of performance theory. Five sets of criteria established by respected authorities in the field are established directly using primary and secondary sources. The conventions, norms, tenants, methods, craft, theory, and practice of professional wrestling is then examined under those criteria. The results of these examinations unanimously resulted in the determination that professional wrestling qualified as a form of performance, and thus worthy of study as fine art.

The acknowledgement that professional wrestling is performance art was made legally official by Vince McMahon’s testimony to the New Jersey State Legislature in 1989. Where professional wrestling falls on the ever-widening matrix of academic performance study has yet to be determined. While theatrical, it is not typically displayed with the conventions of traditional theater. This section will discuss the elements of theater and/or performance as established by a number of top academic voices. After these criteria of theatrical performance are established, the corresponding elements of professional wrestling will be measured against those metrics.

### 1.3.a The Schechner Criteria

One of the most important voices in the study of performance in the latter 20th and early 21st century is Richard Schechner. Schechner is one of the founders of the Department of Performance at New York University's Tisch School of Drama, where he is currently an adjunct professor (Tisch, 2022). He is considered by many scholars to have broadly changed and expanded the academic understanding of "performance." Schechner is the author of dozens of non-fiction books regarding performance theory, and is the editor of *The Drama Review*, an academic journal about performance. This subsection will examine professionals wrestling through the lens of performance established in Schechner's book *Performance Studies*. Fellow famed scholar Marvin Carlson quoted Schechner as having said, "In 100 years, we won't study theater at all. Theater will be a dead art. And it will be only a small part of performance. Performance is the real discipline of the future" (Carlson, 2022).

The pondering of the nature, purpose and key aspects of performance art harken back to antiquity. Innovative performance studies theorist Richard Schechner discussed the contrasting ancient interpretations of performance art from the Hellenic Greek philosophers and their roughly contemporary Indian counterparts (Schechner, 2013, p. 15). Schechner wrote of Plato:

Plato argued that ordinary realities are but shadows cast on the wall of the dark cave of ignorance. The arts—including the performing arts—imitate these shadows and are doubly removed from the really real. —Plato distrusted theater because it appealed to emotion rather than reason, watering away the growth of passions which should be allowed to wither away. Plato banned poetry, including theater in his ideal republic. (p. 15)

Schechner pointed out that Aristotle re-interpreted his teacher's views by reframing performance as a structured outlet of negative emotions, following ordeals within the chain reaction caused by emotional folly throughout the course of the stories (p. 15). "In the *Poetics* Aristotle reasoned that by imitating actions, and by enacting the logical chain of consequences flowing from actions, one might learn to avoid the emotions Aristotle wanted to around, understand and purge their deleterious effects" (p. 15).

Schechner would go on to contrast this with the Indian philosophy of *maya-lila*, which contended that the events of the universe and human plane of existence are “illusion, play and theater on a grand scale,” viewed by the gods. Schechner drew the obvious parallels to the respective Shakespearean quotes from *As You Like It*, “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players,” and from *Hamlet*, “the uprise of play, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as t’were, the mirror up to nature, to show her virtue and feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure” (p. 15).

Schechner would draw his own conclusions of the various aspects of daily and cultural life that fall under the umbrella of “performance.” These familiar performative processes include:

- Shamanism
- Rites & Ceremonies
- Eruption and resolution of crisis
- Performance in everyday life, sports, and entertainment,
- Play
- Art-Making Process
- Ritualization (p. 17)

He then identified eight common kinds of performance:

1. In everyday life - cooking, socializing, “just living”
2. In the arts
3. In sport and other entertainments
4. In business
5. In technology
6. In sex
7. In ritual - sacred and secular
8. In play (p. 31)

He also established seven key functions of performance:

1. To entertain
2. To create beauty

3. To mark or change identity
4. To make or foster community
5. To heal
6. To teach or persuade
7. To deal with the sacred and the demonic (p. 46)

Of course, for the questions at hand, aspects of professional wrestling would fall into most of those categories. Schechner specifically mentioned American professional wrestling as a style of performance (Schechner, 2013, p. 37-38) in *Performance Studies*, and included an intriguing image of Chief Wahoo McDaniel in headdress and title belt, and a promotional photo of The Road Warriors with manager Paul Ellering. Schechner wrote, “What ‘is’ and ‘is not’ performance does not depend on an event itself but on how that event is received and placed—What we today call ‘theater’ people in other times did not” (p. 39). And after a considered discussion of centuries of evolving theater and performance theory, Schechner points out that “The term ‘performance art’ was coined in the 1970’s as an umbrella for works that otherwise resist categorization.—The outcome is that today many events that formerly would not be thought of as theater are now so designated” (pp. 39-40), Schechner’s *The Drama Review* has published article relating to the study of professional wrestling in the context of performance, including Sharon Mazer’s *The Doggie Doggie World of Professional Wrestling* from 1990, and Broderick Chow’s *The Work and The Shoot: Professional Wrestling and Embodied Politics* nearly a quarter-century later (Mazer, 1990; Chow, 2014).

In his book *Performance Theory*, originally published in 1988 and reprinted in 2003, Schechner charted characteristics of various kinds of performance on a spectrum between self-assertiveness (focused on the self) and self-transcendence (focused on the other) (Schechner, 2003, p. 17). Schechner asserted that games, sports and theater existed in the middle ground of this spectrum wherein there were rules to performance, but within those rules was room for expressive play. He posited, “In the middle terms rules exist as frames. Some rules say what must be done and others what must not be done. Between the frames there is freedom. In fact, the better the player, the more s/he will be able to exploit this freedom” (p. 17). Schechner’s assertion of improvisational expressive freedom within the confines of established rules of performance is directly applicable to American professional wrestling. The rituals of presentation including the music-accompanied introductions, flashy



costuming, use of a very particular style of boot, interplay with the audience, the techniques for safe execution of maneuvers, public soliloquy and interview, and the fundamental structure of a fundamental 7 Phases of a match (Intro, Shine, Cut-Off, Heat, Comeback, Finish, Exit) are all established rules of the medium. However, within those rules is tremendous opportunity for physical, verbal, emotional and stylistic expression. Some performers excel at executing spectacular moves like Rey Mysterio or Claudio Castagnoli. Others wow with their verbal skills like Hulk Hogan or “Stone Cold” Steve Austin. Still others excel by selling the moves of their opponents to create an eye-catching illusion of pain like Ricky Morton or Dolph Ziggler. Yet some impress with their choreographic narrative skills during the match like Triple H or Bret Hart. Some performers cultivate mystique through costuming and technical presentation like Mark “The Undertaker” Calloway and “The Great Muta” Keiji Mutoh. And finally, the most acclaimed artists in the professional wrestling space excel across all of these facets, like Ric Flair, Shawn Michaels or Brian Danielson.

On the Performance chart in *Performance Theory*, Schechner identified play and ritual as respective ends of the self-assertive/self-transitive spectrum, with Games, Sports and Theater falling in that order between them (Schechner, 2003, p. 17). Theater is identified closest to ritual across the following criteria metrics, with the following results.

- special ordering of time – Yes.
- special value for objects – Yes.
- non-productive – Yes.
- Rules – Frame.
- special place – Yes.
- appeal to other – Yes.
- audience – Yes.
- self-assertive – Not totally.
- self-transcendent – Not totally.
- completed – Yes.
- performed by group – Yes.
- symbolic reality – Yes.
- scripted – Yes.

Professional wrestling corresponds to theater on a 1-1 basis with the corresponding responses to these criteria. The only arguable criterion is the “completed” metric. While professional wrestling performances end, the episodic nature of the art form involves the overall story moving forward in perpetuity. Individual matches and shows begin and end, though usually the stories from those shows are expected to be extended in the subsequent performances. Televised promotions often use their untelevised performances as non-canonic dress rehearsals or workshops for future television events. However, the argument against this is that storylines are often abandoned without resolution due to performer availability or shifts in creative direction by the writers. The performance does have an end, and if the promotion is successful, there will be another episode in the future to continue that story. Professional wrestling matches, in the abstract, can be repeated move-for move, but (as with theater) no two performances are identical. This was the case with season/series-based professional wrestling programs like *Lucha Underground*, *Wrestling Society X*; a collection of episodes was filmed like traditional television in a limited series.

Schechner’s conclusions about performance can be intuitively applied to professional wrestling. In his chapter on Performativity, Schechner importantly points out that “In theater, the ‘as if’ consists of characters, places, actions, and narratives — all of which exist only as they are performed” (Schechner, 2003, p. 169). Because all events and actions within the performance of professional wrestling take place within the world of the play, which is broadly termed as “Kayfabe” or famous branded as “the WWE Universe” by the world’s leading producers of the performance, it would fall under this distinction of theater. Schechner would also define codified acting as “performing according to a semiotically constructed score of movements, gestures, songs, costumes, and make-up. This score is rooted in tradition and passed down from teachers to students by means of rigorous teaching.” (Schechner, 2003, p. 183) This definition has very strong one-to-one correspondence of the heretofore established standard of professional wrestling including the respective usage of the physical craft of wrestling, the well-known gestures and poses performed constantly therein, the use of entrance and exit music, the various means of traditional costuming, and the use of various forms of functional television make-up and character costume make-up. The infamously rigorous training endured by aspiring wrestlers while they are being steeped in the insular traditions of professional wrestling no doubt meet the criteria for the second portion of the definition. As such, per the given definition of

“codified acting,” the performance of professional wrestling is therefore acting and the performers within professional wrestling are actors.

Moreover, across Schechner’s various metrics, professional wrestling can be demonstrated fairly clearly. Under the categories under the umbrella of performance, professional wrestling clearly falls under the category of “entertainment” and the creative activity used to produce professional wrestling performance falls under “the art-making process.” Furthermore, professional wrestling falls under the definitions of “in sport and other entertainment” in Schechner’s 3rd type of common performance. Finally, each of Schechner’s seven purposes of theater are achieved at some point in the performance of professional wrestling:

1. It is designed to entertain.
2. The visual spectacle and execution is meant to demonstrate beauty of form.
3. The growth of characters along arcs shows the allegorical change of identity.
4. Wrestling fandom is an enthusiastic and visible global community.
5. Professional wrestling commonly rallies its shared community in times of crisis such as the aftermath of the 9/11 Terror Attacks or the COVID-19 Pandemic.
6. The performance of professional wrestling is meant to elevate the characters by persuading the audience simultaneously that they are qualified competing athletes and that the audience should take a particular opinion of their ethical character.
7. Both the sacred and the demonic are displayed commonly in professional wrestling, in both literally religious and secular ethical senses.

### 1.3.b The Sebesta & O’Hara Criteria

This subsection will examine theories of theater and performance as ascribed in the 2012 book titled *Guidebook for Explore Theatre: A Backstage Pass* (hereafter called “*Explore*”) co-authored by Michael O’Hara<sup>10</sup> and Judith Sebesta.<sup>11</sup> Their collaborative textbook is a favorite among American theater departments for its user-friendly approach to the

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<sup>10</sup> O’Hara is a longtime scholar of theater and a distinguished professor at Ball State University, with a Bachelor’s in English and Drama from Fordham University, a Master’s in theater and a Doctorate in Theatre History, Criticism, and Theory from the University of Maryland (O’Hara, 2022).

<sup>11</sup> Judith Sebesta is an award-winning theater scholar and adjunct professor at Texas A&M University, holding a bachelor’s degree in Communication Arts from Austin College, a Master’s in Theatre Studies from Florida State University, and a Doctorate in Theatre History and Criticism from the University of Texas (Sebesta, 2022).

fundamental theories of theatrical performance. A subsection of *Explore* argues that there are five elements which all performances share. They are listed as follows:

- Actor (a person who does something)
- Action (a thing done)
- Audience (witnesses to the thing done)
- Arena (a place where the thing is done)
- Arrangement (how the thing itself is spatially and temporarily arranged)

This section also briefly describes each characteristic thereafter:

**Actors** are people who perform actions such as enact a script, perform a ritual, run with a ball, or aim a virtual bow and arrow. **Actions** are the things actors do, such as tell a story, make a touchdown, or look for treasure. **Audiences** are the people who watch those things being done, and sometimes audiences participate as actors in those performances. **Arenas** are the places in which those people gather to perform or watch or both. **Arrangement** refers to ways in which the action itself is organized in real and symbolic space and time—. (O’Hara & Sebesta, 2012, p. 2)

Measured against this initial criteria, professional wrestling easily fills the criteria set forth by O’Hara and Sebesta. The actors in professional wrestling include the wrestlers themselves, the managers, valets, sidekicks, announcers, commentators, and interviewers. Ostensibly anyone who appears on-screen in the capacity of a character in the presentation is an actor in this art form. The actions taken by performers in professional wrestling serve their character goals, which usually (but not exclusively) are accomplished by winning matches. Common actions would be the attacks in the matches themselves, the wholesale striking of one another with foreign objects, betrayal, coming to the aid of others, giving impassioned speeches to and/or about one another, etc. The audience of professional wrestling is a massively interactive part of the performance, which serves as real-time feedback for the performance and the ultimate arbiter of its quality. In professional wrestling the arena is quite often a literal arena and as most productions have seating in the round, the element of the “arena” is self-evident. The arrangement of professional wrestling includes the ring, the ring-side area,

the entrance aisle, sometimes a stage, and often secondary sets away from the main performance area. These arrangements are temporary, and typically built and torn down prior to and after each performance.

*Explore* also clearly identifies three criteria whereby performance styles might be differentiated from one another: objectives, organization, and consciousness (O'Hara & Sebesta, 2012, pp. 6-7). In the discussion of this *theoretical organization*, *Explore* highlights an important aspect of professional wrestling's predetermined nature, and its innate interactivity with the audience by stating, "audiences at theatrical events do not help determine the outcome of the plot, which was predetermined by the playwright. Theatrical audiences do, however, help determine the quality of the experience for both themselves and the actors by how well they respond to the play." (p. 5) This statement, perhaps more clearly than any other in academia, encapsulates the purpose of audience engagement in an art form, which in parlance of professional wrestling is called "getting over." *Explore* also identifies a shared objective of film, television, and commercial theater, which is to make money. This for-profit objective is part and parcel of the professional wrestling business. The final distinguishing characteristic of performance is consciousness, whereby the actors and audience are aware that art is being performed and made. This concept has evolved in professional wrestling between when the Kayfabe Conspiracy had massive swaths of the population convinced that the events in the ring were authentic, to contemporary professional wrestling wherein the stage nature of events is prohibitively well-known. As such, performers acting in the show, producers overseeing the performance, and interactive audiences are all making conscious contributions to the atmosphere and experience of the professional wrestling show.

*Explore* also helpfully defines art, whereby we may have a secondary analysis of the place professional wrestling occupies in artistic discourse. *Explore* includes the following aspects of performance as art:

- All art is a self-conscious creation of a person.
- All art seeks an aesthetic response.
- All art has both social and aesthetic values.
- Art forms have different objectives.

- Art forms have different rules of organization. (pp. 6-7)

Professional wrestling meets each of these sub-criteria for determining art. The performance is (and can only be) a self-conscious creation of humans. Though many consider its performance style to fall somewhere generally between bombastic and garish, professional wrestling elicits an aesthetic response to beauty of form, character and spectacle. The aesthetic values of professional wrestling relate closely to the culture for whom and by which it is being performed, though it tends to be admired for purely aesthetic reasons. As a function of a narrative subgenre of melodramatic stage combat wherein cultural morality tales are told, American professional wrestling meets the criteria of social value in a cultural sense. In a broader sense, the cultural profile of professional wrestling is so high that it is an indelible part of pop culture. Professional wrestling has its own unique set of objectives and standard for organization. These objectives and organizations have nearly total consensus among performers, producers and audiences of the art form.

*Explore* then establishes a differentiated and more specific definition for “theatrical performance” which establishes yet another set of criteria whereby the status of professional wrestling might be judged. *Explore* contends that the following elements are necessary for “theatrical performance” as it regards to film, television, and live theater:

- The use of actors impersonating people other than themselves
- Audiences are required to complete the art form
- The dependence on predetermined actions to organize and bind the performance which were written by authors, screenwriters and playwrights
- The fictitious worlds of the performances are more condensed and powerful than the real world
- The use of real spaces and things, but those real spaces and things must be artistically arranged
- It is organized, arranged, and enacted in both symbolic and real time
- It is made collaboratively through unique contributions of many artists and technicians (pp. 8-11)

This set of sub-criteria allows for a deeper dive into the aspects of the performance. The most controversial of these notions in the context of professional wrestling is the first. The first notion, that actors must portray someone other than themselves, is not necessarily self-evident in professional wrestling. While some chapters are quite obviously fictitious, such as a voodoo priest, the literal Boogeyman, or a sentient birdman; others are far more realistic. Many wrestlers perform under their own names and with their personae having similar dispositions and characteristics of themselves. However, because the bouts themselves have pre-determined outcomes and the promos are unnaturally occurring parts of structured narrative, then even the most realistic portrayal of a self-similar character in professional wrestling is still undergoing a completely fictional experience in completely artificial circumstances that they must treat as though they are real. By interacting in this way with the fictitious world, the performer thereby becomes a fictionalized version of themselves. Therefore, performers in professional wrestling may sometimes play fictional versions of themselves, but these self-styled caricatures exist separately from the individual in the world of the performance.

The remaining notions are generally self-evidently met by professional wrestling and its production. The notion that the audience is an intergalactic part of professional wrestling, evidenced more so by the awkward no-live-audience productions of professional wrestling in the COVID-19 pandemic era. The audience serves the role of the chorus in professional wrestling, often chanting and singing along to the events. Though the public awareness and acceptance that the events of professional wrestling performance are predetermined by writers is somewhat new, the practice of dictating the in-ring result is more than a century old.

The third aspect, regarding the world of the performance being more contented and more powerful than real life, is discussed in *Explore*. “Theatrical performances do not show every moment in a character’s daily life, but only the parts essential to the main action, or story, being created.” (O’Hara & Sebesta, 2012, p. 9) Though some major professional wrestling companies will produce vignettes to show character beyond the arena, most of professional wrestling is the performance of events within the fictitious wrestling league that are germane to the story at hand. The events therein and the seriousness to the lives of the characters is also exaggerated from what they might be in real life. For example, millionaire professional athletes seldom will legitimately wager their careers in a league on the outcome of a game,

while in professional wrestling performance, “Loser Leaves” Matches are commonplace. Likewise, the heightened seriousness of the events within the world of the performance is evidenced by the radical actions and details of the characters, including vampires, work-place attacks with blunt objects, the outward presence and social acceptance of demonic evil, and the massive drama surrounding showdowns over personal matters. These vivid, wild storytelling devices and narrative elements combined with condensed time of presence in the narrative space meets the requirements for a more condensed and powerful world within performance.

Professional wrestling uses typical sports arenas and sporting spaces, arranged in elaborate artificial ways. The performance space includes everything between the back curtain and within the cordoned off section around the ring. Though like in-ring sports like boxing or kickboxing, the arrangement of professional wrestling is far more deliberate, and has its own staging conventions for creating the ring, entrance, and ringside areas. There are also commonly created sets for additional narrative use.

The use of symbolic time and literal time is perhaps the most curious aspect of professional wrestling in this regard. Because performances are part of an ongoing linear storyline, events are mostly taking place in real time. The performers and the audiences know that the events of this week’s show are directly related to last week’s and next week’s productions. In this way, the episodic adventures are bound by the realities of the passage of time, as it is an endless succession of live performances. These ephemeral theatrical performances cannot be fully duplicated, though they are often filmed. Perhaps the most prominent exception to this is the use of pre-taped segments, vignettes, and indeed pre-taped performances. To save on production costs, many professional wrestling companies will tape several weeks of television episodes in rapid succession, so though the audience will see weekly shows, all of the events will have happened on the same afternoon some weeks before. This use of symbolic time in televised professional wrestling is a significant part of the commercial industry. The symbolic timing of these pre-taped performances happened in the continuity of the story during the normal showtimes, while the literal timing was during the filming session prior. This is also common with the use of vignettes, which are pre-taped segments interspersed in the show, often as though they were happening in real time. This allows for more expansive narrative action to be taken and presented simultaneously, while allowing for the logistical and geographic realities of the live performance. While this has been



commonplace in major companies for decades, the advent of in-home cinematic and the internet have made vignettes, pre-taped segments, and the distribution of wrestling production over the internet commonplace. Though the use of symbolic time in minor league professional wrestling may be a relatively new phenomenon, it is now no less necessary to the regional productions of the episodic art form. In this way, both symbolic and real time are used in American professional wrestling.

Finally, the notion that professional wrestling is created collaboratively is as self-evident as it is necessary for the art form to exist. The collaboration between wrestlers makes the matches happen. The collaboration of the production staff, including technicians and producers, makes the event happen. There is no possible solo professional wrestling production. Indeed, professional wrestling can *only* be created collaboratively.

Sebesta and O'Hara proposed various metrics for measuring performance art in *Explore*. Sebesta and O'Hara created a workable modern academic set of definitions and defining characteristics for performance art in *Explore*. This book will also be consulted in the forthcoming discussion of Aristotle's treatises on narrative and performance. The performance of professional wrestling has met each requirement of each established metric for "art," "performance" and for "theatrical performance." Therefore, by the definitions proposed in this sub-set of criteria, professional wrestling is a medium of art, a style of performance, and a sub-genre of theatrical performance.

### 1.3.c The Bentley Criteria

Among theater critics and playwrights of the 20th century, Eric Bentley sat in rarified air (Lehmann-Haupt, 2020). Born in Bolton, England in 1916, Bentley would become one of the foremost theater critics and theorists of modern history, up until his passing in 2020 at the age of 103. Bentley was himself a student of literary giants C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien at Oxford during his undergraduate studies. Bentley would emigrate to the United States and complete his Doctorate at Yale University, where he was an award-winning scholar. Bentley would go on to a career of great acclaim as a professor of theater studies at top universities, a critic for many respected publications, and an award-winning scholar from numerous theater organizations. His collected works included 11 books on theater criticism, numerous

acclaimed scripts, and a considerable discography of audio recordings. He would live to 103 prior to his passing in 2020.

This section will focus on notions of defining theater and performance which Bentley put forth in his 1964 book, *The Life of the Drama*. His work pre-dates Schechner's expansion of consideration of performance and instead broadened the scope of classical theater. The elements which created the narrative are also a key aspect of this work. As such, these elements can be applied to both literary and performance art. Of the concept of plot, Bentley wrote:

What is plot? The finished product that comes to mind is nothing if not intricate and subtle. From what raw materials was the product made? From life, we may confidently venture, life in its diversity and not excluding its seamy side. —since our subject is the plot of drama in particular—a unit characteristic of drama in particular. (p. 4)

Bentley then cited the quote from philosopher George Santayana who said that the works of dramatists “allows us to see other men's minds through the medium of events.” (Bentley, 1964, p. 4) Of drama itself, Bentley wrote:

Events are not dramatic in themselves. Drama requires the eye of the beholder. To see drama in something is both *to perceive elements of conflict* and *to respond emotionally to these elements of conflict*. This emotional response consists of being thrilled, in being struck with wonder, at conflict. If drama is a thing one sees, there has to be one to see it. Drama is human. (p. 4)

In this book, Bentley would argue that the equation for defining theater is relatively concise. Bentley states:

The theatrical situation, reduced to a minimum, is that *a* to imitates *b* while *c* looks on. Such impersonation is universal among small children, and such playing of a part is not wholly distinct from the other playing that children do. All play creates a world within a world—a territory with laws of its own—and the theater might be regarded. As the most durable of the many magic palaces which infantile humanity has built. The distinction between art and life begins there.

Impersonation is only half of this little scheme. The other half is watching, —or, from the viewpoint of A, being watched. Even when there is actually no spectator, an impersonator imagines that there is, often by dividing himself into two, the actor and the audience. That very histrionic object, the mirror, enables any actor to watch himself and thereby become C, the audience. And the mirror on the wall is only one: the mirrors in the mind of many. (p. 10)

Bentley's deceptively simple formula requires an actor, an act, and an audience. "A" is the actor, performing an impersonation. "B" is that act that is being performatively impersonated. "C" is the audience, literal or imaginary, that is observing the performance. In professional wrestling, these aspects have very direct counterparts. A is most typically the wrestler, or a performer involved in the match. B is the act of performatively imitating competing in a catch-as-catch-can wrestling match in a semiotic exhibition of possible maneuvers in a match. It is in B that all of the craft of storytelling through the conventional plots of professional wrestling storytelling (matches, angles, promos, etc.) is displayed. And C is the live and television audience, viewing, judging, interpreting and with any luck (or skill) enjoying the proceedings. The world of kayfabe is, in Bentley's terms, the world of make-believe which all play, plays and theater create. The audience perceives the emotions of the elements of a wrestling angle, match or promo, and outwardly displays their emotional reactions to them, which by Bentley's definition would make it "drama." By Bentley's definitions, professional wrestling is "drama" and meets the criteria to be an example of the "theatrical situation."

### 1.3.d The Aristotle Criteria

The modern criteria for performance seems to be unanimously tilted in favor of the inclusion of professional wrestling. However, as theatre and performance are classical art forms, this study will now also measure them against the dramatic standards of antiquity. Despite his teacher Plato's aversion, Aristotle's works have been discussed by each of the above-discussed theorists. As a pillar of Western thought, Aristotle is highly regarded as a classical interpreter of the many institutions of civil life in Western Society. As discussed in the Schechner section, Aristotle rebutted his mentor Plato's interpretations of theatre as immoral, and instead extolled the process as an expression of emotional narrative to its intellectual conclusion (Schechner, 1988). In his masterwork *Poetics*, Aristotle divined six elements of

plays, the interplay of which defines the medium (O'Hara & Sebesta, 2012, pp17-22). These elements are particularly commonly applied to tragedy and comedy. Aristotle contended that his ranked list of elements were so entangled in the execution of the performance, which altering one would inevitably and compulsively alter the rest. After more than two millennia have passed, the Aristotelian elements remain a major part of the discussion of theatre and performance. As professional wrestling, and specifically American professional wrestling, emerged from western tradition, it is only fitting that they be measured against the oldest standards of play and performance. Some of these elements are multi-faceted, and as such those facets of specific elements will be discussed in the context of professional wrestling immediately thereafter. And though despite the ancientness of the criteria analyzed in this subsection, it provides some of the most detailed sets of finite criteria for defining theatrical performance available. Aristotle's six elements are listed in order of importance, as follows:

1. Plot
2. Character
3. Thought (Theme)
4. Diction (Language)
5. Music
6. Spectacle (O'Hara & Sebesta, 2012, pp. 17-21)

The first and most important of these is plot (O'Hara & Sebesta, 2012, pp. 17-18). Plot is the structure of the story. Aristotle defined eight stages of plot. The seven-phase match and the case study of a long-term professional wrestling angle displays many of these aspects directly. The nine phases of an Aristotelian plot are as follows:

1. Exposition
2. Point of Attack
3. Inciting Incident
4. Complication
5. Discoveries
6. Reversals
7. Climax
8. Denouement (O'Hara & Sebesta, 2012, pp. 17-18)

Aristotle defined exposition as the introduction of characters, settings, initial relationships, and the general state of things in a story (O'Hara & Sebesta, 2012, pp. 17-19). Exposition in professional wrestling takes many forms. Firstly, in a match, exposition includes the entrances of the characters which establish their ethical alignment and general character. The early going of the classical American match also serves as exposition to demonstrate who is the better technical wrestler, and who is willing to cheat to win the bout. In professional wrestling angles, exposition can come in the form of characters performing in-ring promos, engaging in backstage interviews, being featured in vignettes, or simply by demonstrating character through their in-ring behaviors. These characters evolve over time and through their various adventures/misadventures. Almost inevitably, characters slide back and forth along the ethical spectrum in response to ordeals they have endured in their episodic adventures. In the example of the professional wrestling storyline case study in section 1.8, Foley's exposition came in his April 1997 sit-down interview with Jim Ross, where he revealed his multi-faceted personality to the world. This established him as a new character with a nuanced world view which would manifest in different characters. He also made clear his aspiration to be a beloved character who appealed to the masses, and how in his youth, that character was a ladies' man named "Dude Love." The interview also showcased his personal backstory as having participated in many of the most famous and brutal feuds in professional wrestling history to become famous, despite his lack of a brilliant physique or matinee idol good looks.

The point of attack in *Poetics* is the moment where the action of the play starts, as it relates to the larger story (O'Hara & Sebesta, 2012, p. 18). In professional wrestling, this point is fairly intuitively, the ringing of the opening bell for a match. This is the signal for the participants to literally begin attacking one another. Moreover, most professional wrestling angles begin with an in-ring incident, so the ringing of the opening bell of the first match of a longer arc can also be considered the point of attack for many feuds. The point of attack could also be an interaction between two characters that begins a feud, perhaps a cross word in an interview, an insult hurled one way or another, a loving look at a wrestler's paramour, or a direct verbal challenge for a championship, among many others. The point of attack in the Foley arc came on the 9 June edition of *Monday Night Raw*, where under the auspices of his character Mankind, he came to the aid of Stone Cold Steve Austin, while the latter was

enduring a beating from four men. This began the dramatic action of Foley and Austin's parallel journeys atop professional wrestling.

The inciting incident in the Aristotelian model is the event that sets in motion the dramatic action of the play. In a professional wrestling match, this is most directly related to the cut-off, where the babyface (wrestling's contextual protagonist) is put into peril by the heel (wrestling's antagonist), thus driving the drama for the remainder of the match. In a professional wrestling angle, this is once again slightly foggier in its exact application. For most angles, it usually involves an unprovoked and unrepentant physical attack by the heel on the babyface. Much the way that antagonists drive the story in traditional narratives, heels drive the stories in professional wrestling. By attacking the babyface after a match, distracting them so they lose a match with a third party, or beating them down outside of the ring area, the heel establishes that they are one-up on the babyface, and the babyface must then struggle to get even. The inciting incident can also happen in a promo, when a wrestler challenges, or calls out a potential adversary. This verbal jousting is often used to build up to major matches between top and rising stars. In the case of Foley, this incident came on the 14 July 1997 edition of *Raw is War*, when Foley again came to Austin's aid, but this time as his Dude Love persona. This showed Foley finally embodying the character he dreamed himself to be in childhood and finding immediate success after doing so by winning his first title in the WWF when he and Austin claimed the tag-team titles that night.

The next phase of Aristotle's plot is a trio of plot elements which coincide to create the whirling twists of the rising action in a play (O'Hara & Sebesta, 2012, p. 18). These three elements are called Complications, Discoveries and Reversals. Each of them affect the plot in a different way, and all of them help to shape a complex story. In the context of professional wrestling, these parts also exist.

Complication which involves the emergence of new elements to the story which make matters more complex (O'Hara & Sebesta, 2012, p. 18). In a professional wrestling match, this can be unexpected illegal tactics by a heel, the interference of an outside party, or an injury. In a professional wrestling angle, these could include the addition of additional characters like managers, tag-partners, love interests, championships, contractual status or title implications. In Foley's case this could be any number of rivalries he developed during

his two year arc, most notably one with Triple H, which saw each of his personae activated at different junctures.

Revelations of new information relevant to the plot in Aristotle's model are termed as Discoveries (O'Hara & Sebesta, 2012, p. 18). In a professional wrestling match, this might include an effective hold that the babyface uses to fight back, or any style of offense that helps them to fend off their attack/attackers. This is termed as a "hope spot" in a match, which gives a jolt of excitement to the crowd during the bout but is swiftly cut off by the heels. The mid-match cut-offs of hope spots can be termed as another example of Aristotelian complications. In the context of an angle, this is any tactic that grants a wrestler an advantage in the ongoing feud. Perhaps it is a weak spot found in an enemy, an attack that seems effective against adversaries, or an effective scheme to gain the upper hand against an opponent. In the Foley arc, the discoveries were numerous, including a number of perceived allies (Mr. McMahon, Paul Bearer, Kane, etc.) and their inevitable betrayals along his path.

In Aristotle's opinion, the rising action should conclude with a Reversal, wherein the state-of-play for the story was suddenly and dramatically shifted (O'Hara & Sebesta, 2012, p. 18). These reversals usually occurred just before the climax of the story. In a professional wrestling match, the Aristotelian reversal is called a "double down," which stops the heels' momentum and places the babyface back in control. This is typically accomplished by a dramatic high impact move, or by dodging an attack causing the heel to injure themselves. This completely changes the story of the match and once again puts the characters on equal footing. This can also be manifested in a wrestler reclaiming the advantage with a series of big moves leading to the comeback. In Foley's case, this moment came on the 4 January 1999 edition of *Raw is War*. The long-suffering fan-favorite Mankind was granted a title opportunity against The Rock, in a lumberjack match where the ruthless members of Vince McMahon's Corporation faction, and the lovable cretins of the D-Generation X faction would surround the ring. Despite this Foley would be in dire straits as the situation outside the ring degenerated into a wild brawl but Austin would charge to the ring and bludgeon the Rock with a steel chair and pull Foley on top of him. Foley became perhaps the most unlikely primo uomo in American professional wrestling history; and this status would lead him into his climactic battles of the arc.

The Climax in the Aristotelian plot model involved “the moment of crisis where the original questions of the play must be answered” (O’Hara & Sebesta, 2012, p. 18). In a professional wrestling match, this coincides with the comeback and the finish. The comeback creates this moment of crisis where the protagonist is once again able to fight well against their adversary. The finish determines the winner of the match, whether it be a joyous triumph for the hero, the dastardly cheating of the villain, or an inconclusive “schmoz” where the answer to the question of which wrestler is actually better is left ambiguous. Likewise in a professional wrestling feud, this is called a “blow-off” where the climactic match of a long-term angle plays out at long last and a rivalry is settled. In the case of Foley, this came in a ladder match against the Rock on the 15 February 1999 edition of Raw is War, where The Rock would reclaim the title from Foley with the help of a human giant called “The Big Show” Paul Wight. Indeed, Foley’s reign as the top man had ended.

The final stage of the Aristotelian model is the Denouement (O’Hara & Sebesta, 2012, p. 18). According to Sebesta and O’Hara, “Loose ends are tied up, any unanswered questions are answered, and tension caused by the action is released” (O’Hara & Sebesta, 2012, p. 18.) In a normal match, this is the aftermath and the exits of the characters. The drama of the match ends at the closing bell for the most part. The new normal that has been established by this sets in. It is during this point that angle may begin with a smarting heel attacking a victorious babyface, a victorious heel gloating over their cheated adversary, a babyface celebrating their hard-fought victory with the fans, and many other approaches. In Foley’s case, this came at Wrestlemania XV. Foley had won the right to be the referee for the main event bout between Austin and the Rock but was hospitalized after being thrown through several steel chairs by the Big Show. Foley claimed his moral victory by returning from the hospital, sprinting to the ring at the match’s most dramatic moment, and counting the pinfall that returned the belt to the man who had elevated him to the title some months before.

Aristotle’s second element of the play was *character* (O’Hara & Sebesta, 2012, p. 19). O’Hara and Sebesta outline details of character beyond Aristotelian means. Character is defined in the discussion of Aristotle in *Explore* as being encapsulated by four distinct types of information:



1. Physical or Biological: external appearance such as species, sex, age, color, weight, hair, and eye color, height.
2. Social: The Character's place in his or her environment, such as economic status, profession, family, relationships, and so on.
3. Psychological: The inner workings of the mind that preceded the action. This element is probably most important, as most drama arises from conflicting desires, goals, and objectives.
4. Moral/ethical (mostly implicit): Moral choices and decisions; values; what characters are willing to do to get what they want. (O'Hara & Sebesta, 2012, p. 19)

Each of these elements are present in professional wrestling characters and character arcs. The physical appearance of wrestlers are highly scrutinized and the impressiveness of their physical appearance is often determinative of their character arc, or even their ability to become a top star. The social constructs relating to characters in professional wrestling are no less obvious, as these factors often comprise considerable portions of their character: the wealth (or lack thereof) of many wrestlers is a cornerstone of their character; wrestlers can represent a particular occupation; romantic relationships between characters are often portrayed on-screen and become focal points of storylines; family ties are also a major element of professional wrestling, including relative regularly aligning or falling into conflict with one another in the storylines. The moral and ethical binary of professional wrestling is determinative of many aspects of the story. How characters interact, who they align with, and the selfishness or altruism of their motivations determines this. Though the ethics of characters in contemporary professional wrestling have become more complex, the principle that someone with whom the audience sympathizes is in conflict with a less sympathetic character, if even temporarily for the sake of the narrative of a match, remains a vital part of the storytelling process. This requirement is summed up in the parlance of wrestling as "somebody's gotta take the heat." This means that one wrestler must overcome the imposed will of their less sympathetic adversary for the story of the match to be effectively told.

The *Psychology* of wrestling is perhaps the most important and least obvious aspect of professional wrestling storytelling. Narrative in professional wrestling is almost always based on competing factors of ego, insecurity, aspiration, and courage. All characters in professional wrestling have some level of insecurity in their position, as positions in the

endless narrative form are always fluid. Champions must always face new challengers, ethical alignments shift over time, relationships are always starting and ending, once-familiar personae can become completely revamped in an instant. The core storyline of professional wrestling is that an aspirational babyface will attempt to prove themselves, and standing in their way will be an imposing and arrogant heel. At the beginning of the story, the egotistical heel fears nothing from the upstart hero, but the babyface's cunning and courage instill a sliver of insecurity in the heel's mind. For the remainder of the storyline, the heel will seek to stack the deck against the babyface because they fear that on equal footing, the babyface can overcome. The audience too comes to believe that the babyface may elevate themselves if only they can find their way into a fair fight. Eventually, these matters must be settled in this way and on this equal footing, where either the hero will live up to their aspirations, or the villainy will be too much; however, in either conclusion, the audience is left to understand that the villain only succeeded through nefarious means. This ethical and psychological complexity is at the core of narrative and character in the medium of professional wrestling.

*Explore* also discusses four primary sources of information regarding character. These are listed as follows:

1. Description
2. What the character says
3. What other say about the character
4. What a character does (O'Hara & Sebesta, 2012, p. 19)

In professional wrestling, each of these apparatuses are used in different ways. Characters are described and plotted out by bookers and members of the creative staffs of promotions. The other people who describe wrestlers includes commentators, interviewers and fans. Characters speak in promos, which demonstrate their ethicalness (or lack thereof). The reputation of the character is determined again by interviewers, commentators, fans, and how other characters within the show talk about and treat them. And finally, a character's actions in and out of the ring determine how sympathetic they will be to the onlooking audience.

Aristotle's third element of the play is *thought* or what is contemporarily called *theme* (O'Hara & Sebesta, 2012, pp. 19-20). According to the interpretations of O'Hara and Sebesta meant "theme, or the intellectual issues expressed by the play—the questions, topics and

meanings raised.” (O’Hara & Sebesta, 2012, pp. 19-20) In professional wrestling themes can be present in both storylines and matches. The use of the antics in matches can be expressed in a number of ways. For example, if a wrestler enters the match with an injury, which will play a significant role in the physical narrative of the match; likewise, if a wrestler is injured during the match. Themes can also be expressed through stipulations, such as “First Blood” or “Hell in a Cell” or “Last Man Standing.” These themes convey the gravity of the violence to be set forth as well as the vitriol of the rivalry. Themes can also be expressed in storylines as certain buzz terms continuously come up, typically as taunts against an aspirational babyface, or of catch phrases-come-rallying cries. When Triple H and Stephanie McMahon spent the seven months leading up to Wrestlemania 30 calling Brian Danielson “a B+ player,” they created the theme that the undersized spitfire was less than the top stars of the company; this theme was completed when he overcame Triple H and two of his protégés in the same night to win the title with the commentators declaring that he was “an A+ player” as fans watched him celebrate. These themes evolve along storylines, and often involve the insecurities of wrestlers, the mental health of characters, issues in familial and romantic relationships, etc. As mentioned above, the most common theme in professional wrestling storylines is that of a protagonist aspiring to prove themselves as better than they first appear.

Aristotle’s fourth element is *diction*, which refers directly to how the characters express language in the story (O’Hara & Sebesta, 2012, p. 20). In professional wrestling, monologue is a common narrative form in the famous wrestling promo. Though the quality and character depth conveyed in these promos varies from pun-filled caricature, to screaming ramblings of the mentally unstable to the passionate pleas of a complex intellect beset by institutional exploitation; promos are the most basic form of character self-expression in professional wrestling. In the Greek sense, wrestlers and wrestling characters often directly address the audience, as characters in Greek Drama address the chorus. The audience acts as the moral and ethical arbiter of the speaker’s emotions, often to their chagrin. Dialogue, and the interplay of many characters is also commonplace in professional wrestling, as characters have competing desires with limited resources to fill them within the scope of their fictional catch-as-catch-can wrestling league. Characters often interact behind the fourth wall in broadcast wrestling in discussions and events that the viewing audience is not meant to see in the ring, but still counts on as part of the narrative dialogue. In broadcast professional

wrestling, commentators provide an extra level of narrative as the *raisonneur* for the storyline, gently guiding the viewing audience through the ethics and events of the story.

Aristotle included *music* as his fifth element of the play (O'Hara & Sebesta, 2012, pp. 20-21). According to O'Hara and Sebesta, most theorists believe that this referred to the rhythm and musicality of the dialogue, and not the literal use of music in the show, though there is some debate on this matter. Either way, the rhythmic flow of interviews, promos and dialogues in professional wrestling is often determinative of the efficacy of its presentation. Clunky segments of discussion and dialogue erode audience interest in the events, while the lively and rising flow of tensions and expressions builds audience interest and anticipation of the inevitable physical confrontation. Moreover, literal music plays a major role in professional wrestling narrative. Ostensibly all characters have entrance music, and some entrance music songs are so iconic that when the opening chords are struck, the audience explode with Pavlovian enthusiasm for the arrival of that character. Music is also a key factor in promotional video packages, which typically accompany major matches or angles. These video packages summarize the story thus far and use musical accompaniment to exciting video editing to bolster audience anticipation for the match, and to reinvigorate audience enthusiasm by hitting the high points of the story thus far.

Aristotle's final element of the play was *spectacle* (O'Hara & Sebesta, 2012, pp. 20-21). In professional wrestling, there is certainly no shortage of spectacle. Whether it be the awe-inspiringly athletic moves in the ring, the flashy costuming of the performers, or the technical theatre production of the show, spectacle is a vital aspect of professional wrestling. There may be no other performance art wherein the pageantry of the presentation is an end unto itself. In major promotions, indoor pyrotechnics are commonplace. Major professional wrestling events have some of the most complex technical theatrics in the world, made doubly impressive by the fact that they are a touring show that must assemble and disassemble the sets, lighting rigs, and wiring for every show. The best example of this is the annual *Wrestlemania* extravaganza which features fireworks, epic light shows, LED production, live musical performances, dancing, and a host of other surprising spectacular aspects. These events have included wrestlers riding tanks to the ring, wrestlers zip-lining in from the rafters, performers being hanged (as a stunt), and innumerable physical altercations between wrestlers and pop culture figures. Spectacle can also be featured as danger, with the

images of wrestlers covered in blood, attacking each other with whatever objects are at hand, are etched into the public memory of the art form. Awe-inspiring falls of performers from wildly unsafe highs, the use of terrifyingly creative means to maim one another, and the unabashed disregard some performers show for their own well-being in the name of spectacle; all comprise part of this aspect of professional wrestling as an Aristotelian play.

After careful review of the complex aspects of Aristotle's *Six Elements of the Play*, it can be shown point-by-point that professional wrestling meets the great philosopher's criteria for being considered a theatrical play. Aristotle determined that Plot, Character, Theme, Diction, Music and Spectacle were all necessary elements to create an effective play. Indeed, professional wrestling ceases to be a complete performance if *any* of these elements is omitted. Indeed, professional wrestling not only meets the requirements of being considered an Aristotelian play, but indeed Aristotle has been shown to have described the six elements of professional wrestling presentation and performance.

### 1.3.e The Carlson Criteria

Dr. Marvin Carlson<sup>12</sup> is (at the time of this writing) a distinguished professor at and the Sidney E. Cohn chair of Theatre & Performance at CUNY. He is also the author of several scholarly books on theatre and performance, including *Places of Performance*, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*, and *Speaking in Tongues: Language at Play in the Theatre*, among several others. Dr. Carlson agreed to be interviewed for this study, and his contributions helped to guide and expand the research herein.

Carlson articulated the notion that “theatre” or “traditional theatre” falls in the large category of activities under the umbrella of “performance,” and credited much of his thinking on the subject to Schechner's innovative work (M. Carlson, personal communication, 12 May 2022). Carlson indicated the defining performance served as a means by a performer to elicit a response from an audience, using the tactics of their performance as a predictor of action (or reaction) by the audience. For defining performance, Carlson maintained that an action

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<sup>12</sup> Dr. Carlson is one of the most respected educators on the subject of theatre in the United States today (Hovis, 2017). The Kansas-born scholar earned his Bachelor's and Master's degrees from the University of Kansas, prior to earning his Doctorate from Cornell University. Dr. Carlson would then go on to a distinguished career in academia, including professorships in theatre and performance related fields at Cornell, the University of Indiana, and the City University of New York.

must be purposeful on the part of the performer and be consciously performed for someone else to view. Carlson also said that “wrestling fits” this definition of performance. In both the interview and in *Places of Performance*, Carlson stated that the three elements absolutely necessary to create theatrical performance, which included the performer, the audience, and the performance space. These details in professional wrestling are self-evident, as performers are fairly distinctive, the audience is a massively important aspect of the performance, and the unique performance space has existed in the public consciousness for more than a century. Carlson also stated that having a written story or script that was meant to be embodied and performed on stage, would become theatre once that story was embodied and performed. This is an exact relation to the storylines and physical narrative set by the booker and creative teams when predetermining the action of a professional wrestling performance prior to the wrestlers themselves stepping through the curtain and performing it. The discussion also turned to the similarities in structured narrative with improvisational aspects that is shared by professional wrestling and *commedia dell’arte*.

The interview then turned to the reasoning behind why professional wrestling had yet to be academically accepted as a style of performance. Dr. Carlson discussed several factors that formed barriers limiting the study of professional wrestling as a legitimate academic topic in the study of performance (M. Carlson, personal communication, 12 May 2022). Carlson noted that the association with professional wrestling as a mostly physical activity, had some influence on it. There is little if any scholarship about the in-ring narrative psychology of how characters develop within the physical context of the character arcs of a match.<sup>13</sup>

Carlson asserted that another barrier to its study was the perception that professional wrestling is entertainment for the general public and the working class (M. Carlson, personal communication, 12 May 2022). While noting that the distinction between high and low culture was “changing.” The works of British scholar Leon Williams were discussed, along with the importance of the notion of “cultural capital.” Cultural capital, Carlson explained, was the amount of awareness of influence that a concept commanded within a culture. While the notions of “high,” “low,” and “pop” culture all command different connotations, the concept of cultural capital was a better metric by which to measure the importance of an art

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<sup>13</sup> This was one of the most significant factors that inspired this study.

or institution to a culture. Multiple sections of this study is dedicated to examining and dissecting the outsized cultural capital which professional wrestling commands specifically in American culture.<sup>14</sup>

On the topic of the inclusion of professional wrestlers in the labor unions of actors, such as SAG-AFTRA for screen actors or Actor's Equity for stage actors, Dr. Carlson had a refreshingly practical position, "Should they be included? Yes. Will they? Absolutely not!" (M. Carlson, personal communication, 12 May 2022) Carlson would explain that these major unions were heavily invested in protecting the "respectability of the institution of 'acting'" and were "notoriously ruthless in protecting 'acting'." This exclusion of professional wrestling and professional wrestlers from major professional guilds despite their performance art form meeting all extant academic criteria of acting is a blow to those within the professional wrestling industry hoping to bargain collectively. There have been calls for a number of years from politicians and professional wrestlers to be allowed to join such unions. Film actor and former WWE writer Freddie Prinze Jr has stated that he plans to open a professional wrestling company that is a member of the Screen Actors Guild in 2023, though at the time of this writing these plans remain to be fulfilled.

### 1.3.f Conclusions on Professional Wrestling and Performance Theory

In terms of performance theory, there can be little to no argument made against the inclusion of professional wrestling as a prominent subgenre. Professional wrestling has met all of the metrics set by authoritative scholars from Aristotle, to Bentley, to Schechner, to Carlson, to O'Hara & Sebesta, to the cadre of academic writing peer-reviewed essays to be included in respected academic journals. The criteria for "performance," "drama," "theatre," "theatrical performance," "the play," and all other such interchangeable terms have been met. Per Dr. Carlson's recommendation, every piece of academic content dedicated to the study of professional wrestling takes its study one step closer to legitimacy. Indeed, perhaps the most significant barrier between the art of professional wrestling and its acceptance by the institutions of performance art is the unceasing insistence of the academic community that it be included in the discussion of performance. Regardless of institutional acceptance,

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<sup>14</sup> This includes Chapter 3, Sections 2.5 and 2.7, and Subsections 2.4.i and 2.5.a. The evolution of cultural values is also discussed throughout Chapter 4.

professional wrestling continues to expand its base of cultural capital into new generations of fans, producers, and performers. While there is no existing objective metric bearing the inclusion of professional wrestling from performance studies, the efforts of scholars to normalize its inclusion are ongoing, and with any luck expanding. As the scope of understanding of performance expands, and having established a mountain of objective evidence to support its inclusion, it seems almost inevitable that professional wrestling will gain some acceptance as performance art. Though Carlson cautions that that acceptance will be slow in coming, he also gave assurances that the continued scholarship on the art form would eventually make it so.

For determining theatricality and performativeness, there is no one definitive criteria that holds complete authoritative sway over establishing what is and is not performance. There are more theories and sets of criteria than those examined herein. Among the five above discussed theories, there are 56 points of analysis. While there is wide variance in detail, complexity, and abstraction in these definitions, there is considerable overlap among the theories. Cross-referencing these sets of criteria as a matrix reveals the five key elements established in every theory are:

- An actor
- The deliberate action taken by the actor
- The audience for whom the actor is performing
- The targeted reaction of the audience
- The space in which the action occurs

Beyond those five shared elements, the esoteric details of each theoretical criteria can be approached and analyzed. In the case of professional wrestling, all 56 points of cross-sectional criteria across the five theories are met, including the five key elements within the matrix of performance theory.

Perhaps the most glaring point of overlap between professional wrestling and performance theory is the mutual passive arrival at the conclusion that much of everyday life is performance. While professional wrestling and other theatrical forms are codified performance art, performance as a ritual of living is a main treatise of contemporary performance theory. The idea that the conscious and intentional choice of words, costuming and behaviors to elicit a desired reaction from an audience is at the core of performance. The



workers within the professional wrestling industry similarly believe that most aspects of life can be manipulated with similar psychological tactics to those that work in the ring. This is most often described as, “Life is a work.” We must remember that a “work” to professional wrestlers is a performance with a predetermined outcome seeking to create a particular reaction of an audience and thereby dictate their future behavior. This means that in the parlance of professional wrestling, life is a performance. Professional wrestlers and professional wrestling personnel also tend to be highly attuned to con artists, manipulators, propaganda, and circumstances designed to create a particular outcome. This also manifests with paranoia that the results of normal sporting events being manipulated by leagues or referees for marketing and gambling purposes. From Shakespeare to Schechner to Sensational Sherri, the world has been a proverbial stage, and the people play the witting game of performance in their daily lives. However, it should be noted that when enjoying professional wrestling, both the performers and the audience make a mutual agreement that the performance art is being displayed for the purposes of commercial entertainment, whereas the manipulations of performance in daily life and ritual go unstated or unnoticed by many. Verily, if life is a work, then in the words of Mick Foley, “The real world is faker than wrestling,” (Foley, 2001).

## 1.4 Modern Academic Scholarship on Professional Wrestling Studies

Carlson maintained that the best way for professional wrestling to become a more academically accepted style of performance was for passionate academics to study professional wrestling in the context of performance (M. Carlson, personal communication, 12 May 2022). This study aims to be a contribution to that growing field of scholarship. Academic journals have begun opening their walled gardens to the study of professional wrestling. The Professional Wrestling Studies Association is an organization of “scholars, bloggers, journalists, fans, wrestling insiders, and other professionals from around the world to discuss, analyze, and critique different aspects of professional wrestling.” The organization was established officially in 2018 and has published a peer-reviewed scholarly journal titled *Professional Wrestling Studies Journal* since 2020 alongside a digital magazine titled *PWSA Ringside* and an annual symposium regarding academic studies of professional wrestling studies titled *WrestlePosium*. The executive committee of this organization includes its President Prof. Carrielynn Reinhard Ph.D., Vice President/President Elect Prof. Lowery

Woodall, Membership Officer and Treasurer Prof. Tunisia Singleton Ph.D., Chief Journal Officer Prof. Matt Foy Ph.D., Chief Website/Blog Editor Jesssica Fontaine, Student Representative Christopher Olson, Non-Academic Representative Lee Benaka, and Member-at-Large Hussaini Garba Mohammad. Another notable journal dedicated to the art of professional wrestling is *Orange Crush: The Journal of Art & Wrestling* was founded by Adam Abdalla provides a platform of in-depth analysis regarding professional wrestling and a platform for nuanced journalistic fandom.

Notable articles and collections of peer-reviewed scholarly works on profession wrestling include (but are not limited to): *Professional Wrestling: Politics and Populism* edited by Sharon Mazer, Heather Levi, Eero Laine and Neil Haynes; *Identity in Professional Wrestling: Essays on Nationality, Race and Gender* edited by Aaron Horton, *Performance and Professional Wrestling* edited by Broderick Chow, Eero Laine (again), and Claire Warden. Another significant piece of scholarship on professional wrestling comes from the aforementioned Eero Laine, who also wrote the book *Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage*, which thoughtfully examines much of the for-profit business of the professional wrestling business in the context of commercial theatre. When it comes to the history of professional wrestling, several names recurred throughout the writing of this study.

While most of the above content discusses the melodrama, business, culture and cultural influence of professional wrestling, the actual physical action of performing in the style is largely overlooked. A scholarly article partly focused on the physical execution of professional wrestling moves is *The Work and The Shoot: Professional Wrestling and Embodied Politics* by the aforementioned Broderick D.V. Chow, published in 2014 in *The Drama Review* (edited by Dr. Schechner) (Chow, 2014). Chow is himself a Theatre & Drama Lecturer at London's Brunel University and a scholar of both sports culture and choreographics. In this article, Chow describes his research experience of training to be a wrestler as a means of studying the physical art form. Chow's work in this area is particularly noteworthy as he chose to undergo the rigors of professional wrestling training to gain an understanding of how the mechanics of physical choreography works in this medium. This is somewhat juxtaposed to the writer of this piece, a professional wrestler with over 15 years of experience at the time of this writing, pouring that personal research and citation-backed

expertise into the academic molds of culture, craft, industry, and history for the purposes of this study.

Professional wrestling also has a number of dedicated historians tracking its rich and ongoing history. Tim Hornbaker is one of the foremost historians of professional wrestling. His books on different historical eras of professional wrestling and his LegacyOfWrestling.com website are reliable and engaging resources for anyone interested in professional wrestling history. A great historian of early professional wrestling is Ken Zimmerman Jr. who wrote a number of definitive works on the transition era between legitimate catch wrestling and kayfabe professional wrestling. Ruslan Pashayev, who interviewed for this study, is an eminent historian of legitimate catch wrestling in the late-19th and early 20th century. Keepers of biographical archives regarding significant professional wrestling figures and events include Jimmy Wheeler of the Professional Wrestling Historical Society and Sean Sweeny of Online World of Wrestling. Prolific internet writers whose work has contributed multiple times to the historical record of professional wrestling herein include Danny Djeljosevic, Jamie Greer, Javier Ojst, Jim Phillips, and Stephen Von Sagle. Respected wrestler and digital columnist Jason Kincaid also contributed mightily to this study, as well as to the growing digital record of professional wrestling history. It is also worth noting that the professional wrestling media constantly provides content relating to the news either within storylines or behind the scenes of professional wrestling. Likely the most respected of the former category is *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*, which has continuously been in circulation from 1975 to the time of this writing. Despite consistent accusations by many industry professionals of bias and unreliable reporting, professional wrestling tabloids like *The Wrestling Observer*, *The Pro Wrestling Torch*, and *PWInsider* (among others) remain popular publications for die-hard fans, and consistently documented sources of editorialized news.

Many of the sources for this study were primary sources from luminaries of the professional wrestling industry. Luminaries whose first-person reviews of their careers which contributed to this study include Ric Flair, Hulk Hogan, Lou Thesz, Harley Race, Shawn Michaels, Bret Hart, Mick Foley, Dusty Rhodes, Paul Heyman, Tom Billington, Eddie Guerro, Terry Funk, Chris Jericho, William Regal, Jim Cornette, and Jim Ross. These works, and the multitude of others in the subgenre of wrestler memoirs, bring engaging first-hand accounts of the living history of professional wrestling. As industry professionals and wrestlers, their

sharing of this history is leaving a legacy of the performing art for the edification of future generations.

Perhaps the most valuable resource for the modern history of professional wrestling is the Ad Free Shows podcast network established by Conrad Thompson. Through his seemingly impossible number of professional wrestling nostalgia podcasts, conventions, and match promotions, Thompson has established the most massive database of the oral history of professional wrestling in the late-20th and early 21st centuries in existence. This has proven to be, and will continue to be, an incredibly valuable source of information for future scholarship on professional wrestling. In 2023, the George Tragos/Lou Thesz National Professional Wrestling Hall of Fame gave Thompson the Gordon Solie Award for excellence in professional wrestling broadcasting (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Thompson was inducted by his original professional wrestling podcast co-host and current WWE executive Bruce Prichard, whose professional career was the first of many which Thompson has resurrected.

Other valuable stewardship of the history of professional wrestling comes from data archives like CageMatch.net and Wrestling-Titles.com. These two databases, based respectively in Germany and Japan, are a treasure trove of data about the history of professional wrestling. CageMatch actively tracks every professional wrestling match, feud, wrestler and show in every major promotion. It contains the entire known career wrestling histories of thousands of performers. Likewise, Wrestling-Titles.com tracks the histories of professional wrestling championships, as well as historical documents, match results, and data relevant to maintaining the historical record of professional wrestling from around the world.

## 1.5 The Performativity of Americanness: Cultural Symbolism in Professional Wrestling Performance

As a distinctly American art, professional wrestling has served to widely propagate iconography across global cultures throughout its history, and most distinctly over the past 50 years. At its core, professional wrestling is the creation of a fictional context wherein a culture can describe and exalt its values, while demonizing the violation of those values. The traditional craft of the narrative sets a stage for a morality play wherein virtue and villainy

come into direct conflict in pursuit of a shared, mutually exclusive goal. However, cultures evolve over time, and so too must the cultural values of that moment in time. Professional wrestling is often described as a cyclical business, with a persistent boom and bust industry. While there is some debate within both the professional wrestling industry and professional wrestling fandom as to the cause, this study strongly posits that the central cause of the booms in professional wrestling is that the content of the episodic performances captures the tone and tenor of a cultural moment, usually through one or more lead performers with genre transcendent appeal backed a strong supporting ensemble. The bust periods emerge when the central thematics of the narrative fail to track with the cultural moment, and/or when the transcendent performers stop performing. The ebb and flow of specific values in American culture over time can be highlighted through professional wrestling. While all cultures that embrace professional wrestling use it as a platform to propagate such values, this section examines the American traditional style of professional wrestling as described in Chapter 1. The emergence of professional wrestling as an American art form is reflective of the cultural practice in the United States of propagating cultural mythos through performative fiction and iconic cultural archetypes.

In her book *The Fiction of America: Performance and the Cultural Imaginary in Literature and Film*, Susanne Hamscha, asserts that “Americanness,” is asserted through widely embraced mythic figures in fiction as cultural imagery, which then influence the demonstrations of the values those fictional characters represent through copying and performing those behaviors (Hamscha, 2013, p. 13). Hamscha wrote in reference to imagery of frontier heroes in American art:

It depicts a version of America that does not correlate with the political, social, and economic ‘realities’ of the United States. Rather, it is a representation of a very specific imagining of American culture which is grounded in an elaborate system of stock concepts and images, whose manifestation in actual cultural products may vary and are contingent on the context in which they appear. However, the basic structure of these concepts essentially remains the same. What is more, it is precisely the transformability of these images/concepts and their ability to adapt to the course of time that contributes to their persistence in American culture. Their continued

presence is so strong that it appears as if they indeed reflected a ‘reality’ when, in fact, they represent an imaginary version of ‘America.’ (Hamscha, 2013, p. 15)

The identity of an “American” is largely fluid, as the nation is built upon a melting pot of cultures, races, religions, nationalities, people, and peoples of all kinds. The definitions of that traditional identity emerged from early writers during the American Renaissance, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, and Nathaniel Hawthorne (Hamscha, 2013, pp. 89 & 285). The establishment of the traditional, now classical, American character was an exercise in solidifying national identity through the constant reiteration and repetition of foundational characters in foundational scenarios (Hamscha, 2013, p. 285). This cultural construction in fiction served to stabilize the patchwork culture of the growing nation.

Hamscha’s assertions of the performativity of Americanness mesh directly with a number of aspects of professional wrestling performance. Americanness and professional wrestling are both built around fictional archetypes. The most obvious among them is the use of *gimmicks* as a central unit of character. Characters in pro wrestling are usually initially established as flat archetypes, which (if executed well) emerge as multidimensional, nuanced archetypes over time. At the time of this writing, there are multiple famous, successful, prominent professional wrestlers whose characters are most readily described as stereotypical cowboys, partiers, arrogant aristocrats, foreigners, martial artists, narcissist, cowardly dandy, sleazy manager, and humanoid monsters, among others. Depending on the precise performer and the nuance of their storylines, these characters may emerge as multidimensional, like Adam “Hangman” Page’s acclaimed run as an angsty millennial cowboy, or Wyndham “Bray Wyatt” Rotunda’s years-long turn as a demonic swamp cultist. However, part of the appeal of professional wrestling is that most characters can be almost immediately visually deduced, despite the nuance that most performers attempt to bring to their performances and can be quickly explained by the narration of live commentators.

Patriotic heroes in professional wrestling have been a staple of the art form since the 19th century. National pride and the perceived villainy of foreigners have always posed tremendous drawing power in professional wrestling. The examples of this are too numerous to mention in total, but a few examples include: the alliance of Khrushchev, Ivan Koloff and

Nikita Koloff as Russians and their goose-stepping cohort Baron von Raschke<sup>15</sup> in the NWA<sup>16</sup> feuding with ; Hulk Hogan's rise to prominence was launched by his defeating the Iranian villain Iron Sheik<sup>17</sup> shortly after the Iranian hostage crisis and during the Iran-Iraq War; American Olympic hero Kurt Angle winning the WWF title 12 days after the 9/11 Terror Attacks. So prominent was the patriotism of Hogan's babyface run from 1984-1996 that the iconic lyrics<sup>18</sup> of his theme song said:

I am a real American  
Fight for the rights of every man  
I am a real American  
And fight for what's right  
Fight for your life

Even when Americanness and patriotism are not the central themes of the characters or the storylines at play, the values of American culture play heavily into the performance. This process is described in the context of match choreography in Chapter Two.<sup>19</sup> The symbolism of the pursuit of Americanness in the heroes and heroic actions in professional wrestling is indicative of the cyclical relationship between exalting American virtues through fiction and the constant re-popularization of those ideals through that fiction. The world heavyweight championship<sup>20</sup> is the central object that drives the plot of professional wrestling, and in the pursuit of it, wrestlers must choose either the virtuous or the villainous path, as defined by American culture. There are a finite number of championship belts, and in the traditionalist estimation, the more finite they are, the more valuable they become. Whoever holds the belt is granted the implied prestige, wealth, respect, and glory that it represents, alongside the power that those prizes hold. The metaphor here is that wealth, prosperity, and respect in American culture and traditional professional wrestling can be pursued along the lines of either path in the ethical binary. Per that ethical structure, Americans will either embrace

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<sup>15</sup> Raschke is a Nebraska-born US Army veteran and a wrestler on the 1964 US Olympic team.

<sup>16</sup> All four members of the stable were born and raised in North America (the US and Canada).

<sup>17</sup> Hossein Khosrow Ali Vaziri, aka The Iron Sheik, emigrated to the US to escape the Iranian revolution, served as an assistant coach for the US Greco-Roman wrestling team for the 1972 Munich Olympics, married an American woman, fathered three American children, and proudly gained American citizenship.

<sup>18</sup> Lyrics by Rick Derringer and performed by Derringer. (Morris, 2022)

<sup>19</sup> The specifics of the expressions of American values in professional wrestling choreography is described in detail in sections 2.4, 2.5, 2.7, and 2.8.

<sup>20</sup> Branding may vary for the top championship belt in a promotion, but "world heavyweight championship" is the most common phrasing and is often used in place of other branding by fans.

heroes for winning the “right way” or resent villains for winning the “wrong way.” So great are the passions of fans for these principles, that they have often rioted at the antics and tactics of wrestling villains, and many heels have been attacked by incensed fans. As professional wrestling evolved in the late-20th and early 21st Centuries, it adopted a more complex ethical dynamic that became the aforementioned ethical spectrum. This more nuanced understanding of the methods to success in the squared circle was reflective of the changing attitudes towards the pursuit of success and the defiance of norms of previous generations.

The tremendous irony here is that classical American values are, as Hamscha asserted, imaginary and while emotionally satisfying in the abstract, cannot accurately or realistically define the path to success in the United States; so too are the fictional wrestling matches that demonstrate their importance. Virtue is not the sole determining factor of economic, social, or political success in the United States. While certain forms of privilege are vilified in professional wrestling, most typically wealth, the oppression of social minority groups is seldom addressed in any meaningful way. Americans do, however, take comfort in the familiar fantasy that all one needs in the world are the values sold to them by deep-voiced narrators parroting banal platitudes about American work ethic over-dubbed with swelling orchestral music, images of a waving flag, and tagged only at the end with the brand of beer that paid for the 30-second dissociative trip to the United States of Narnia<sup>21</sup>. The truth about American life is that success, problem-solving, and life are not as simple as Tocquevillian values, Hollywood films, or professional wrestling would make them seem. Following “Stone Cold” Steve Austin’s example and bashing an overhearing corporate boss’s head in with a steel chair is a pathway to generational wealth in the world of kayfabe, but in the US it is a swift path to an indictment of aggravated assault with a deadly weapon and/or attempted murder. However, the observers watching the heroes that embody their repressed impulses, courage, and actualized selves is what draws fans into the story. All of professional wrestling and Americanness is about the self-actualization of people in the process of overcoming challenges. As such, the importance of that ethos being reinforced throughout an endless episodic fictional platform allows the viewer to emulate their heroes by showing up, day-after-day, week-after-week, and grinding through a seemingly endless line of challenges in

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<sup>21</sup> The United States of Narnia is a fantasy country.



pursuit of the belt and the actualization it symbolizes. Tocqueville asserted that the public performance of the acquisitions of personal and material success in the United States was a function of democracy, as it theoretically equalized citizens before the law. Hamscha determined that Tocqueville's writings conflated the performativity, self-fashioning, and theatricality of successes as a part of America's culture. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville wrote:

In the United States, a man carefully builds a dwelling in which to pass his declining years, and he sells it while the roof is being laid; he plants a garden and he rents it out just as he was going to taste its fruits; he clears a field and he leaves to others the care of harvesting its crops. He embraces a profession and quits it. He settles in a place from which he departs soon after so as to take his changing desires elsewhere. Should his private affairs give him some respite, he immediately plunges into the whirlwind of politics. And when toward the end of a year filled with work some leisure still remains to him, he carries his restive curiosity here and there within the vast limits of the United States. He will thus go five hundred leagues in a few days in order better to distract himself from his happiness.

Death finally comes, and it stops him before he has grown weary of this useless pursuit of a complete felicity that always flees from him. (Tocqueville, 2000 pp. 511-512)

Hamscha examines the performativity of Americanness through the lens provided by Carlson in observing that performance is a field so broad that it encompasses nearly every deliberate human activity (Hamscha, 2013, pp. 38-39). She quotes *The Haunted Stage: Theater as Memory Machine*, "Its performance's embodiment of the tension between a *given form or content* from the past and the *inevitable adjustments* of an ever-changing present make it an operation of particular interest at a time of widespread interest in cultural negotiations" (Hamscha, 2013, p. 39). Hamscha goes on to conclude that Carlson's determination means that the repetition of performance from the past creates a platform to appropriate and re-examine the art. In the context of Americanness, this means that performing the "how" of the culture as a function of the "what" evolves over time, and therefore the definition of what a culture is shifts part and parcel with how that culture is expressed in performance. In

professional wrestling this principle is demonstrated in real time the shifts in American attitudes towards functionally stock characters. An example of this occurring in the WWF in 1998, upon seeing wholesome American hero Kurt Angle cut a promo exalting traditional values, WWE Executive Bruce Prichard described it as a great heel performance in the context of 1990's counter-culture, much to the chagrin of his traditionalist colleagues whom envision the Olympic gold medalist as a paragon of virtue (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Prof. Joseph Roach Ph.D.<sup>22</sup> posits that the process of evolving performative norms happens as attempts to re-enacted past performances instead reinvents those performances by adjusting them toward the present (Hamscha, 2013, p. 39). Schechner alternately describes this process as revision, reinvention and reiteration. From the writings of Carlson, Schechner, and Roach, Hamscha determined that performance demonstrates the embodiment of an intentional action at a particular time, that repeating that performance is the attempted embodiment of that memory, and that the act of repeating or changing that performance is an act of memorializing or forgetting a past event or action and therefore this definition is applied to culture<sup>23</sup> and cultural performativity, it has the power to reinvent the culture (Hamscha, 2013, pp. 39-40). Hamscha submits:

Performance, I therefore argue, must not only be analyzed in terms of temporality and longevity, but rather in terms of multiple interactions. While these interactions take place in the moment of the now and are therefore elusive and ephemeral, they may have long-lasting effects as they can serve to reaffirm or to deconstruct normative notions of Americanness. (Hamscha, 2013, p. 41)

Hamscha later asserts that over time, American culture has begun to challenge its classical images of heroism. Hamscha later contextualized this idea, "Upon a closer look, the cowboy proves to be a highly ambivalent figure in whom conflicting and very contradictory versions of Americanness become manifest" (Hamscha, 2013, p, 291). While Hamscha points out the gay cowboy love story of 2005's Oscar-winning neo-western *Brokeback Mountain* as a reconsideration of the cowboy character, so too is Adam "Hangman" Page's 2-year journey overcoming alcoholism, self-doubt, betrayal, and a cadre of enemies through emotional

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<sup>22</sup> Prof. Joseph Roach Ph.D. is the Director of Theatre Studies at Yale University and a prolific author and essayist on performance theory.

<sup>23</sup> Roach's theories heavily influenced Hamscha's writings in this section.

intimacy and self-reflection (plus some cool wrestling moves) to become the world champion of AEW. Professional wrestling constantly reconsiders the heroism and villainy of American culture, and is most successful when it is found.<sup>24</sup> America, Americanness, and professional wrestling are all constantly in a state of fluid evolution, and the common narrative thread that aligns those evolutions is the unending pursuit of self-actualization and the ensuing complete felicity that each of them promises, but none of them ever delivers.

## 2.0 The Craft of the Work

It is a matter of some public knowledge that today the term “professional wrestling” is not used in reference to any style of paid participation in a competitive grappling contest under any set of rules. This is a globally accepted, if wildly counter-intuitive fact. There are dozens of styles of wrestling, grappling and non-striking martial arts that are vigorously competed at on local, regional, national, international and indeed world level by highly skilled practitioners all over the world. Participants at the highest levels in these styles of grappling combat are often compensated for their efforts and successes. The Soviet Army employed amateur wrestlers in Greco-Roman and Freestyle Wrestling simply to train and compete in those styles without worrying about income or housing (Hopper, 2021). Cuba’s famed national team training program pays competitors by way of meals and housing (Rogan, 2018). Japanese Sumo wrestling has been governed by the Japanese Sumo Association continuously for over 300 years, with massive, Mawashi-clad, paid professional athletes competing for the title of Ozeki or Yokozuna (Japanistry, 2021). Even the USA Wrestling put a bounty of \$250,000 on Olympic gold in either of the recognized styles (Abbot, 2021). Over the past decade there has been an explosion of organizations promoting professional Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, or a companion rule set based on no-pin/submission-based grappling (O’Donnell, 2021). From Mongolian Bohk, to Indian Pehlwani, to Senegalese Laamb, to Turkish Yağlı Güreş, to Cornish Rasslin, to American Folkstyle; some manner of wrestling emerges from almost every culture, grapplers will earn money competing in it. Yet despite this reality, they will not be called “professional wrestlers” in the mainstream consciousness. Almost every culture around the world has its own take on the grappling arts, and yet, when someone uses the descriptor “professional wrestling,” none of those sports or sportsmen come to mind,

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<sup>24</sup> These evolutions are discussed in detail and at length in Chapter 4.

though all over the above-mentioned professional athletes, competing in their styles of grappling.

In the parlance of the industry, professional wrestling is a “work.” A “work” is defined as a scripted sequence of events meant to leverage a particular reaction from an intended audience. Professional wrestling uses a complex series of techniques and tactics honed throughout the evolution of the craft to elicit a variety of reactions from the audience, with the ultimate goal of having the audience members spend their money on the experience and/or its keepsake mementos. The kayfabe conspiracy was largely successful for several decades. Though the legitimacy of contests were often questioned by the public, there was enough plausible deniability to allow spectators to suspend their disbelief. As the generations wore on and the secret society expanded and globalized, preserving the secret performance art nature of the art form became untenable, and worse, unprofitable. While the 1937 novel *Fall Guys: The Barnums of Bounce* exposed the business in print, and various luminaries of the industry had admitted in various public forums that professional wrestling was performance art, the subculture of wrestling traces the end of kayfabe to an action by WWE mogul Vince McMahon in his 1989 testimony. After that point, kayfabe is mostly used to reference the audience’s suspension of disbelief.

As a relic from the days of legitimate competition in the first decades of the 20th century, athletic commissions across the United States still oversaw professional wrestling. This included medical screenings, licensing, regulation, and most importantly a sanctioning fee paid to the athletic commission, usually in the neighborhood of 10% of the live gate. This fee amounted to a de facto legitimacy tax paid to athletic commissions well-aware of the worked nature of professional wrestling. Having the sanctioning of the same agencies of the state governments which were responsible for sanctioning boxing and other sports added a defensible supposition that the action in the ring was a legitimate athletic contest.

As an uncompromising capitalist, McMahon has no appetite for paying for any state government’s complicity in an eroding public deceit. Instead, realizing that the appeal of professional wrestling was character-driven spectacle, McMahon famously and infamously declared professional wrestling as *sports entertainment*. While an apt term for describing the actual happenings of the shows, sports entertainment is and has often been used as a derisive

term by classically-minded professional wrestling purists. However, the public admission by the dominant global promotion that the industry was an action-packed melodrama was an important step in the knowing acceptance of professional wrestling. This also was a death blow to most athletic commissions' ability to tax professional wrestling as a sport. Despite this, the athletic commissions from some states like Kentucky and Virginia charge wrestlers licensing fees, though research revealed that there is apparently no such requirement for touring Broadway musicals. Most states still require a license to promote professional wrestling shows, and many require a doctor to be on-site at all times in case of injury.

Once the great collective trade secret was revealed to the world, the fanbase defied all classical reasoning and embraced professional wrestling as spectacle. Indeed, it exploded in popularity as the existence of kayfabe became public knowledge. As it turned out, generations of fans who had observed professional wrestling evolved from a limited series of mat-based holds into an ever-more-spectacular exchange of garish violence, the audience had accepted that the show, even if staged, was entertaining enough to justify the expenditure of money on tickets and merchandise.

A key factor in this evolution of spectator attitude is the size of shifts in media that have come since the Carnival Era. When Lee de Forest made the innovation of public radio in 1920, George Hackenschmidt and the US 1908 Olympic wrestling team were more than a decade past, and Frank Gotch was a few years dead (Bellis, 2020). Though feature films had been a staple since the 1910s, talking pictures would emerge in the 1930's (Bellis, 2020). The invention of television would see a similar change in the 1950's and 1960's (Bellis, 2020). With each innovation, the tastes of consumers evolved, and the narrative fiction they consumed along with it: radio plays begat teleplays with the accompanying sets; silent films became talkies; appointment televisions became watch-when-you-please streaming content; and so on. Audiences grew accustomed to comfortably suspending their disbelief and allowing themselves to be spellbound by the story. And while seeing on-screen figures Scarlett O'Hara and live was still impossible, Mildred Burke was on tour all over the country. Promoters in the early Kayfabe Era had no frame of reference to believe that audiences would pay to see a live performance of staged combat, particularly not one lasting for several hours. Nothing in their personal or business experience in the early 1900's would indicate that there is a massive, global, paying audience for wrist-lock Shakespeare.

Though other forms of commercial narrative fiction have been analyzed, criticized, and pondered ad nauseam throughout the last 150 years, professional wrestling has been largely excluded from artistic discourse. It is the intention of this study to reveal the artistic complexities of professional wrestling performance, and thus explain both its widespread appeal and its cultural significance. Among theater and performance theorists, professional wrestling is considered among the lower strata of sophistication. This means that the artisans of professional wrestling do not receive funding grants for their performances, performers are excluded from labor guilds, and that the spectacular live events are never even considered for theatrical or television achievement awards. This study posits that the exclusion of professional wrestling is due in part to its colorful bombasticness, innate prejudices against its working class audience, and complete ignorance of its storytelling conventions among most scholars in the academic fields of theater, drama, and performance. This study focuses on the latter-most of those points, as this ignorance can be addressed by describing the craft, its standards, and its conventions in detail. Prejudices against the working class and an aversion to gladiatorial histrionic pageantry are matters of moral failure and personal taste, respectively, and therefore cannot be cured with only additional factual data. In short, professional wrestling and its fans get little to no respect from non-fans and the academic community. To put it into context: no the wrestling matches are not real and neither were *The Three Sisters*; however it is inescapably true no one outside of professional wrestling fandom is studying the sublimeness of Walter “Gunther” Hahn’s technique and that Chekov’s earthtone realism won’t be selling out Texas Stadium anytime soon.<sup>25</sup> This study will close that intellectual gap between lovers of professional wrestling and lovers of theater by revealing the technical, structure, and performative complexities of professional wrestling.

It is with this understanding that the true craft of professional wrestling will be unraveled. The most important and least understood aspect of the craft of professional wrestling is the means of *how* it is choreographed in such a way that can spellbind an audience for up to or over an hour. In this section, the mystery of how after over a century there are still new and unique matches being presented every week will be addressed. While the aspects of

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<sup>25</sup> This references WWE’s *Wrestlemania 38* event, which drew a reported 156,352 attendees over two days to the stadium in Arlington, Texas, USA.

melodrama and character have been studied by an increasing number of scholars, the character exists as preamble to their actions in the ring. The artistic styles which the actor-athletes use to tell their stories are ill-understood, and seldom-if-ever academically studied. The once-secret subtleties of the art form are lost on the dismissive academic establishment.

While there have been several exposes on the methods to many of the maneuvers, tricks, and illusion of professional wrestling, the craft of emotional and narrative stories through choreography has not been definitively revealed. The formatting by which these matches are conducted is left out of all authoritative texts on professional wrestling. Indeed, perhaps the most unique scholarly contribution of this study will be adding this formatting of storytelling into the scholarly zeitgeist, therefore serving as a starting point for expanded analyses and criticism of professional wrestling as performance. Simply put, the goal of this study is to create a starting point for further scholarly exploration of professional wrestling as narrative performance art.

Though the writer of this study is a trained professional wrestler with over a decade of experience (at the time of this writing), for the sake of objectivity and academic rigor, this section was written in consultation with a professional wrestler of international acclaim with diverse experience across the various prevailing styles of professional wrestling. The professional wrestler tasked with introducing the craft of in-ring storytelling to the academic world is Jason “The Gift” Kincaid. Kincaid is an American professional wrestler from the hamlet of Oak Hill, West Virginia. Born in 1985, Kincaid began training as a professional wrestler in 2003 under the tutelage of former WCW, USWA, and Smokey Mountain Wrestling talent Scotty McKeever. McKeever was a widely respected performer and acclaimed trainer throughout the Appalachian, Mid-Atlantic, and Southeastern US. Kincaid would then receive additional training from the Batten Twins, a highly respected tag-team who were mainstays of top territories in the 1980’s and performed for WCW, WWC and Smokey Mountain Wrestling though the early and mid-1990’s. Kincaid also credits much of his in-ring storytelling ability and training to his long-time tag-team partner TJ Phillips. A fellow student of McKeever, Phillips is an American independent wrestler and trainer of considerable acclaim, who has been featured on the WWE network, in addition to being a mixed martial arts and grappling champion. This cadre of trainers allowed Kincaid to develop expertise in the traditional American storytelling format of professional wrestling common

from the Slam Bang Era until now. Kincaid is widely known for expertly weaving this traditional storytelling methodology in with innovative modern choreography and complex submission grappling.

Over a 20-year career, Kincaid has performed at a litany of top promotions including WWE NXT, TNA/Impact Wrestling, Ring of Honor, the NWA, and EVOLVE Wrestling. He has also done extensive international touring with Dynamic Dream Team (DDT) and Gan Pro in Japan, Chilanga Mask and Lucha Libre Aztlán in Mexico, and Canada Wrestling's Elite in Canada. Kincaid performed regularly in his early career for Ted DiBiase's Power Wrestling Alliance and George South's Exodus Wrestling Alliance. Kincaid is a former NWA World Junior Heavyweight Champion, where his name is among a lineage that includes Danny Hodge, Verne Gagne, Hiro Matsuda, Tiger Mask, Último Dragon, Gerald Brisco, Shinjiro Otani, Ricky Morton, and Jushin Thunder Liger. Kincaid also won the East Coast Wrestling Association's prestigious Super 8 tournament in 2015; other winners of this tournament include Christopher Daniels, Davey Richards, Petey Williams, Xavier Woods, Tommaso Chianpa, Paul London, Low Ki, and Jerry Lynn. The list of big-name performers with who he has performed thus far includes but is not limited to: AJ Styles, Kyle O'Reilly, Bob Evans, Jimmy Jacobs, Davey Richards, Keisuke Ishii, Chuck Taylor, Lance Hoyt, Adam Pearce, Chase Owens, Rob Conway, Brian Kendrick, Shuji Ishikawa, Chris Hero, Sonjay Dutt, Dijak, Roderick Strong, Mark Brisco, Kaleb Konley, Giovanni Vinci, Jun Kasai, and Matt Riddle.

Perhaps most importantly, Kincaid is universally respected among his peers across generations, nations and in-ring styles for his professionalism, in-ring skill, innovation, adaptability, athleticism, and respect for the performance art. Kincaid is also a writer and columnist for Fightful.com, a professional wrestling and combat sports website. The writer of this study and Kincaid have been friends, training partners, and occasional in-ring opponents for 15 years at the time of this writing. The information shared herein has been covered in years of discussions about the philosophy and artistic methods of professional wrestling between the writer and Kincaid. Kincaid was chosen as a principal articulator of this widely-accepted and eminently verifiable data because of his holistic conscientious understanding of in-ring storytelling.



Before delving into the method of the craft, understand that the style of storytelling here will be the staple physical plot arc of a 7-stage basic American-style professional wrestling match, a case-study of a 9-Phase Advanced American-style professional wrestling match, and an historically significant long-term character plot arc. This ring psychology varies in its pacing and presentation but is generally the first style of match taught to young American professional wrestlers. Just as musical styles vary among cultures, so do styles of professional wrestling. In the Mexican Lucha Libre style of professional wrestling, the narrative style is different. The puroseau style, roughly translated to “strong style” of Japanese professional wrestling, has its own narrative conventions. The same can be said of round-based European wrestling which often carries the historic “catch style” moniker. The inner working of each of those styles of physical performance, as well as their unique approaches to character, could justify their own dissertation by a future scholar. The towering figures, cultural impact and evolutions of those artistic subgenres could also justify book-length scholarship.

It is also noteworthy that this 7-phase foundational match and the case study of the 9-act variant are not meant to demonstrate outstanding ringcraft. Indeed, these are meant to demonstrate a median match in the American style. The reason that a fundamental match of median quality was selected for demonstration of the storytelling style rather than an exceptional match is multifaceted. Firstly, an average match structure is more representative of the bulk of the bell curve of match quality and therefore a better representation of the genre. It is also more likely to be applicable to a match in the American style chosen at random for analysis. Moreover, exceptional matches tend to have more complex storytelling by virtue of being above average. Analyzing such matches first requires an understanding of the foundational match style(s), so the esoteric deviation from that structure or particularly creative approaches to it can be understood in the context of the storytelling structure. As it stands now, there is little to no academic understanding of American ring psychology in the abstract at the foundational level, making it impossible for critical analysis for objectively gauging match quality. Moreover, adherence to this structure is not the sole arbiter of whether a match is “good” or “bad.” That assertion will ruffle some traditionalist feathers, but the true arbiters and metrics of match quality is public interest, audience reaction, and monetization. Interpretation of artistic success is highly subjective and variable, as it is in all artistic media. Rather, this foundational structure establishes a historical norm for American professional wrestling match wherefrom artistic variations may grow. These matches also demonstrate the

basics of safe in-ring moves, strikes, falls, landings, selling, choreography, in-match communication, and active crowd interaction. Revealing these techniques is a violation of the historical secretive norms of maintaining kayfabe. However, promoting the evolution of public understanding of professional wrestling storytelling and breaking free of its historical designation as fringe entertainment. Indeed, demonstrating professional wrestling as a valid genre of performance necessitates these revelations.

This style of storytelling is often referred to as *ring psychology*. This practice of using maneuvers of physical combat to manipulate the emotions of the audience has been well-established within the wrestling world for generations. This method of physical storytelling can be firmly laid out like sheet music or improvised like jazz. Which of those approaches is most applicable is often dictated by the time allotted for the match, the level of creative freedom which is given to the wrestlers, and the disposition of the wrestlers involved.

Traditionalist wrestlers who were groomed in or under the norms of the Kayfabe Era, tend to have sensibilities favoring more improvisational wrestling with a few specific spots set up beforehand. This is meant to create a more realistic and unpredictable feel to the proceedings. The unrehearsed nature of it also allows for any botches to be covered and/or addressed without throwing off the general narrative of the match. It also has an advantage of being adjustable to the preferences of the individual live crowds. Wrestling fans exist in particular subgroups which tend towards particular styles of presentation, so being able to adjust to those preferences immediately makes for a more entertaining live presentation. A drawback to this style is that the process of feeling out the preferences of individual crowds takes time in the ring, and rank-and-file modern wrestlers seldom have an excess of ring time to figure that out.

Modernist wrestlers who grew up in the post-Kayfabe Era tend to have more structured matches with specific choreography. This makes for a clearer and more visually spectacular presentation. A big advantage of this approach is that timing can be set to within a few seconds of the match. This is especially important for televised matches which have firm match times to hit that are often dictated in increments of seconds. This style also allows for a faster-paced match where more moves are apparent. It also highlights the athleticism of the competitors and relies on their physical and mental conditioning to work in tandem to keep

their pace in a complex performance. It is also a very cooperative style where performers must be hyper-aware of what their performance partner (read: opponent) is doing. A drawback of this style is that if a botch happens, it often wildly throws off the overall narrative, and some modernist wrestlers struggle to find their way back to their initial story or make up a new one as the match is going on. Another potential issue is that it doesn't allow much room for mid-performance adjustments to the match narrative if the audience is not showing interest in the proceedings.

Verily, this dissertation will focus on the American style of in-ring narrative. This selection was made for various reasons. First among them is that American professional wrestling is globally the most popular and therefore most familiar to most people. Secondly, there is a glut of present first-hand history and primary documents relating to this sub-genre. This facet means that the venerated figures who were once (or are currently) top performers, promoters, producers, and contributors are available to share their expertise. Lastly, as professional wrestling has evolved hand-in-hand with media technology, the consistent episodic documentation of American professional wrestling has been more actively and fluidly reflective of American culture at a given time than perhaps every other art form.

## 2.1 The Foundational American Professional Wrestling Match

For this discussion of the basic psychology and physical choreography of an American professional wrestling match, we will be focusing on the most basic expression of the art form: The 7-stage professional wrestling match (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This match will involve two wrestlers and a referee. There can be added characters and production accoutrement to the match depending on the presentation. This type of match is usually presented in the classic *babyface versus heel* ethical binary. It is often referred to as a *singles match*. This is typically the first match that every wrestler is taught. Importantly, the structure of this match is the same in both Traditionalist and Modernist American wrestling. The psychology of this type of match serves as the blueprint for most or all other matches. There is some persistent and ongoing debate about applying and adapting the blueprint for different match types and situations. There are many other structures of stories in American wrestling, which performers widely demonstrate. Following the format of this exact style of match is not necessarily a sole criterion for judging the

success of a match. However, the 7-phase format is most essential to understand this basic narrative structure because it is the mold from which all contemporary American wrestling springs.

It is also worth noting that it is the basis for most top matches on most live or televised wrestling events (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). It is also typical that the most valued talisman, which drives the narratives of the promotion, be the top singles match title belt. Depending on the promotion, this top singles title is often called the “world championship,” though that term is often used dubiously by smaller wrestling organizations. There are only a handful of these prop belts which are recognized beyond debate to truly warrant that distinction by the wrestling media and community.

This section will also discuss the second-most common style of professional wrestling match: the tag-team match (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). A tag team match follows much of the same narrative structure of a single match. However, this narrative is then split amongst four actor-athletes and a referee. There are also a few additional wrinkles in the timing and structuring of the match that will be discussed.

## 2.2 Match Time

The performance of an American professional wrestling match is normally issued a firm performance time by the booker for the show (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This time will vary by the match’s placement on the card, by the story that the match is meant to tell, and by the priority of that story during the show’s allotted time. Typical live wrestling shows are over two hours or longer in length. The time limits on live shows vary based on the regulations of the buildings being used for the show and audience fatigue.

Taped professional wrestling programs normally range between one and three hours, depending on the promotion and the program (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The live events during which the television tapings take place typically have additional matches and content before the cameras start rolling, and/or after they have stopped taping. A non-televised match during a taping is called a *dark match*. These matches

serve several purposes. If they are at the beginning of the show, they are often used to warm up the crowd, groom younger wrestlers, or give tryouts to up-and-coming talents. If the matches take place after the tapings, they usually feature top talents in high profile matches that are non-canonic for the television product. In the case of the WWE, to keep the audience from leaving early and hurting the televised aesthetic, there is often a world title match or a special attraction *gimmick match* after the broadcast.

Because there is one time limit or another on every wrestling show, individual matches have their length pre-determined by the booker, agent/producer/coach, or booking committee (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). On broadcast or cable television, matches normally range from 3-15 minutes in length. It is rare for a television match to be 20 minutes or longer. On special events, pay-per-views, or streaming exclusive events, the shows are usually longer, thus allowing for longer matches that tell more complex physical stories. Only on rare occasions are premium television matches longer than 30 minutes, and typically when they are, it is part of a major storyline. The upper limit on match length is the now-rarely seen 60-minute match. Among the major wrestling promotions, there might only be two or three of such matches televised per year, and those matches are almost never a simple one-on-one affair. The number of times that two wrestlers in normal wrestling matches on television reached the 60-minute mark in 21st Century American professional wrestling can be counted on one hand.

Long matches are more common on live events because the rules of broadcast television do not apply (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This also means that the promotion will receive no television advertising revenue from the show. This puts more emphasis on the in-ring product at these live events. It also increases the likelihood of special attraction *gimmick matches* to be performed on the show. These (theoretically) spectacular matches are meant to increase ticket sales. Whether or not the oft-hazardous spectacle of those matches had been adequately justified in the lead up to the event, or was simply assigned as interestingly gratuitous danger is a matter of considerable debate among the wrestling community.

## 2.3 Staging of Professional Wrestling

The ropes are also used to gain advantage in the competitive environment (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Some wrestlers spring or dive off of them to attack their opponent. Many contemporary wrestlers will dive through the ropes to attack an opponent or a group of adversaries outside of the ring; this is commonly called a “suicide dive” or “tope suicida.” Opponents often press one another to the ropes and send them running across the ring and bouncing off of the opposite side in a maneuver called “running the ropes,” a surprisingly painful aspect of the art form. Wrestlers also use the ropes as a tool to gain implied leverage, or as a tool to assail their adversaries, most commonly across the throat or a particular joint.

The ring itself is composed of several amalgamated parts and materials (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The frame of the ring is typically made of steel. Four ring posts are placed at the corners of the ring. Posts can be either square or round. Each post is usually about 4 inches in diameter or across. On the upper portion of each post is an eye-hook where turnbuckles can later be affixed. The space between these posts is bridged by four rectangular trusses which act as the outer frame of the square ring. Once the posts are stood up, the trusses are affixed, and the ring itself must be squared. These trusses have slots and eye-holes to attach the steel bars which form the platform. A typical modern professional wrestling ring is normally between 16 and 20 feet wide, though the WWE notably has a ring that is 22ft (7m) across. Once the ring is squared, usually two pieces of 2-inch square tubing are bridged across the trusses at the center of the ring, roughly 100 centimeters apart. Next, 8-10 pieces of square steel tubing are bridged across the ring perpendicularly to the lower rails. Most modern rings have cupped tabs to rest the rails on. On the top of the trusses, there are open rectangular notches into which large sheets of plywood are inserted. The plywood is positioned within the notches and arranged so as to completely cover the rails. This created the floor of the ring. Once the floor has been built, padded mats are laid down in the ring. Typically, these mats are between 1 and 1.5 inches thick. They are also usually in several pieces, arranged to cover the entire ring. There is usually some exposed steel along the ring apron. Next a canvas is stretched over the entire floor of the ring and hangs down over the sides of the platform. The edge of the canvas is dotted with eye-holes. These are used to either bungee or tie the canvas under the bottom of the trusses so as to keep it taut and

smooth. Sometimes vanilla is used for ring canvas as well. Once the canvas is set, the hooks on the end of the turnbuckles are loosely affixed to the eye-holes on the ring post. Usually, the ropes are permanently attached within the turnbuckles. The turnbuckles are then evenly tightened around the four corners until the ropes are taut, but with slight give. If ropes are too tight, they can be very painful to run into; whereas if they are too loose, wrestlers can trip or fall out of the ring. The level of tightness of the ropes is also related to whether the ropes are actually made of rope or steel cable. Another factor in rope tightness is the style which wrestlers in that organization use. A more gymnastic style of wrestling requires tighter ropes for balancing and springing off of. It should be stated in no uncertain terms that ropes should be tightened from the bottom up. The top rope is the most important because it absorbs the brunt of impact from wrestlers running into it and from wrestlers leaping from it. If ropes are tightened from the top down, the slight warping of the ring posts will cause the top rope to loosen when the bottom rope is tightened, and the process will have to be repeated. The top rope itself should end up roughly 4.5ft (1.5m) high. Finally, the ring skirt is strung along between the posts. The ring skirt will hang down and hide the ring's frame from the view of the audience. This area is often used for prop storage during the show; improvised weapons and even wrestlers lying in wait for an ambush can be hidden here. Most rings also have some form of stairs or steps up to the ring.

For staging a match in the ring itself, performers are virtually always performing in the round (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). With the audience in every direction, it is important that performers find occasion to play to each side of the crowd. Many wrestling shows are taped. Major promotions broadcast on television or streaming, while minor league promotions often distribute their taped shows on the internet. This creates a de facto proscenium for the wrestlers to perform in front of. As the lens of the hard cam is representative of a much wider viewing audience on television, it is weighted that the performers should favor it with the most attention. In theatrical terms this creates a simple staging mat that neatly fits over the squared-circle. The staging grid is typically positioned where the performer in the center of the ring faces the hard cam, this is center stage. This creates a de facto proscenium. Most of the entranceway is positioned at stage center left. The action of the match occurs along the center of the ropes which correspond to up-center/down-center and center-left/center right respectively. It also corresponds to the corners of the ring. The diagonal corners of the ring correspond to up-left/down-right and up-right/down-left

respectively. These directions have been categorized this way as these are the linear paths that wrestlers are expected to follow during their matches. Bumps are best taken, and submission holds are best applied at center stage. An additional dimension is added to this staging when the ringside area is involved, which creates another staging level, as well as far stage directions. Because the platform of the ring blocks diagonals, action on the outside of the ring runs along the perimeter of the ring, or back into the entranceway. On occasion, performers will spill out into the crowd for a wilder feel to the match. This is common in gimmick matches labeled as “street fights,” “hardcore,” “extreme,” or “deathmatch.” These wild affairs are relatively rare in major promotions, so when performances do spill out beyond the matted or padded staging area, it is considered a particularly gritty and spectacular affair.

The design of the modern ring is meant to be solid, yet giving (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The give of the bowing trusses dissipates the impact of falling bodies. The clanging of trusses off of one another also makes an impressive crash to add emphasis to the maneuvers in the ring. If a ring is too bouncy, wrestlers can trip and injure themselves or one another. The ring floor itself is a hard surface of steel atop plywood with only a thin layer of padding separating the flying, falling and crashing bodies of performers downward. A ring must be solid enough to withstand the acceleration of the falling weight of two or more individuals over 150kg simultaneously from the increased height of the ropes.

Older versions of wrestling rings have large springs in the center so as to prevent collapse (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). These heavy metal springs often accomplish the polar opposite of that and make the ring stiffer by not allowing for the rails to bow naturally under impact. These rings are typically hard and painful to land on. Likewise boxing and kickboxing rings are constructed differently so as to give a solid and unforgiving platform so that competitors can have ground-like stability beneath their feet.

The ringside area is a space of roughly 10 feet surrounding the ring wherein action continues to take place (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This area is used for secondary performers, as well as entrances and fighting. In larger promotions, this area is often covered by mats to allow performers to safely bump on the floor; in smaller promotions



this is virtually never the case. This area is separated by a barrier from the audience. This can be a literal barrier made from security railing, walls, or fencing; or it can be an implied barrier, consisting of only a string and the mutual understanding of the audience and the performers of what is the dedicated performance space. Often security is stationed around the ring to prevent unruly fans from breaking the barrier, which is commonly called “jumping the rail.” This is usually dealt with swift reprisals and immediate ejection. This is also true of the entrance aisle which goes from the curtain to the ring. Within that barrier, the world of the play exists, and virtually all of the time, the audience respects that area belongs to the performers, and promotional staff.

Former WWE writer Matt Weir described the complexities of staging an arena or stadium sized professional wrestling event (M. Weir, personal communication, 17 September 2023). For an average WWE television taping, the logistics are staggering. When asked how many technical crew members were required for a single standard televised event, Weir remarked that the number was easily in the hundreds including both the dedicated touring staff and the local contractors. An arena-scale television taping requires specific skilled labor for every aspect of live production including: the ring, the stage, the backstage, the live production booth, the television production truck, lighting, audio, set-up/tear-down, electric, catering, camera, cable wranglers, pyrotechnics, props, and transport. Weir estimated that any average WWE televised event would require roughly ten container trucks, including those with the production bay and the props<sup>26</sup> for the performance.

## 2.4 The Psychology of a 7-Phase Singles Match

This section will establish a fundamental format that serves as the foundation for how the craft of professional wrestling is taught (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Hereafter, gimmicks, caricature and character will be discussed. These basic seven phases are taught in professional wrestling training. Any training in the American style of professional wrestling that does not include specific work on these phases is considered subpar. This format can be deviated from when more skilled competitors are telling a more

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<sup>26</sup> This is also where the championship belts are stored, thus reinforcing their status as storytelling devices and not actual sporting trophies.

complex story, or when there is sufficient pre-existing narrative in a match that allows them to begin at another point in the story.

This section will also be overlaid atop diagrams of plot excitement structure. The narrative format of a match will also be overlaid upon the conventions of a three-act screenplay, and a five act play. This will create a holistic understanding of how the conventions of storytelling in the medium of professional wrestling mirror those of accepted fine arts. By establishing how the physical choreography is a mode of character development we can, for the first time in academia, understand professional wrestling as a form of theatre. This will also allow for the creation of a structure of comparative studies between professional wrestling performance, as well as comparative analysis and criticism of professional wrestling and other media of fine arts.

Within ring psychology, particular characters do not use the same attacks and maneuvers as others. A 2m tall, 200kg (6ft 8in, 441lbs) monster will not use the same offense as a 170cm tall and 75kg highflier. Also, a character's disposition and ethical alignment will also affect their alignment. A classical heel will tend to avoid flashy, crowd-pleasing maneuvers, while a classical babyface will embrace them. Though this distinction in attacks has eroded somewhat in modern professional wrestling, as characters have entered an ethical spectrum. While this grants performers more creative freedom within the ring, it also erodes the classical model of steering audience reactions throughout the match. The in-ring tactics are also influenced by the amount of conflict and tension between the characters. Two characters who have no pre-existing conflict will not attack one another with the same vitriol as long-standing personal rivals. This also affects whether the goal of the character in the match is to simply win, or to avenge some previous slight. For the sake of the fundamental match described below, it will examine a match between two characters with no pre-existing enmity. The goal of this section is to describe the most fundamental traditional American match to establish an understanding of the basic components of in-ring narrative. In musical terms, performing this match is tantamount to playing chopsticks, and a pianist must play chopsticks before Chopin.

## 2.4.a Phase One - Entrance and Establishment of Character

According to the fundamental style of professional wrestling in the United States, a performer is in character from the moment they step through the curtain until they return to the dressing room (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). While observers might intuitively think of the wrestling ring as the stage for this art form, this would be inaccurate. While the ring is an elevated platform where much of the action for a performance takes place, everything within the security barriers and the outer side of the curtain is the space for this performance. Occasionally, either in their entrance or during the match, wrestlers will travel through the crowd, much as actors often do during plays or musicals. Despite this occasional staging technique, the realm of the prohibitive majority of professional wrestling performances is within the thrust-proscenium of the entranceway and the security barrier surrounding the ring. This staging has the performer pass through the curtain and walk down a narrow aisle, surrounded by fans (or at least empty seats) while they walk to the ring. While this staging is at the base of the genre, it is commonly more pronounced in large promotions with televised wrestling products. Since the mid-1990's the top professional wrestling organizations have elevated stages whereupon performers make their entrances. These stages then follow the aisle which often includes a ramp to the floor level as is common for the WWE, or sometimes a bridge ramp between the stage and the ring, which is common in AEW.

There is also an area surrounding the ring called the "ringside area" wherein the performance also takes place (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This area is used for entrances, stagehands, production personnel, as well as out-of-ring performers like valets, managers, heaters, storyline observers, and often commentators.

At the beginning of every wrestler's journey, they are expected to construct and tear down the ring (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Building the sacred space is an important part of aspiring wrestlers paying their dues to the business. It also teaches them to become an integral part of any promotion. Indeed, working on the ring crew is often a part of trying out at a new promotion. All of the green wrestlers are expected to take part. But also, the process of paying one's dues is said to never end, as long as the business is giving you something, you owe something to the business. The reason that ring construction is

taught as a part of educating a young performer to the craft is the same reason that collegiate actors are required to take technical courses and practicum credits: because it creates a fully-rounded artist with an appreciation of and respect for all aspects of theatrical production, and logistically there is almost never enough stagehands to get the tasks done efficiently and effectively.

In the tradition of professional wrestling, the inside of the ring itself is considered a sacred place (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Showing respect to the ring, along with the traditions and history of the industry is considered a cardinal virtue of the subculture for performers, technicians, producers, and fans alike. Stepping into that space is considered an honor and is taught not to be taken lightly. This is an art form that thousands have dedicated their entire lives to, at great physical and personal cost. It is therefore incumbent upon those pursuing the art form to show due respect to those sacrifices made at the altar of mass entertainment.

A wrestler's entrance and phase one begins with the ring announcer standing in the ring (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). A ring announcer is expected to be well-dressed, respectable, and to have a powerful speaking voice. Many promotions recruit singers for this role so that they can also have someone to sing the national anthem at the beginning of a show. From there a referee will emerge from behind the curtain and take his place in the ring. The referee will usually wait in a neutral corner during the introductions. The dapper ring announcer will announce the number of falls and the style of match for the following contest. They will then indicate that one of the performers is about to arrive.

In contemporary wrestling, this entrance is almost always accompanied by entrance music (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Entrance music acts as a theme song for the wrestler and signals the crowd that they are about to appear. The music should also underscore their character and disposition. If a wrestler enters to music incongruous to their character and disposition, it will confuse and irritate the audience. Shortly after the music hits, the wrestler will enter through the curtain. Traditional wisdom dictates that, all other things being equal, the heel should enter first. There are a few circumstances where this ordering is not observed. For instance, in traditional wrestling, the champion, regardless of ethical alignment, is expected to come out last to demonstrate the importance of the title. This

wisdom is often challenged in modern wrestling, as a competing philosophy dictates the wrestler who is the biggest attraction should enter last. The matter is further complicated with many organizations promoting various shades on an ethical spectrum of wrestlers, rather than the traditional ethical binary. However, despite all of the philosophical disagreements, most of the time the heel enters first. This is done because it is generally easier to antagonize a crowd than to inspire it, put simply that it is far easier to stir the ire of strangers than it is to rally their approval.

Upon their entrance, a wrestler must be fully in character (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Their mannerism is fully engulfed in kayfabe, as they are now embodying a person different from their real identity. This requires posture, facial expressions, walks, and quirks that align with their character. Regardless of their ethical alignment, they are expected to be confident and focused on the primary task at hand, which is *not* winning a wrestling match, but getting over with the crowd. For heels this can require outward displays of nastiness, arrogance, contempt, or outright hatred. For babyface, this requires open displays of affability, fun, confidence, respect, or genuine coolness (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). A performer is expected to engage with the audience from the moment they arrive in the world of kayfabe, until the moment they step back through the curtain. In the Kayfabe Era, wrestlers were expected to keep kayfabe everywhere *but* the dressing room, so as to maintain the secret and the illusion of legitimate conflict and competition. This has subsided to a degree or virtual totality. However, when performers are “in gimmick” they are expected to speak, walk, talk, look, and behave *only* as the character. This allows the audience to suspend their disbelief in the proceedings, much like any other styles of acting and theatre.

Entrances also include signature poses, dances, and outer costuming which serves to enhance their character (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). These often include the added performances of the wrestler’s second. This individual is an integral part of the wrestler’s act and can serve to define an unfamiliar character to the audience. These outer costumes can be as simple as a towel or a signature hat, or as elaborate as fully-body paint, full suits of armor or pieces of armor, faux suits, sunglasses, head dresses, weapons and garments.

The most common and iconic of these outer costumes are the ring jacket, leather vest, and the ring robe (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). A ring robe is similar to robes in boxing, however in professional wrestling they are expected to be as ornate and impressive as possible. While there are many wrestlers throughout the history of the medium who wore ring robes, the two most notable wrestlers for this practice are the original Gorgeous George and “The Nature Boy” Ric Flair. Gorgeous George was the dandy, foppish, and effeminate heel who exploded to fame in the WWF Northeastern territory in the 1950’s. Iconic musician James Brown and boxing icon Muhammad Ali have both gone on record as saying that their trademark flashy costuming was inspired by Gorgeous George. “The Nature Boy” Ric Flair is widely reputed amongst fans and members of the industry to be the greatest professional wrestler of all time, and his custom, sequined, feathered, embroidered ring robes that came in every color were an important part of his presentation. For millions of wrestling fans around the world, the horns of Also Zach Zarathustra can only herald the coming presence of a platinum blonde grappler in a massive robe. According to Flair’s autobiography, his robes from the late-1970’s and early-1980’s routinely cost more than \$5,000 each, which would be over \$17,000 adjusted for inflation today. These robes are currently prized among collectors. Some have been cut to tiny squares and sent as a part of fan loot packages by the WWE in recent years. A more modest version of a ring robe is what was tantamount to a bathrobe worn by Bob Backlund in his WWF run from 1994-1995.

The other most common garment is a ring jacket (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). These jackets are meant to display the ring name and/or gimmick of the person wearing it. They are often embroidered with the brand of the wearer. They can also be quite ornate and serve as a part of a wrestler’s image to the crowd. Famous examples of this include the leather jackets of the Hart Foundation emblazoned with their family logo, the University of Michigan Wolverines varsity letterman jackets of the Steiner Brothers, the track suits of Bob Backlund or John Bradshaw Layfield, or Edge’s ornamented duster, among hundreds of others. Leather jackets, varsity jackets and floor-length dusters. However, the most iconic ring jackets in history were the floor-length dusters worn by the Undertaker. An ominous gone, a black out, and projections of purple lightning send chills across millions as professional wrestling’s man in black emerges from the mystic shadows from whence he came. This iconic entrance defined the most universally respected, unequivocally beloved, and enduring performer of the 1990’s, 2000’s and 2010’s.

The leather vest is common among wrestlers with a motif of the American South (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). It was famously worn by “Stone Cold” Steve Austin during his historic run as the top drawing star in wrestling history during the late-1990’s and early 2000’s. It was also famously worn by fellow Texans Blackjack Mulligan, Barry Windham and Stan Hansen.

Upon their entry into the staging area, performers will perform their entrance routines and attempt to get over with the crowd to the greatest degree of which they are capable (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The ring announcer will introduce the performer by the name, weight, and hometown of their character. These gimmick statistics are often embellished to a certain degree. Heights and weights are commonly exaggerated. The true small town origins of many performers are set aside for the names of recognizable metropolitan areas, or a kitschy *entendre* relative to the characters. North American-born performers often take on the persona of foreign origin so as to exploit nationalist sentiments in the audience. Perhaps the most infamous of these hometowns is the mystically vague “Parts Unknown,” a catch-all hometown for any monstrously sub-human or darkly magical character.

The timing of a match does not begin at the opening bell (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). A match time begins when the ring announcer commences with their introductions. The length of time spent on entrances is then subtracted from bell-to-bell timing of the match. This is a commonly misunderstood metric in professional wrestling. This metric is particularly important with televised matches, as the formatting of the show requires very precise execution.

After the introductions have finally been concluded, the ring announcer leaves the ring and takes his seat at ringside next to the Timekeeper (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The timekeeper is tasked with clocking the match and signaling the referee where the match is in its progression. Notably, the timekeeper is also tasked with striking the ring bell. The most important signal that a timekeeper gives is the call to “bring it home.” This hand signal is similar to “wrap it up” performed by circling with the index finger in the air. This signal can also come from the production director down the line, or directly from the

director to the referee through an earpiece. The latter is a common practice in major promotions with television presentations, and particularly significant during live broadcasts.

As the match begins, wrestlers often circle the ring, checking it at various points to make sure that it is not damaged (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This time is also often used to continue to play to the crowd. It is then that wrestlers proceed to “lock-up at the center of the ring. While this is not a firm requirement of the craft, it is the most common way of starting a match. To lock-up means for both wrestlers to grab a collar and elbow tie up. This position requires both wrestlers to grab the back of their opponent’s neck with their left hand. The wrestlers will then use their right hand to grab their opponent’s extended arms at the crook of the elbow. The grabbing of the back of an opponent’s neck is common in amateur wrestling and is used to snap an opponent’s head down to pull them off-balance. A counter to this is to peel off an opponent’s grip at the crook of the elbow to set up a takedown or advantageous standing hold. In this locked-up position both wrestlers are simultaneously attacking and trying to counter one another. This position is also colloquially known as “locking horns.” The position displays a test of strength, technical skill and aggression.

In professional wrestling, this position is meant to create the illusion of a test of strength, technical skill and aggression (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). While the wrestlers turn their faces outward to the crowd to display their painful effort, in reality they are expected to be gently entangled in the position. The quality of a lock-up is considered a simple test of whether or not a wrestler knows the fundamentals of working a match. When grabbing the lock-up, or any hold for that matter, wrestlers are expected to snatch the hold vigorously. This vehemence displays their passion for victory. However, the grabbing of these holds would ideally be very lightly applied. The lock up is also expected to be entered into with a simultaneous stomp of the left foot by both performers. This loud crack is meant to accentuate the impact of the hold, making the shock of the sound more dramatic. It is also expected for wrestlers to meet one another half-way, at the dead center of the ring for the most dramatic clash. They are expected to enter from opposite points of the ring’s staging area. This will hereafter be described as a “compass,” though that term is not typically used in wrestling vernacular.



It is absolutely vital that wrestlers keep their heads up when entering into this position (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). There are several reasons for this policy. First and foremost, it prevents injury, as in the case that one or both wrestlers' heads were down, it could lead to a very real, if accidental head butt. The second reason for this is so that the wrestlers can sell the strain of their staged struggle to the audience. This position also allows the wrestlers to communicate in the ring. A tertiary justification for this head position is that in an amateur wrestling contest, keeping one's neck tight and head up is a counter to an attempted snap-down.

When grabbing the lock-up wrestlers engage in constant communication either through speaking quietly or through hand signals (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). In earlier eras, most of the in-ring communication was done in carny so as to obscure the language, preventing the audience from knowing what's going on. There were also a series of hand signals communicated by differing numbers of taps on the body to signal the opponent what to do next. Voice modulation has mostly taken the place of both of these practices. To further obscure in—ring communication, skilled wrestlers find ways to cover or hide their mouths, or helpfully obscure their opponent's mouths to allow for the next move to be called.

The lock up should also be entered into going across one of the ring's straight lines (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This compass of activity once again creates a linear and visually stimulating image. It also keeps unfamiliar opponents in sync with one another's movements. In the Kayfabe Era, babyface and heels almost exclusively worked against one another, and to maintain the illusion of the ethical binary, they were placed in separate locker rooms and sent through separate entrances. This also created a Pavlovian response from the crowd as to who they should cheer or jeer respectively. Notably, this presentation of two locker rooms representing the ethical binary of characters has been revived in recent years in the United States by All Elite Wrestling.

Let us examine a fundamental story told in a professional wrestling match throughout this section (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This section will describe a match that any professional wrestler who has completed their training can perform, and a story that can be told with a bare-bones approach. If a wrestler cannot complete this match,

they are either untrained, have incomplete training, or should absolutely request a refund from their so-called trainers. The story of this bout has been vetted with luminaries of the professional wrestling industry throughout the past six decades.

Once locked in their epic struggle, the wrestlers begin telling the story of the match (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Because the lock-up is a test of strength and grit, wrestlers often drive mightily to push their opponent back a single step, this is often repulsed by the opponent rallying their own strength and regaining ground. This technical pushing match will continue until one of the competitors pushes their opponent into the ropes for a rope break. This is usually the babyface, gaining a moral victory over their abrasive adversary. The wrestler in the advantageous position must then release the hold before the referee reaches a count of five, lest they be disqualified. The babyface will follow the referee's instructions respectfully as a show of sportsmanship.

The entire interaction is an exercise in building drama in the match (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). It is also important that when the referee begins his five-count, the babyface releases the hold without delay and steps back without attempting to attack their opponent further. This action of fair play is directly related to American values. A traditional babyface is expected to follow the rules, not take cheap shots, and win on their own merits. The babyface proving their strength in this initial exchange is meant to pop the crowd and serve to embarrass their haughty adversary.

So, the heel, smarting from their embarrassment, will usually make excuses and false accusations of cheating on the part of the babyface (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). In this classical framework, the heel might falsely accuse the babyface of pulling their hair to gain an advantage. The audience, who clearly saw the babyface play by the rules, is outraged by this accusation. This demonstrates to the crowd that the heel is not only abrasive and arrogant, but also a liar. Then, the hapless referee who missed the blatant cheating firmly inquires to the babyface about the accusations of cheating. The babyface vehemently professes his innocence, directly asking the crowd to tell the referee. The rabble of the live crowd grows as a cacophony of support rises for the hero.

Of course, this interaction is the basic rule that young wrestlers are taught (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). It can be deviated from depending on the details of the story that the wrestlers are trying to tell. On some occasions, a much stronger opponent will simply shove their foe to the ground from this position, perhaps with a taunting flex to the delight or chagrin of the crowd. On other, a heel might fake a lock-up and simply their opponent in the stomach precipitating a brawl. Why even on occasion, wrestlers will attack their opponent on the way to the ring and beat them unmercifully with a steel chair. There are nearly unlimited variations in the choreography and staging. However, this standard demonstrates the fundamentals of storytelling in this stage combat-heavy theatrical genre. It also creates the baseline which the exceptions defy, thereby making the exceptions unexpected and special.

After the initial interaction, the wrestlers will reset and begin circling again, this time, engaging the crowd's increasing investment in the struggle between them (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Commonly they will again lock up at the center of the ring and resume their titanic struggle for position. It would then be expected for the babyface to once again gain the advantage. However, this time around the dastardly heel, unwilling to accept another blow to their pride, will use nefarious means to gain an advantage. Most often, they will use an illegal hair pull to break the babyface's posture and drive them backward into the ropes. In a traditional presentation, the heel would hide this from the referee, and the referee would circle to an angle where they could not see the hair pull. In a sloppier presentation a heel would do this blatantly, drawing the ire of the official.

Having now seen the heel cheat to gain the advantage in the second lock-up, the audience is outraged on multiple levels (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). For one, they have seen the villain in this 8-10 minute drama gain the upper hand. Furthermore, they have witnessed the heel violating the cultural expectation of fair play. And worse yet, the heel has gained this nefarious advantage using the exact same illegal tactic that they had just accused the babyface of using. On top of being an arrogant, abrasive liar, the heel now revealed themselves to be a hypocrite. This hypocrisy has further outraged the crowd.

Now that the babyface is in a vulnerable position, it is the modus operandi of the classical heel to take advantage of the situation (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November

2022). While the referee tries to break up the fracas, the heel will continue pressing his advantage, using the leverage he gained by pulling hair to shove the babyface's head back painfully. The heel will continue to do so with impunity despite the referee's warnings. The referee will begin his five-count and the heel will continue to apply pressure until the count of four and release a split second before he would have been disqualified. This exploitation of loopholes to justify dirty tactics further enrages the crowd. The babyface is in a disadvantageous position, as they have been cornered against the ropes and have been freshly released from a painful position. Rather than joining the babyface in showing sportsmanship, the heel will use the opportunity to slap or strike the babyface. This dirty strike seeks to humiliate and intimidate the babyface. The babyface will usually lunge at the heel, but the referee will remain between them, trying to separate the action until the competitors are reset. The babyface's restraint and sportsmanship are not preventing him from getting immediate revenge. The heel will often use this opportunity to pose and mug to the crowd, his self-image evidently restored through cheap tactics. Undaunted, and now rightly agitated at the actions of the heel, the babyface vigorously promises payback as the referee keeps the two separated.

Once again, this is not a requirement of the match format (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Sometimes the heel will simply take a cheap shot at the babyface and begin an all-out assault. Sometimes the heel will become frustrated and leave the ring to egg on the crowd. Perhaps the babyface will climb up onto the ropes to further pump up the crowd. A heel with a second at ringside will sometimes convene with their companion to apparently discuss strategy. If the heel slaps the babyface, the hero will often begin to hammer away at the villain with heavy blows, dropping him immediately to show his superiority again to the delight of the crowd.

Now, with the crowd fully engaged in the conflict with clear moral lines drawn, the wrestlers come circling for the third time (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). While little time has lapsed and there have been no holds, slams or strikes, the audience has been engaged on multiple levels throughout the proceedings. This is of course a clear example of the rule of threes in professional wrestling narrative. In this instance, both the hero and the villain have succeeded in driving their adversary back once. Though technically equal in success thus-far, the babyface is perceived to be the superior athlete and sportsman,

while the heel has been able to be just as or slightly more successful by taking short cuts and cheating. The ethical dynamics of the match reflect the moral compass of the culture to which the performance was targeted. Americans want the humble sportsman to prevail over the arrogant cheat, but if they can do so is yet to be seen. This question permeates much of American sports culture.

Now that our morality play has its characters and conflict, the players circle to continue their battle in earnest (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The traditionalist crowd will have made their judgements of the actor-athletes by this point and will tend to stick with them throughout the performance. The first of seven phases of the match concludes as the competitors lock horns a third time.

It should be noted that this is the traditional basic standard in-ring narrative style from the kayfabe era of professional wrestling (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Modern professional wrestling often deviates from this format based on a variety of factors. Much of that deviation from the traditional formula is the rise of several competing philosophies of how professional wrestling is made the most entertaining and engaging. These competing philosophies were given rise based on cultural changes within the US, as well as stylistic evolutions within the art form. This will be discussed at some length in a later portion of the study. It has been described this way as it is a fairly visible and understandable demonstration of the efforts and processes made by all performers and support staff involved to get the performance over with the crowd.

#### 2.4.b Phase Two - The Shine Exposition and Happy Normalcy

At the third lock-up we enter into the second act of our seven-phase structure (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This phase is called “The Shine.” While “shine” can be used for any portion of the match or narrative device that makes the babyface look favorably, it is most often used to describe this portion of the match and other usages are an extension of that meaning. The shine is the early portion of the match where traditionally the babyface will press their advantage with increasing excitement for the crowd. In a five-act structure this portion would be a continuation of the exposition, along with the entrances. However, because of the distinct difference in pacing and physical narrative, this portion is considered a separate phase of the story. This portion is meant to engage the audience’s

excitement fully and drive them to invest in the match and believe in the babyface as an athlete and a character. This section of the study will also discuss and explain some of the common wrestling holds and iconic maneuvers used in professional wrestling matches.

The third lock-up tends to transition into a phase of the match called “chain wrestling” (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). In amateur wrestling, chain wrestling refers to continuously linking moves and attacks to gain advantages, advantageous positions, takedowns, points, and hopefully victories. This is theoretically the same in professional wrestling. It is the job of the performers to project a desire to win the match, despite their actual cooperation. This exchange of holds demonstrates to the audience that the competitors are actually skilled athletes, schooled in the martial arts which seek pins and submissions. While there are literally thousands of holds, this subsection will focus on the small collection of holds which are commonly used in professional wrestling.

#### 2.4.b.i Chain Wrestling

Chain wrestling requires the wrestlers to not only have knowledge of the physiology of the painful submission holds they are applying, but also the knowledge of how to apply them safely without hurting their performance colleague (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). For the purpose of the subsection of these common attacks in our theoretical basic match, we will be looking at five holds for the chain wrestling portion of the shine of the match, and one hold later portions of the match. There will, however, be photos and explanations of various maneuvers throughout this section. This section will also walk us through how these holds would be applied during a match, so as to continue the narrative story of our fundamental match. The five holds that we will describe our theoretical competitors exchanging in the chain wrestling section are the arm wringer, the hammer lock, the headlock, the cradle and the head scissors. This section will also discuss illegal tactics used by unscrupulous characters to gain the wrestling advantage in professional wrestling; such tactics have been termed by Hall of Famer Gene LeBell, “the Dark Arts.”

Let us first explore what is generally considered to be the most basic of the standing wrestling holds, the arm wringer (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The arm wringer gets its name from the twisting motion used to wring excess water out of a wet cloth.

This method of painfully twisting the arm to gain leverage or control of an adversary is used in many martial arts and taught as a means of self-defense.

In professional wrestling the hold is useful for several reasons (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Firstly, allows both competitors to keep their faces visible. Secondly, it can be comfortably applied, while still maintaining the painful aesthetic of an unnatural body angle. And thirdly, it is relatively easy to apply out of a lock-up.

At any time in the chain wrestling sequence, a heel may simply sprint to the ropes to force the referee to break the hold and lock up with his opponent again (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This is sometimes intermingled with the process of lock-ups. This particular format of a match has them separated so as to keep the action clear for the reader. All portions of the match are variable.

In our theoretical match, let us have the babyface grab the arm wringer first (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). As is the rule in American professional wrestling, they grab and twist the left wrist. The crowd has seen the babyface win the third portion of the match's opening conflict. This moral victory, along with the expected dramatic wails of agony from the heel, should immediately pop the crowd. After selling the painful hold for an appropriate time to engage the crowd, the babyface will give the babyface the office (several rapid squeezes of the hand) to signal that it is time to counter the hold. The simplest counter to this hold is to grab the opponent's left wrist and twist into an arm wringer of one's own. Now the heel has taken the advantage with the hold and gloats to the crowd. The babyface sells the hold dramatically as well. This communicates the seriousness of the hold and reminds the audience that the heel is a dangerous and highly competent competitor. After an appropriate application, the heel will signal that it is the babyface's turn to counter the hold. While the same counter is an acceptable method of reversing position, it is more common for a babyface to perform a flashier escape, perhaps a somersault, a cartwheel, a bridge, a kip, or a flip. Significantly, the contact between the wrestlers is never broken during this portion of the match. So, using the left hand to stabilize and assist, the heel will watch as the babyface reverses the hold back into an arm wringer.

Not content to repeat what has been done, the babyface will then advance to the next hold in the chain, by bending the heel's arm at the crook of the elbow and stepping behind him to seize the hammerlock (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This holds pins on the arm behind the back by painfully twisting the left arm against its natural range of motion. This hold is common among law enforcement professionals. With a few more wails of agony the heel again counters by stepping around and behind his opponent, grabbing a hammerlock of his own. Not content with the hold, the heel decides to move forward in the progression and grab a headlock.

The third hold that will be discussed in the essentials of chain wrestling is the headlock (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The headlock is an intuitive move of wrapping the left arm around the head and locking it up with a grip on the right hand. While this manner of locking hands is illegal in American Folkstyle wrestling, it is allowed in catch wrestling. This hold can damage the ears and is a common cause of cauliflower ear scarring on wrestlers. The hold can also be used with a twisting trip or throw to drive an adversary down to the mat to attempt a pin. This hold was most famously used in American amateur wrestling by Iowa-born Olympic champion and NCAA coaching legend Dan Gable.

While the headlock is a lethally effective move in wrestling and grappling, it is also essential to professional wrestling performance (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Firstly, the standing headlock is an extremely photogenic hold. The performer grabbing the hold squares their feet to their opponent, grabs the head, puffs their chest out, flexes their arms and shoulders, while standing tall with their face out to the crowd. Their opponent, trapped in the hold, can wave their arms to say that they are in a great deal of pain. In reality, despite the cries of agony and posturing, the hold is lightly applied, and the two performers are relatively comfortably entangled at this juncture of the match.

The headlock can also be used for a visually impressive takedown (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Using the method of cooperation in stage combat, competitors can use the headlock for a throw to the mat, called a headlock takeover. This maintains the hold but brings the match to the ground. With one wrestler on top in a dominant position using the headlock, they can attempt to pin their opponent. However, this position allows the opponent several opportunities to counter their adversary.



In this instance, let's say the heel grabs a headlock momentarily (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). He puffs his chest up and means mugs to the crowd. But knowing that the babyface is, all other things being equal, supposed to be the superior technical wrestler, the heel gives the babyface the iggy and the babyface counters the hold by stepping back into the hammerlock. The babyface now steps around and grabs a headlock of his own, leading to an impressive headlock takeover. Now on the mat, the heel's shoulders are exposed. For a moment they are pressed down, and the referee begins to slap the mat counting the pin fall. The heel desperately shoots his arm up. The heel grabs the babyface around the waist from the bottom and bridges over his right shoulder. This maneuver tilts the babyface over pressing his shoulders to the mat in a cradle, but the babyface kicks out back into the headlock.

It is common for a heel to pull the babyface's hair or fish hook him to gain leverage in this position to aid in his counter (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Still in the grounded headlock, a heel will often gouge the eyes of the babyface, pushing their head backward. The heel will then wrap his legs around the babyface's head and drag him back into a head scissors. The maneuver uses the legs to choke an opponent or crank their neck at an unnatural angle. The audience now sees the babyface in peril. Both wrestlers have shown themselves to be very capable technicians at this point. The babyface is expected to sell the hold with their entire body, by moving their arms and legs at visually stimulating angles, sometimes slapping the mat or stomping to change position.

When the babyface receives the signal that it is time to change holds, the most common counter is for the babyface to roll back on their shoulders and kick both feet outward (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This "kick out" propels the babyface out of the hold. Now the wrestlers scramble to their feet and the babyface is quicker to grab the headlock and launches a speedy takeover to regain the upper hand. This time the heel will quickly shift to a belly down position, plant their knees on the mat and work their way back up to a standing headlock. The heel then desperately gouges the babyface's face and eyes, pushing them back to the ropes.

It is during this exchange that the next portion of the match is called (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The heel will now typically give the call for the most common series of moves in American professional wrestling. This basic series of maneuvers is so common that it is called “the international” or “the universal” within the business. There is slight variability with how it is played out. It does, however, usually come at the end of the chain wrestling portion of the match (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Now that the audience has seen a reasonable display that gives the competitors plausible deniability that the staged combat is a catch wrestling contest, the audience is treated to some fast-paced excitement. Prior to moving on, here are some images and descriptions of common chain wrestling holds and their origins in martial arts.

This international spot is the first multi-phase running spot that young wrestlers are taught (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). It is considered to be a fundamental spot among professional wrestlers. Though some version of the spot appears in a high percentage of matches, it is rarely recognized by the untrained eye. This is because it involves several varied levels and angles which the audience finds visually stimulating. For green wrestlers, or veteran wrestlers with traditionalist sensibilities, the International is used as an introduction to the shine phase of the match.

Though this study has discussed chain wrestling as a portion of the shine, not all matches include chain wrestling (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). More accurately, the chain wrestling was used to “shine” the babyface, meaning to spotlight the positive aspects of their physical character. Chain wrestling can be omitted from the shine for a number of reasons. Some wrestlers have physical limitations that prohibit them from engaging in the maneuvers. Others have limitations in their technical skill where the chain wrestling display would play out to their detriment. For some wrestlers, though they are physically capable and adequately skilled to perform the complex movements, it would be incongruous with their character to engage in a prolonged display of technical wrestling. In that case, the gimmick could be that of a wild brawler, a street fighter, or a loose cannon. It is also relevant to consider what story is being told in the physical interaction in the match. If two wrestlers are engaged in a passionate rivalry built on a raw, seething hatred of one-another, aspects like sportsmanship and technical mastery may well be foregone in lieu of competitors intuitively beating one another senseless.

This portion of the match was kept in this breakdown of essential ring psychology because of its significance to the legacy of this manner of storytelling (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). At its core, professional wrestling is a theatrical exhibition of catch-as-catch-can wrestling. It is a style of performance art that grew out of an Olympic sport. The grappling and holds in professional wrestling are a direct link to over a century of performance sport tradition. They are also a microcosm of the theory of the art form: a cooperative display of legitimately dangerous combat sports as commercial entertainment.

#### 2.4.b.ii The International

The international, which is also called the universal, is widely known by those terms conceptually (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). However, when the spot is called in the ring, to avoid confusion on variations, the segments of the spot are called out directly. There are three moves in the international that are always present: tackle, drop-down, and hip toss. They are also usually performed in that order. The most common variance is that a leapfrog will be added prior to the hip toss.

In the theoretical match, we rejoin the babyface as the heel presses them against the ropes with a handful of their hair (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The heel says “International.” The heel will then lean the babyface into the ropes to build a slingshot of momentum and shove them across the ring. The babyface will charge at the ropes on the opposite side of the ring as the heel stumbles to the center of the ring. It is then that the babyface it’s a “tackle” in the parliament of professional wrestling.

This manner of tackle differs severely from rugby or American football, where players lower their shoulders into the midsection of opponents to stop their progress on the field (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). In professional wrestling, that maneuver is called a “spear” and is a common finishing move. In professional wrestling, a “tackle” is a collision of the left shoulder and pectoral muscles of two wrestlers. This causes the stationary wrestler to take a flat-back bump, while the wrestler who knocked them down stands above their foe triumphantly. It is not a firm requirement as to whether the babyface or heel perform the tackle or any portion of this spot. It can be variable based on the story of the

match, the athletic make-up of those involved, and the preferences of the performers. In the theoretical example, all of the flashy maneuvers will be assigned to the babyface as they are traditionally crowd-pleasing. Most properly trained wrestlers know several variations of delivery to the spot which allow them to assign the necessary bumps to whomever needs to take them to keep the flow of the match going.

After hitting the tackle, the babyface stands over the fallen heel (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The dramatic knockdown of the villain will typically delight the crowd. The babyface poses and mugs to the delight of the crowd. The babyface then makes direct eye contact with the heel. It is vitally important that the standing wrestler make direct eye contact with the wrestler on the mat. This is a tacit acknowledgement by both performers that they are paying undivided attention to one another. This also guarantees that the wrestler on the mat will see which way the standing wrestler goes.

The babyface will then charge into the ropes, seeking another slight shot of momentum (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The heel, having been knocked down, turns over to their belly and slides their body horizontally on the mat. This maneuver is called a “drop-down.” This is an attempt to trip the running babyface with the side of the body. In this instance, unable to stop immediately, the savvy babyface skips over the heel and charges to the ropes on the opposite side. While it virtually always fails, in some longer traditional matches the drop-down succeeds and allows the wrestler on the mat to regain control of the match.

In this variation, to maximize the flashiness of the babyface, the heel will charge at them like a bull (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). In the context of the match, this is theoretically an attempt at a tackle or takedown. However, in reality, knowing that the story of the match is highlighting the athleticism of the babyface, the heel lowers their head as they charge, and the babyface performs a running leapfrog over them. Leap frogs are commonly added to the international to highlight athleticism, or they are conversely omitted to hide a lack thereof. The babyface then turns back toward the heel, who has hit the ropes. We now have the babyface standing at the center of the ring and the heel charges at them.

The babyface then holds out their right arm, and leaves their right foot planted with their leg bent at the knee (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This thigh platform will serve as a “shelf” for the maneuver. The babyface hooks their right arm under the left arm of the heel. The heel will jump, post their arm on the shelf for control (if necessary) and hit a “circle bump.” This bump is a somersault in the air, landing flat on one’s back. This throw also exists in amateur wrestling and is most similar to an o goshi in judo.

This is the first complex spot that aspiring wrestlers are taught (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). It intersperses various levels, speeds, jumps, and slams. It prioritizes cooperation between the competitors. In longer form matches, complex spots like the international can be stretched out and interspersed with the chain wrestling to create a longer, more dynamic story in the ring. There are some classic examples of this contributing to classic, one-hour matches like those between “The Nature Boy” Ric Flair and Ricky “The Dragon” Steamboat in the 1980’s.

#### 2.4.b.iii Heroic High Impact Action

The audience, having seen wild movement, near misses, and athletic prowess on display, culminating in the dastardly heel being flung to the floor, pops immediately (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The babyface again fires up, shaking their fists and calling out to their supporters. The heel writhes in agony from the impact to their back. Capitalizing on the crowd’s excitement, the heel plants their right hand with the left arm extended. This movement is called “feeding” so that the left arm is available for the next spot. The heel wheels up to their feet with the left arm extended.

Capitalizing on their advantage, the babyface jumps, apparently dropping to their back, while in mid-air they lock arms with the heel (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The two wrestlers clasp their left hands to one another’s left wrists in mid-air. The babyface lays out and barrel rolls in the air as the heel tumbles over them in the air with another circle bump. This is the third time in only a few seconds that one wrestler has jumped over the other. These coordinated tumbles and bumps delight the crowd, but never deviate from the simulation of combat. The heel again tumbles to the mat and feeds up quickly while groaning in agony. The babyface. Grows ever-more excited as victory seems near. The heel holds their damaged back as they approach the babyface at the center of the ring.

It is now that the wrestlers will perform perhaps the most commonly known and iconic move in the art form: the body slam (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). While the term “body slam” can be applied to many throws, suplexes and other high impact maneuvers, as it is generally understood the term bodyslam is most often applied to a “scoop slam.” The wrestlers will be facing one another for this move. One wrestler, in our example the babyface, will place the right arm between their opponent’s legs and is extended upward to the lower back. This arm is used to lift the wrestler in the air and control the body while elevated. The left arm reaches over the clavicle and grabs the opponent by the upper back; the arm can be positioned on either side of the head. The lifting wrestler again creates a shelf with the flattened thigh of their left leg. The wrestler being lifted will post their right arm on that shelf, give a small hope for assistance and be taken up in the air. It is then that the slamming wrestler turns their opponent in the air and throws them onto their back.

While in the air, the wrestler being slammed can post on the left hip of the base wrestler (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This allows the wrestler to lift their face toward the crowd and sell the move to the audience. In our sample match, the heel does so, screaming and shaking their head in abject terror. This display delights the crowd who believes they are seeing the villain dispatched in relatively short order. Our babyface slams the heel in the center of the ring to the cheers of the crowd. Having landed three consecutive high-impact maneuvers, the babyface tries to capitalize and win the match. They lie perpendicularly across the heel’s upper body, pinning their shoulders to the mat. The careful babyface hooks one of the legs to lessen the probability of a kick out. The referee drops to the mat to count, “1... 2...—”

As the referee’s hand falls for the third strike of the mat, the heel kicks out with both feet and lifts one shoulder from the mat (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This stops the count and prolongs the match, much to the chagrin of the crowd. The babyface disappointed but undeterred goes to continue their assault, but the wily heel slips away on the mat and scurries under the bottom rope to the ringside area. This display of cowardice in the face of what seemed like an inevitable victory for the hero, outrages the paid onlookers. The heel seeks to recollect themselves at ringside while the sportsman babyface watches from the

ring. The referee begins their 10-count. If the referee reaches the count of 10, the babyface will be awarded the victory in the bout.

The crowd's joy will dissipate for the time being, but their interest remains utterly focused on the action in the performance space (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This spellbinding of the audience in support of the babyface, who has shown themselves to be the superior to the hell in both word and deed, will conclude the shine. Importantly, most of the time the shine consists of the heel taking three bumps in active succession. While the term can be used loosely to describe the beginning portion of the match where the babyface gets over, it is usually applied to that quick succession of bumps. It is another occurrence of the "rule of 3's" in professional wrestling.

Most importantly, the shine is vital to storytelling in a professional wrestling match for two main reasons (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The first reason is that it establishes the character for the audience to sympathize with the most in dramatic fashion. The high energy and fan-friendly approach of the babyface in this portion of the match is a tried and true aspect of professional wrestling. It is fundamental that the audience be convinced of a babyface's ability to succeed in this context. The second reason is that the pace and impact of this glorious display give the audience something and someone to cheer for. Their excitement fuels the action in the ring and vice versa. By constantly playing to the crowd, the wrestlers allow the crowd to continuously engage with the action. Now that the crowd is wildly enthused, they have invested in the story. Because this basic match is not a sprint to the finish, they are about to undergo a prolonged period of having to watch this athlete that they have emotionally invested in suffer at the hands of a performer they have been trained to detest within minutes.

This portion of the match also includes heavy allusions towards a "happy normalcy" (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The crowd is meant to be pleased with the fact that kind, effusive, fair-minded people are successful, while their brash, arrogant, abrasive counterparts are not. In professional wrestling, a particular morality tale plays out several times per wrestling show, and hundreds, or thousands of times per year. This is not that surprising considering it is at the core of most fiction across media platforms anyway. However, what is notable is that in professional wrestling, the physical combat

between the parties is taken for granted, and not saved until dramatic moments later in the story. It is also vital that at this point in the story structure of the match, the audience is about to see that allegorical happy normalcy ripped away, and their heroes become inevitably imperiled by their adversaries.

The opening of the match has established the ethical state-of-play for the match (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The dichotomy of characters and their interests have also been established. Characters have a variety of character goals across longer character arcs. Most, if not all, of the progress towards those goals can be made by winning the match. Without winning, characters struggle to progress toward the career goals of prestige, pride, wealth, success, and self-actualization. This was at the core of the expose novel “The Fall Guys.” When the protagonist was losing in the ring, he was a failure outside of it as well; the same idea can be extrapolated onto the characters within kayfabe universes. Not all goals characters have are wrestling related. Professional wrestling characters pursue love, wealth, friendship, adventure, etc. However, their ability to achieve those goals shares a direct correlation with winning in the ring, because the implication of success between the ropes is the confidence and ability to succeed in the characters’ world beyond the ring.

#### 2.4.d Phase Three - The Cut-Off and the Turning Point

The next phase of a professional wrestling match is called “the Heat” (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). With the introductions, chain wrestling and shine having all plated the audience firmly behind the babyface, the crowd is now primed for a reversal in narrative. After the third bump of the shine, audiences have generally passed the point of diminishing returns for follow-up bumps. If the shine were to continue much longer, the pops of the audience would diminish, and eventually they would grow listless. Instead, traditional psychology dictates that the heel gains the advantage in the match. This reversal of fortunes mirrors the “turning point” in the plot chart.

Up to this point, our effusive hero has been firmly in control of the situation and appears to be cruising to an easy victory (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). If that victory were easily achieved in a quick outing, this would be characterized as a “squash match.” Squash matches are helpful for establishing new characters, or reinforcing their



ability against lesser opponents, however, the lack of conflict in such a match means that the winner had nothing to overcome.

Professional wrestling tells stories about overcoming adversity (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). So now that we have a hero for our story, they must face adversity in the match to elevate themselves. This is done by first dramatically stopping the momentum of their success, then placing them in increasing jeopardy of failure despite their best efforts. That jeopardy and the rising excitement in that portion of the match will be covered in the next section. This section will focus on the turning point of the match's narrative.

In the theoretical match, the heel has taken a powder and is recollecting themselves outside of the ring (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). While they do, they mug to the crowd, sell their injuries from the match thus far, and confer with their seconds as possible. The crowd, now very confident in the skills of the babyface, heckles and jibes the frustrated heel. In this instance, the heel demands that the referee restrain the zealous babyface. Once the heel re-enters the ring. The competitors seek to lock up again. But instead of a lock-up, the heel viciously jabs his thumb into the eye of the babyface. This blatant illegal move drew a stern warning from the referee and the raucous condemnation of the crowd. The heel capitalizes on the temporary blindness of the babyface and kicks them in the stomach, drags them to the corner, smashing their head on the turnbuckle and repeatedly striking them violently and in rapid succession.

This approach is useful to reinforce that the babyface is, in fact, the better catch-as-catch-can wrestler (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The heel must resort to cheating and bullying tactics that have no relation to sportsmanship or wrestling skill. The sporting contest has now degenerated into a gutter brawl, because the classless heel could not win by playing the game fairly.

This harkens to two of Tocqueville's American values: Competition and Fair Play (Datesman et al., 2014). Put simply, while Americans value winning, they detest cheating. By gaining success unfairly, it leads Americans invariably to feel disgust, or simply to abandon the pretense of scruples. In American culture, one cannot truly be the best if they do not play by

the rules. No exceptions. This narrative permeates much of sports culture in the United States.

This is why congressional hearings were held regarding the use of performance enhancing drugs in Major League Baseball, despite this being completely irrelevant to the legislature's constitutional mandate and the issue being far less than tertiary to the public good (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). But rather than address war, poverty, education, crime, national security, healthcare, energy, infrastructure, corruption, unemployment, voting rights, or anything else relevant to governance, hours upon hours of media coverage and Congressional time were spent discussing alleged cheating in baseball games between millionaires. Lance Armstrong was an American hero because he won at a sport with next-to zero popularity in the US, and an absolute pariah when it was revealed that he cheated; despite it being a matter of public record that all of the top ten finishers in those races were also proven cheating. This principle is related to the assumption in American morality that success without honor is hollow. And those who embrace success without honor are therefore immoral. Worse yet, to win by cheating doesn't simply defy ethical norms, but is seen as stealing the American Dream. Cheating in sports is not just unethical, it's un-American.

And now our heel in our theoretical match drags the babyface out to the center of the ring, hooks their head and hits a spectacular vertical suplex (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The babyface writhes in agony, and the audience jeers the smug heel. The heel who is an arrogant, cheating, in-American liar, is now beating up a person who the audience genuinely likes and respects. The children in the crowd see this person succeeding despite their immorality, and their parents are mortified. The babyface has to rise to the occasion and right this situation or risk the heel tearing at the very fabric of American society.

#### 2.4.e. Phase Four - The Heat and Rising Action

The heel is now in control. Including entrances, this segment is likely still under four minutes in length (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). We now enter the longest, and often most complex portion of the match. This segment of the match is called

“the Heat.” It is in this section that wrestlers distinguish their ability to control match excitement and manipulate the crowd’s reactions. This portion of the match corresponds to the rising action of a plot graph. The protagonist has a problem that they must solve and make constant attempts to solve it. The antagonist, for their part, must foil any hopes that the babyface and the audience that supports them have of escaping the situation with a victory. This is also the longest part of the match, so the task of the heel is to manage the amount of enthusiasm the audience has during this time, allowing them to have hope and repeatedly disappointing them. This process allows the match to slow and the peril that the babyface is in to feel insurmountable. This makes it all the more satisfying to the audience when the hero does find a way to overcome. The more peril the protagonist has to overcome, the more valiant and impressive their struggle against it becomes.

This portion of the match is also checkered with “hope spots” (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This term refers to moments where it appears that the protagonist is going to shift the momentum of the story in their favor, only to be cut off again by the heel. These hope spots correspond to “action beats” in certain scripts. If the babyface is at a helpless disadvantage for too long, the audience will tire of rooting for them, and eventually become bored. The crowd does not want to simply sit there while the babyface is pounded unmercifully by someone they hate. These flashes of brilliance by the protagonist grab the audience’s attention back, give them reason to cheer and reinvest their energy, only to snatch that feeling away only moments later.

In the traditional American style, the heel will use this time to attack a particular body part of the babyface (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This weakening allows the heel to gain an advantage. This selecting and “working” of a body part is a hallmark of the “technical” wrestling style. This often includes a series of related submission holds.

In the case of the theoretical match, the babyface now has an injured back after suffering a vertical suplex (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The heel will capitalize on this first by attempting a rather lax cover. This overconfidence only reinforces their lack of respect for their opponent. The babyface tries to rise, only to suffer multiple

clubbing blows to their back from the heel. While the protagonist writhes in pain, the heel plays to the crowd, and shouts abuses at them.

The heel begins picking up the babyface but becomes distracted by his arguing with the audience (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Suddenly, the babyface fires up and strikes a series of punches to the heel's head. The crowd is reinvigorated as the babyface pounds the heel back into the corner. The babyface tries to whip the heel across the ring to the other corner, but the heel gives the hand signal for the reversal and sends the hero crashing into the corner. The babyface collapses clutching their back. The heel momentarily sells that his face was injured by the beating before returning to mugging for the once again disappointed crowd. The hot spot was a mirage in the story.

The heel picks up the babyface successfully this time, and claps on the bear hug in the center of the ring (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The bear hug was the finishing maneuver of greats like George Hackenschmidt and Bruno Sammartino, so its place as a devastating hold in traditional American professional wrestling is well established with fans. The heel lifts up the babyface and swings them wildly from side to side, like a rag doll. The babyface lifts their face and sells their agony to the crowd. The heel snarls and strains while giving the babyface instructions for the next spot. The babyface begins to fade against the strength of the heel. The babyface looks out to the crowd for inspiration. The crowd cheers for their hero to fight through the pain of the hold. The babyface eggs them on to continue shouting encouragement. The babyface shoves back the heel's face and breaks free of the hold. The babyface fires up again, driving the heel back to the ropes. The heel reverses the Irish whip yet again and the babyface hits the ropes. The heel ducks down for a back body drop, but the babyface dramatically dives over the heel and attempts to drag their adversary back in a sunset flip,<sup>27</sup> a common cradle from this position. The heel waves their arms as they lose balance and the crowd cheers on the straining babyface. The heel topples over backwards onto their back. The crowd pops and the referee counts. 1... 2...—

The heel kicks out (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The audience is let down. Both wrestlers scramble to their feet, but the heel is fresher. The heel scoops up

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<sup>27</sup> An image of a sunset flip can be seen in section 2.4.b.i.

the babyface and hits a violent bodyslam of their own. Now the babyface writhes in pain again. The heel only briefly celebrates this time, realizing the urgency of defeating his opponent. The heel grabs the bear hug again from behind the grounded babyface. Once again the crowd is dejected. The heel, using the same maneuver as their hero, had dashed their hopes of a dramatic comeback, and now the babyface is in their worst position yet. The babyface becomes desperate, and the crowd cheers them on, but the heel's grip is too tight. The heel keeps the pressure on and does some dramatic shifts of his body, which while they do not actually engage the hold tighter, they do show visually stimulating activity to the fans. It seems now for a moment that the babyface has passed out from the pain and lack of oxygen. If the referee lifts and drops the babyface's hand three times, it counts as a technical submission. The referee lifts the babyface's hand, the hand falls. The referee counts 1. The babyface does not move (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The crowd is desperate not to see the life squeezed out of their hero. Unbeknownst to the roaring crowd, it is at this point that the heel is giving the babyface instructions on the next several spots of the match, all the while obstructing the view of his call. The referee again lifts the arm. It falls again limply to the mat and the referee counts 2. Now at the final moment, the audience screams for signs of life from their hero, the heel makes dramatic action with their body to appear to increase pressure, the referee drops the hand—

At the very last second, the hand stops and the babyface, presumably woken up by the cheering of the fans, is once again conscious (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). In a Tinkerbell-like moment, the hero has been restored by the love of the people. The babyface begins to fire up and work their way to their feet. The heel tries to tighten to hold, but to no avail. The babyface makes it to their feet with the heel behind them. The crowd's energy grows with the pumping of the babyface's courage. The babyface attacks their opponent's left wrist which they had held in painful submission holds earlier. The heel's grip breaks! The babyface steps behind the heel, lifts them overhead in dramatic fashion, stalling in the air before dropping to the mat. The crowd goes wild. This maneuver is called "belly-to-back suplex." This is a common way of transitioning to the end of the heat.

The babyface has now settled the score (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). And both wrestlers lie on the mat selling their back. The crowd roots on their hero to get up first this time. The heel screams in agony and holds their back. The referee begins their

ten-count. If both competitors are down at the count of 10, the match will be declared a “double knockout.” If one wrestler rises and their opponent remains down, the standing wrestler will be the winner by knockout. This dramatic moment of the match is called the “double down.”

Through this portion of the match, four or five minutes have passed (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The crowd has repeatedly had their hopes built up and dashed for their hero. The hero has faced stark adversity. Despite their abrasiveness, the heel has managed and executed this portion of the match without cheating. Both the babyface and heel repeatedly attacked the same body part earlier in the match to gain an advantage. Both wrestlers, now understanding the tooth-and-nail aspect of the bout, are willing to trade blows rather than just wrestle. Despite the heel’s unfair, unsportsmanlike, and un-American tactics, the babyface has managed to level the playing field through fair play and with the support of the adoring masses. The audience believes their hero can prove American values correct and stand on their feet to cheer them on. The morality tale is now ready to reach its crescendo, and the long-suffering babyface is about to get some licks in for the American Dream.

This narrative construct of having impending peril throughout the middle of the story is quite common (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). In the three-act structure of a screenplay, the heat would take up the entire second act, bookended by the cut off and the double down respectively. In a five-act play structure it would take up Acts 2 and 3. The protagonist is beset by the advantageous position of the antagonist, and struggles against those circumstances, failing several times before they succeed. In this straw man theoretical example, the wrestlers adhered to the “rule of threes” where the babyface was finally able to stop the heel’s momentum on their third try. This rule will come into play more during the next phase, the comeback.

#### 2.4.f Phase Five - The Climactic Comeback

The next phase in the story of the match enters into the most exciting phase of the story (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This portion is called “The Comeback.” The comeback sees the babyface regaining the advantage in fast-paced action and multiple exciting maneuvers. After having seen their hero suffer through the bulk of the middle of the match, the audience is primed to see the babyface rise to the occasion and give

back some punishment to the dastardly heel. This would correspond to Act 4 in a five-act play structure, and the beginning of Act 3 of a three-act structure. The conflict has been going in the favor of the antagonist for most of the bout, so the babyface must do a lot of damage quickly to put the competitors on equal footing.

In the theoretical match, the two wrestlers remain grounded while the referee counts (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). For the first several seconds, the wrestlers remain still on the ground. This gives the audience impetus to cheer their hero, as they have seen their encouragement re-energize them earlier in the match. At roughly the count of 5, the wrestlers begin to stir. By seven the heel is up to their knees while the babyface is struggling to get to their feet. Having seen the results of the heel getting up first earlier in the match, the audience cheers harder for the babyface to get up quicker. At the count of 8, the heel has regained their feet. The referee marks them standing, and the babyface rises a split-second behind. This split-second head start for the heel reinforced the babyface is still coming from behind and fighting from a disadvantage. This further solidifies the “American underdog” trope at this late stage of the story.

See the babyface on their feet, the heel swing a haymaker punch (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The exaggerated punch is meant to be seen from the very furthest seats in the arena. This is called “playing to the back row.” There is a similar approach in theater regarding voice projection and gestures. The babyface blocked the punch to the delight of the crowd. The babyface then cracks the heel with a haymaker of their own. The heel sells the punch and staggers. However, due to the extended beating, the babyface cannot immediately follow up. The heel, still fresher, tries another haymaker. It is again blocked and met with another haymaker. The heel staggers even more dramatically and throws a third desperation haymaker, only to have it blocked by the babyface. This time the babyface lands a big punch and the heel bumps on their back.

The crowd pops for the knockdown (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). A savvy and experienced heel will sell to the middle of the ropes of the corner. This feeds into the next move. The heel sells up with their left arm extended, the babyface whips the heel into the ropes. When the heel returns, the babyface strikes the heel with a clothesline,

a strike to the neck and face with the extended arm. This maneuver is most safely struck across the upper chest.

The crowd again cheers as their hero pumps them up (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The heel scrambles to their feet, feeling their once-assured victory slip away. The heel charges at the babyface with a clothesline of their own, but the babyface ducks. The heel again hits the ropes and is met at the center of the ring by the back of the babyface's elbow. This fast-paced dodge of attack is meant to keep the audience guessing as to what will happen next. The heel keeps trying to regain the advantage, but the babyface now has momentum, fueled by audience participation driving them forward.

The heel sells the blow to the jaw along the ropes yet again (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The babyface whips the heel off the ropes, bends down as the heel did midway through the match, and launches the heel in their air with a back body drop. The running heel posts their arms on the babyface's upper back while the babyface pushes upward on the heel's thighs. This weight sharing, plus the momentum of the running wrestler and their hop at the beginning of the maneuver will launch a wrestler 2-3 meters in the air in a half somersault, landing flat on their back. This leaves the babyface standing and selling their previous injuries, while the heel sells their rapidly accumulating punishment on the canvas. The babyface jumps onto the prone heel and makes a cover while hooking the leg. This careful attention to fundamentals further reinforces the association of the babyface to sportsmanship.

The referee drops down for the count and the audience anxiously counts along, believing that the babyface may restore their faith in the American values (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The referee slaps the mat and the audience counts along, "1... 2..."—the heel kicks out at the very last second, drawing an audible groan from the crowd. The referee holds up two fingers to the timekeeper, to confirm to the crowd that the count was only two. The babyface is incredulous, as he thought he had the match won as well. The referee holds up two fingers to the babyface as well. The babyface must now regroup and figure out a way to finish off their opponent who has swung momentum earlier with their equal parts cleverness, toughness and unscrupulousness.



The babyface has hit the heels with three large bumps in rapid succession (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). These three rapid dramatic bumps are the hallmark of a comeback. This entire fast-paced section of the match may have only taken 60-90 seconds. While there can be more than three big bumps, there are seldom fewer. The variety of maneuvers used here is wide to the point of infinite. This is also common for wrestlers to use the same or a similar series of moves that become their hallmark during a comeback. This practice is often referred to as “the moves of doom” when the babyface’s routine is well-known. Well known examples of the “moves of doom” trope include Bret Hart, Shawn Michaels, Hulk Hogan, and John Cena. Moments where the momentum can appear to swing during the comeback as the heel attempts to regain control, but those attempts are almost always blocked, overpowered, or most commonly dodged. The babyface making one or more covers or attempting one or more submission holds during this time is meant to reinforce their sportsman-like desire to win. It is possible for a match to end here, and the crowd goes home happy. However, it is much more common to use this section of the match to set up finishing moves by the competitors. Occasionally, heels will have babyface’s bump them two or three times in quick succession during the match, only to cut them off again. This type of extended hope spot is called a “false comeback.”

In the American values narrative, this phase serves two dual purposes. It tells both a comeback story and an underdog story. Because the babyface was once winning, then they were losing and they have now regained the advantage, it has been a 9-minute rise-fall-rise plot arc. The babyface being nearly blinded, beaten and squeezed unconscious, makes them an underdog against the heel. Their rally in spite of being downtrodden serves to reinforce that principle. The babyface continues to play fair and shows that they are able to succeed even against the unscrupulous. Unfortunately, the match has not ended yet, and all of their success may be for naught.

#### 2.4.g Phase Six - The Finish

The finish is meant to follow the comeback (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Occasionally, when a match is running short on time, a wrestler will simply hit their finishing move to win the match rather than have a full comeback. On other occasions, the third bump of the comeback will be the finishing maneuver that ends the match. However, by far the most common ending will see at least one attempt at the

babyface's finishing move blocked, leading into whatever the conclusion of the match is. For the purposes of this theoretical match, this study will forgo signature finishing moves and use generic finishes that any and all wrestlers who have completed training can perform.

The heel, beleaguered by the babyface's dramatic comeback, scurries to the corner and tries to pull themselves up (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The referee checks on the heel. The heel whispers the next spot to the referee. The heel struggles to do this because of their aching wrist, back and face. The babyface plays to the crowd who want to see the villain punished for their antagonistic ways. The babyface now confidently approaches the heel in the corner. The referee whispers the spot relayed to him by the heel. This process is called "passing a note." The heel, still clever and dastardly, pops up and jams their thumb into the babyface's eye again.

A rabble of frustrated obscenity rises from the crowd as they encourage the referee to stop this repeated fouling (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The referee gives the heel another stern warning, but the heel has already reversed positions and is beating the babyface in the corner. The crowd remembers how this played out earlier on in the match. The heel, reinvigorated mugs to the crowd again. The babyface leaves their left arm extended to feed into the next spot.

The heel attempts to whip the babyface into the other corner, but this time, the babyface reverses the heel (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This is the opposite of the two previous occasions. This defiance of expectation draws a cheer in front of the crowd. The heel rushes across the ring and slams into the corner. The crowd pops again for his reversal of corners. The heel feeds out from the corner to the center of the ring. In a mirrored image of earlier in the match, the babyface grabs the heel by the scruff of the neck, runs toward the corner, and slams the heel's head into the top turnbuckle. The heel jumps in the air on the way in and bounces their whole body as they stumble backward selling the blow. The audience cheers.

The babyface ducks behind the heel, drops to the mat and trips the stumbling villain (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The heel falls back and rolls up onto their shoulders. The babyface hooks their arm up between the heel's legs and around one.

The heel kicks their feet as they are rolled up, stacked on the shoulder. The babyface is careful not to illegally pull the tights of their opponent. This maneuver is called a “schoolboy cradle.” It is the most basic of all cradles. The referee counts and the audience joins in, “1... 2... 3!” The heel kicks out a second too late. The babyface throws their arms in the air to celebrate, but winces in pain and sells their injuries from the match. The crowd cheers. The heel sells their injuries and powders out of the ring. The referee raises the victorious hero’s hand.

At this stage of the match, the babyface has proven that hard work, fair play, grit and competitiveness can pay off (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The success of this affable example of American values has proven to the audience that the American Way is still the right way. Likewise, the failure of the heel shows that three qualities that Americans detest are further unjustifiable because even those shortcuts to dishonorable success can be overcome by the honorable efforts of a true hero.

This is an example of a happy ending in wrestling (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Of course, not all matches end with the babyface as victorious. If it could have been that after the comeback, the heel gouged the babyface’s eye, dragged them to the center of the ring, and locked on the sleeper hold until the babyface passed out. These endings are variable based on where the angle of the match (if any) is going. Some matches are simply one-offs without a particular story around them. Appreciating that, this theoretical match could happen between any generic babyface and any generic heel. From opening bell to closing bell, the match took about 7-8 minutes as described.

Perhaps for more established characters whose signature moves are known to the audience could also be appropriate (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). A final and more decisive finish would see the heel rise up and hit the thumb to the babyface’s eye. The heel could then grab his signature sleeper hold. The babyface would struggle valiantly against the hold but sells the nearly certain definitive end to the match. The valiant babyface strikes his opponent with back elbows to the gut thrice. The babyface shoves the heel to the ropes and leaves his left arm extended. The heel runs off the ropes and is caught in a sleeper hold and almost immediately submits to his own hold.

From bell to bell, most wrestling matches follow this format: shine, heat, comeback, finish (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Some current top performers like Kenny Omega, have termed this to be a “four phase wrestling match.” The formatting of the match described and the basic match that all trained American professional wrestlers can have goes as follows: chain wrestling, shine, cut-off, heat with hope-spots, double down, comeback, finish. This format extends past the traditional wrestling ethical binary. Whether or not wrestlers are traditional “babyface’s” or “heels” is irrelevant to the format. One wrestler will inevitably take the heat and the other will make the comeback. This applies to whatever the combination of heels, babyfaces, and/or tweeners.

However, individual wrestling matches are not designed to happen in a vacuum (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). There will be another show upcoming, and the fans will need a reason to pay for a ticket to see the next show. This means that occasionally after the match, there must be some additional content.

#### 2.4.h Phase Seven: The Post-Match Denouement

It is often what occurs after the match that extends the story of a match beyond one bout (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Because the audience has established relationships with both wrestlers, and has been engaged by their fight, there is every reason to have a rematch and give the audience more of what they like. Let us return to our theoretical match. We will now briefly examine two possible conclusions to the segment that will give the fans a reason to continue to follow the storyline.

The babyface stands triumphant in the ring (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). They raise their arms up to the crowd celebrating. The babyface sells their injuries, as part of the story of the match was how much they sacrificed to prove the audience right for supporting them. The heel had powdered out of the ring in shame after the match. The babyface basked in the moment. Unbeknownst to the babyface the heel has returned to the ring. The protagonist turned around and realized too late that the heel had returned with a steel folding chair. The heel bludgeons the babyface with the chair. The babyface is unconscious on the mat and the heel slams them several more times with the chair. The heel mugs and poses to the crowd. They may have lost the battle, but they won the war on this

night. At the next show, can the babyface get revenge. Referee's and medical personnel come from the backstage area to lead the babyface away.

In the alternate conclusion of this match discussed above, the heel won with their signature sleeper hold (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). With the victorious heel unsatisfied with their victory, they continue choking the babyface after the match. This inability to respect the sportsmanship expected of a professional athlete. The heel cheated for every advantage they had and continued to cheat after the match. The heel might steal the babyface's signature ring jacket and refuse to give it back. This gives the babyface a reason to aspire to overcome the cheating and unsportsmanlike conduct of the heel to prove to the audience that it can be done the "right" way.

It is also not necessary for the babyface to wind up beaten down to extend the storyline (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). It could be that after the babyface's victory that the heel's manager-girlfriend winked at the babyface. This could lead to additional conflict between the jealous heel and the babyface. It is, however, helpful to have the babyface resume that underdog role as an aspiring wrestler at a disadvantage to drive the story forward. Another common format is the heel seeking revenge. Perhaps the simplest reason might be that one wrestler won the coveted title belt, and the other will simply try to get it (and the ancillary wealth and glory it represents) back.

#### 2.4.i Analysis of a Foundational American Wrestling Ring Performance and Narrative Psychology

This section has examined the traditional format of a foundational American professional wrestling match in context (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The format of a theoretical match that uses the very most basic performance skills that professional wrestlers are taught is vital to understanding the performance art as a whole. As to this point the methods of wrestling choreography and crowd engagement have been widely overlooked in academic study. The bulk of that study has gone towards the aspects of masculine melodrama in the art form. Those skills continue to evolve, as does the presentation of the art form. Within the wrestling artistic community and industry, the melodrama of the characters and their presentation is often referred to as "sizzle." Fans love

engaging characters in interesting plot lines. However, when professional wrestling promotions tried using *only* melodrama without solid in-ring stage combat behind it, those promotions and the creative forces behind them were commercial and critical failures. The satisfying and engaging action during the matches themselves is referred to in the wrestling parlance as “steak.” Effective professional wrestling performances have a balance of sizzle to interest fans and steak to satisfy their desire for action.

An important part of ring psychology and storytelling is that maneuvers are seldom, if ever, performed as a one-off or out of context (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). In the match above several moves were teased or hinted at during the match and executed later. For example, the heel reversed the Irish whip twice in the match, and on the third beat, the babyface reversed the heel. The babyface executed a bodyslam in the shine, and the heel executed their own in the heat. This tit-for-tat storytelling also came up during the cut off when the heel gained an advantage by slamming the babyface’s head into the turnbuckles, and the babyface did the same to the heel during the finish. Likewise, when the heel failed to execute a maneuver, the babyface succeeded. Two examples of this include when the heel failed to execute a back body drop during the heat and it led to the babyface countering with a cradle, and during the comeback when the babyface hit a running clothesline and the heel missed one immediately thereafter. Importantly, the heel targeted their offense at the back of the babyface, save for a few blows to the head. The heel twice attacked the babyface’s eye, this reminder of how this maneuver could turn out stuck with the audience and build doubt as to whether the babyface would succeed in their comeback. The babyface had success in the chain wrestling and during the shine with arm locks and an arm drag, this was called back to break the bear hug and set up the suplex that caused the double down. The central portion of the match saw the heel execute repeated bear hugs with the protagonist in increasing peril to establish the seeming unavoidability of the heel’s victory. The babyface’s offense evolved as the match progressed to overcome the heel’s tactics and tendencies. Conversely, as the match progressed, the heel was befuddled by the increasing failures of their once-effective offense. This interconnected stage combat narrative style is unique to professional wrestling. It is made more impressive by the fact that matches in this particular wrestling style are largely improvised.

Using teases, callbacks, counter and tit-for-tat moves are common tools for in-ring storytelling (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). In the match above all of these tactics were used to build drama and wrap the physical storylines in on themselves. The more effective professional wrestlers are at this concept, the better their in-ring work is generally considered to be. This match was effective because there was no wasted motion or superfluous details. This is a physical manifestation of the theatrical principle of Chekov's Gun in the performance of melodramatic stage combat. This manner of technique being improvised and adjusted as it happens based on the interests of different audiences is considered a hallmark of great wrestlers. The ability to execute these lengthy, heavily interconnected, largely improvised, physical stories over periods of up-to one hour while maintaining and building crowd interest in the match is the standard by which storytelling in professional wrestling is judged. The only more important skill in professional wrestling is to sell the maximum number of tickets, merchandise and pay-per-views while executing those stories.

The mechanics of the match discussed above have been the standard of the industry for the last half-century (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This format evolved in the mid-20th century as matches began to take on a more action-based approach. The techniques of wrestling safely and effectively have been honed over roughly 150 years at the time of this writing. The safety of all performers during the segment is of paramount importance as a matter of basic professionalism. The trust between performers in these extended worked bouts is considered sacred by the members of the insular fraternity of performers. The integrity of the commercial artistic product and well-being of the performers depends on both the proper execution of the choreographed techniques and the understanding of the storytelling format. The execution of more complex moves holds and spots can be accomplished through years of study and careful training. What is described above is a bare-minimum performance for effective American wrestling in the contemporary style.

Professional wrestling styles of other cultures do not match up exactly with that of American professional wrestling. Professional wrestling is an apparatus for melodramatic stage combat to tell morality tales that reinforce the cultural values of the audience. So other prominent and influential wrestling styles in places like Mexico, Japan, and England, reflect the values and norms of their cultures. As is true with all art, professional wrestling holds up a mirror to the society that created it and lets the audience decide if they like what they see.

## 2.5 Case Study of a Traditional American Professional Wrestling Match

The above-described framework is widely known and practiced among American professional wrestlers (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). While the beats of the story are the same, the maneuvers that fill those beats vary wildly. The narrative structure of the match remains largely the same. The focus on putting the babyface in continuous jeopardy, constantly engaging the crowd, and the babyface fighting to overcome unfair tactics by the heel, are all vital aspects of the match. This section will provide a sample match for a case-study of this manner of storytelling. This case study will cover a common variant of the foundational match structure, the 9-Act structure. Importantly, this example of a popular sub-structure of matches that includes “big heat and little heat.” This structure adjusts the structure of the match to add additional back and forth between apparently evenly matched opponents to give the bout more complexity. The first two acts remain the same with Entrances and Shine. Following the Shine will be a cut-off by the heel, leading to a “little heat.” This brief period of heel advantage makes it appear that the heel is taking control. The structure unfolds as follows:

### The 9-Act Match Structure -

1. Entrances
2. Shine
3. Minor Cut-Off and Short Heat
4. Minor Comeback
5. Major Cut-Off
6. Major Heat with Hope Spots
7. Major Comeback
8. Finish
9. Denouement

The match in question took place on the 13 March 1994 edition of WCW Saturday Night Main Event (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Video of the match is available on the Peacock streaming service and on YouTube at the time of this writing. The



footage itself is the property of the WWE, and part of their tape library. The match pits the heel “Diamond” Dallas Page, accompanied to the ring by his valet Diamond Doll, against a babyface Arn Anderson. The match is refereed by veteran official Randy Anderson, whose name will be largely omitted from the description for the sake of clarity. The match was taped at the WCW sound stage at Disney-MGM. Anderson has recently returned from injury to the delight of the WCW faithful, while Page has been terrorizing the mid-card of the promotion with his stable The Diamond Exchange. The characters are previously known to the fans and their ethical alignments at this time have been previously established. Commentators Eric Bischoff and Jesse “The Body” Ventura narrate the story, filling in details of the prior narrative and coloring the television audience’s perception of events.

#### Act 1 - The Introductions

Following the tradition, Page enters first his valet on his arm (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). She wears a revealing cocktail dress and gaudy fake jewelry. Page enters with a massive, flowing, curly mullet. His ring vest and sunglasses are bejeweled with faux diamonds, and a large half-smoked cigar in his mouth. These allusions to decadence and sleazy wealth are meant to irritate fans. Page and Doll saunter to the ring, basking in the jeers of the fans in the live crowd. Page rudely gestures for Doll to give him space and points for her to hold the ropes open for him. The Diamond Doll hold opens the ropes for Page, an inverse of the expected politeness of a chivalrous man doing so for his female companion. Doll acquiesces to his demands, leaving the befuddled audience to ponder, “What does she see in him?” Before stepping through the ropes, Page jaws to the camera, “It’s a bad day at the beach for Double A!” Doll woos with approval, and the commentators take note of his confidence. Page holds the lower ropes open allowing Doll to enter after him. Page arrogantly raises his arms to the crowd, allowing Doll to remove his ring vest. The crowd is less than pleased. Thus far, Page has established himself to be haughty, rude and arrogant.

With the crowd now riled with a clear villain before them, the opening chords of Arn Anderson’s music hits (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This creates a Pavlovian cheer from the crowd, as they know this sound means the return of one of their favorites. Anderson has been a long-established star with WCW, the founder of the Four Horsemen stable, and carries the nicknames “Double A” and “The Enforcer.” Anderson

walks out in a shiny black satin jacket, with “The Enforcer” emblazoned on the back in a white and yellow logo. As a babyface, he readily slaps hands with the fans along the aisle, exactly the opposite of Page’s actions just a moment prior. Anderson also smiles on his way to the ring and salutes the viewing public and raises his arms to celebrate their approval upon reaching the ring.

With the ring announcer having shared both men’s names, weights and hometowns, the introductions are complete (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The hero and villain have been established. Anderson tosses his ring jacket to a ringside attendant. Alongside his glorious golden mullet, page wears long black tights ovetop of a black singlet, with zebra-striped elbow pads and a zebra-striped belt and brown wrestling boots, creating a tacky clash of garments. Both men have athletic tape on their lower wrists, with Anderson’s being white and Page’s being black. Anderson wears black trunks with matching kneepads and black boots with white trim. The referee asks both men if they are ready, and upon their acknowledgement, he calls for the bell. The ring of the bell signifies the end of this act of the match.

#### Act 2 - Chain Wrestling and Shine

Anderson and Page circle one another, and exchange trash talk for several seconds (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Both men demonstrate their bravado and attempt to intimidate their opponent. Neither is yet to back down. The two men lock up firmly in the center of the ring. Page towers over the balding Anderson, but the Bulky Georgian manages to shove the New Jersey native back to ropes in the opening lock-up. Page falsely accuses Anderson of pulling his hair, prompting the referee to inquire and an annoyed Anderson to look to the crowd in disbelief. Page continues to insist on his lies, and Anderson throws up his hands to the crowd in irritated disbelief before calling Page a liar to his face.

The two men lock up again at the center of the ring (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This time Page quickly drops to an arm drag, tossing the veteran competitor to the mat. Page pops up immediately and taunts Anderson, while the surprised veteran takes a knee and recollects himself. Anderson takes a moment to sell his back pain and stretch along the ropes while the commentators discuss Page’s impressive mobility for a man of his stature, prior to maligning his fashion choices.

The men lock up a third time (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This time the larger Page pushes Anderson back into the corner, thanks in some part to the damage done with his previous maneuver. With Anderson pinned in the corner, Page swings a cheap shot punch with his right hand, but the wily Anderson ducks the punch. The miss causes Page to stumble into the corner, and when he turns back in panic, Anderson is coiled in wait. Anderson hits Page with an arm drag of his own. Page retreats on his knees to a neutral corner, while Anderson taunts that their score is now 1-1 on arm drags. This tit-for-tat offense shows them to be evenly matched. Page smiles and minimizes Anderson's move, insisting "You got lucky."

The men lock up a fourth time, and Page grabs a back waist lock, lifts Anderson in the air and slams him to his knees with an amateur wrestling takedown into the referee's position (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Anderson, undeterred, uses a textbook sit-out-turn-in move that sends the towering Page flopping onto his face on the mat. Anderson has now shown himself to be a superior technical wrestler to the physically superior opponent. An embarrassed Page pops up, only to endure another arm drag from Anderson. This is the third arm drag of the match, thus fulfilling the rule of threes, and having the babyface win that contest 2-1. Anderson keeps Page on the ground in a submission hold, now confident that his fundamental catch-as-catch-can wrestling is his best path to victory. Anderson drops a knee on the arm twice and applies a bicep crusher submission hold. Page tries to rise to his feet to escape the untenable predicament, only to have Anderson twist his arm into a standing wrist lock submission.

### Act 3 - The Minor Cut Off

Page, realizing himself to be outmatched in fundamental wrestling, must now change tactics if he hopes to win (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Rather than attempting to grapple with the savvy Horseman, he will try to draw him into a brawl. This decision by Page marks the end of this segment of the match.

Realizing his grappling skills are outmatched, Page makes a change in tactic. When Anderson grabs a standing arm wringer, Page lands a knee strike to Anderson's midsection, stunning Anderson and breaking the hold. While not illegal, this is considered something of a cheap

shot. Page then grabs the smaller man by the trunks and hair and the back of the neck and hurls him through the second and top rope to the floor. The floor is concrete and covered only in a thin mat. Anderson tumbles roughly two meters down to the hard floor, hurting his back on the landing. Thus far, this has been the most significant blow of the match. Sensing his advantage growing, Page steps through the ropes, raises his hands high in the air and drops his “double ax handle” clubbing blow to Anderson’s back. Remember that Anderson’s back had been injured from an arm drag, and he had been hurled onto the concrete floor just seconds earlier. Page is now targeting that injury in his attacks. This extends the physical narrative of the match. The impact of a 125 kg man falling an additional meter from the ring to the floor to hammer his back knocked Anderson face-down to the floor. Anderson struggles to his feet as Page again strikes him with a forearm shiver to the face.

Page’s ceasing of control in this way would be the cutoff in a 7-phase foundational match. But given the major platform upon which this match is occurring, its significant allotment of television time, and the performers’ experience, the 9-Act structure is used. Rather than having Page maintain the advantage for the bulk of the heat portion, Anderson will mount a short but substantive comeback, only to be more significantly and decisively cut off thereafter.

#### Act 4 - The Minor Comeback

Page pushes Anderson against the ring post and takes a step back (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Page attempts to clothesline Anderson against the post, but the wily veteran ducks and Page forcefully wraps his injured left arm around the steel post. Anderson takes a moment to catch his breath before grabbing Page’s injured arm. Anderson pulls Page’s arm close to the post and looks to the audience on both sides for approval. The audience is familiar with Anderson’s offense and gleefully approve of what he is suggesting. Anderson racks Page’s arm on the post again. Page gives exaggerated wails of agony, flipping his golden mullet wildly as he sells his arm injury to the fans in the back row. Anderson grabs Page by his belt and the scruff of the neck to toss him back into the ring, the inverse of the previous spot.

Once back in the ring, Anderson traps Page’s arm in a hammer lock submission hold and asks for a thumbs up from the audience (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022).

The audience acquiesces and Anderson picks Page up while holding the hammerlock and bodyslam him onto his own arm. This is one of Anderson's signature moves and delights the crowd. Commentator Eric Bischoff sells the crowd to the television audience by mentioning that it can dislocate the elbow, shoulder, or elbow joints. Anderson swiftly applies another arm lock to the downed Page, as Page writhes in pain. The Diamond Doll cheers Page on from ringside, and unbeknownst to her, the commentators ogle her in real time. Page attempts to stand, but Anderson traps his arm in a hammerlock on the mat and stomps Page's elbow. Page writhes in pain, and it seems he may have been premature to think he had taken the advantage in the match. Between the arm drags and the hammerlock bodyslam, Anderson has now solidly bumped Page three times, in addition to capturing a number of submission holds which serve to potentially win the match and certainly injure his opponent. This is a common completion point for the shine of a match.

#### Act 5 - The Major Cut-Off

Anderson grabs another arm lock, and Page powers his way up (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Anderson delivers a knee to Page's midsection, just as Page had to him earlier in the match. Anderson attempts to whip the larger Page off the ropes, but Page reverses the momentum and pulls Anderson into a back elbow strike from Page's uninjured right arm. Anderson takes this blow on the chin and is dropped to the mat.

Page has now seen that he cannot beat Anderson using traditional wrestling tactics. It is now incumbent upon him to embrace rough strategies to win the match. Page now has the advantage and knows that he must continue his onslaught. He has no intention of ever letting Anderson regain the initiative in the bout.<sup>28</sup>

#### Act 6 - The Heat and Hope Spots

A frustrated and increasingly desperate Page attacks Anderson with disregard, stomping him wildly and kicking him while he's down (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Page stomps on Anderson's outstretched hand and kicks him in the ribs. Anderson

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<sup>28</sup> This back-and-forth momentum at the cut-off is indicative of a sub-style of the general match structure which includes a short heat and extended hope spot prior to a more decisive cut-off into a longer heat (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This 9-Act structure is a favorite among many top wrestlers due to its additional complexity, the extended emotional journey of the audience and the increased unpredictability of the action. Hereafter, the match's remaining 4 acts will follow the same structure as the 7-phase foundational match.

cries out in pain and rolls across the mat, trying to distance himself from the beating. Page shakes and sells his aching arm as he steps up to further his attack. Page kicks Anderson again and slams his head off of the turnbuckle. On commentary, the future Governor of Minnesota explains Page's strategy to turn the match into a brawl where he can use dirtier tactics to defeat his opponent. Bischoff concurs, mentioning Page's purported reputation as a street fighter on the Jersey Shore.

Page pins Anderson in the corner, with Anderson's face facing out of the ring (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Page claws at Anderson's face with both hands, fish hooking his mouth while coughing his eyes. Page is now fighting dirty, but his posture in the corner blocks the referee's view of his fouls. These fouls are, however, obvious to the camera performing a close-up on Page and Anderson in the corner, giving the fans at home a clear window into Anderson's screams and Page's direct address trash talk to the audience. Regardless, the referee begins the five-count for a rope break; if Page fails to meet the count, he will be disqualified. As heels do, Page takes full advantage and breaks the hold at 4. Anderson gasps for air and tries to recollect himself. Page now grabs Anderson by the trunks, another foul, and lands a forearm shiver to his lower back, continuing the assault from earlier. Page traps Anderson in the corner and lands another right back elbow to his face. After another back elbow, Anderson sinks in the corner, reeling from the multi-layered barrage.

Page now feels confident and slides to his knees goading the injured Anderson to fight him (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This cocky behavior incites the crowd to cheer on Anderson and boo Page. After another kick, Page comes into the corner to try to inflict more punishment, but Page is met by a pair of quick knees from Anderson. Page responds with a haymaker to Anderson's face, sending him staggering along the ropes. This movement is more stimulating to the live crowd and draws the eye around the ring. Anderson sells to the adjacent corner, where a cameraman films on the ring apron. This is the haymaker Page had missed earlier in the match. Anderson has also landed three knees to the body in the match, though all have preceded him being struck in the chin by the larger man.

Page pulls Anderson to the center of the ring, tosses one of the veteran's arms over his head while triumphantly mugging to the crowd (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15

November 2022). The crowd boos the arrogant Page, but that does not deter him from hoisting Anderson high in the air and body slamming him to the mat. Page gives an arrogantly lax cover with a leg hooked. Anderson kicks out, and the crowd is left to wonder if Page had given a proper technical cover that he might have won. For himself, Anderson tries to shake off the beating and regain himself.

Page sinks in a reverse chin lock, which serves as professional wrestling's version of a fulcrum choke (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The choke is locked in at the center of the ring for maximum symmetrical visibility. While the commentators ogle Page's valet, the camera zooms in on the hold. This is considered a photogenic hold, as both wrestler's faces are visible simultaneously. Page's lascivious smile and Anderson's writhing in pain can be seen in the close-up from the mobile camera. Anderson continues selling with his face and trying to keep his body moving, for two reasons, within the story of the match it is to show the referee he is still active, and in the craft of wrestling to keep the fans visually stimulated. Anderson shoots a fist into the air and slowly works his way to his feet. Anderson lands a pair of back elbows to Page's abdomen, breaking the hold. Anderson hits the ropes, only to catch one Page's knees to his own midsection. This sent Anderson flying to the mat, clutching his midsection in pain. It seems that every time Anderson tries to stand toe-to-toe with Page, he cannot maintain his advantage. Thus far in the heat, Anderson has fired up twice with consecutive blows to Page's midsection but has been swiftly cut off by the strikes of the towering future-yogi.

Now supremely confident, Page berates, and brow beats the fallen Anderson (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Anderson clutches his gut on his knees while Page continues his verbal barrage. Anderson worked his way to the center of the ring once again as part of his ringcraft. Page lands another punch to a kneeling Anderson's face. Anderson works his way to his feet. Page shoves him to the center of the ropes and whips Anderson to the opposite side, only to meet him with a boot to the gut. Anderson doubles over, and Paige hoists him up in the air using the gut wrench maneuver. Page slams Anderson back down onto his knee in a move called the "Gut buster," a former finisher of Anderson's. Page has now found a variety of success, attacking Anderson's back, head and gut. This is common among brawlers. A technician like Anderson will focus on a single body part to gain

and keep an advantage, while brawlers will vary their attacks towards whatever is convenient or expeditious.

Page struts around the ring, playing to the crowd as their hero writhes in pain (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Page grabs another lax cover. Anderson kicks out at two, but this time he can only raise a shoulder from the mat, as he is fading in the fight. A third and a fourth lax cover each yield Page a two-count and earn him the chiding of Ventura on commentary about his sloppy covers. Anderson kicks out and Page sinks in his rear chin lock again. The wrestlers had been positioned too close to the ropes upon initial application of this hold, and both subtly scoot closer to the center of the ring. In this version of the hold, both men are stretched out on the mat. Anderson continues to lurch and twist trying to adjust his position to keep his movement visually stimulating to the crowd. Page subtly moves his feet up onto the ropes during the hold. This foul goes unseen by the referee but is obvious to the crowd, who books wildly. Anderson, upon receiving a hand signal from Page, sells the hold more vigorously while Page's feet are on the ropes, as in the mythology of professional wrestling makes holds move painful. The crowd shouts for the referee to notice the obvious foul, but Page removes his feet just in time before the referee can see. The referee, suspicious of Page, asks about the possible foul, but Page denies it by shaking his glorious golden mullet side to side for all of the fans to see. Page then berates the much smaller referee. The audience now knows that Page is an arrogant liar, a hypocrite, and a bully who fights dirty. As the referee returns his attention to Anderson, who remains in a chokehold, Page again puts his feet on the ropes. The referee is again told, and Page again profusely denies it to the head-slapping dismay of fans. Page tries this a third time, but the referee catches him, and he is forced to release the hold.

A furious Page pops to his feet and attempts to drop his right elbow on Anderson (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Attacks with that elbow have been successful thus far. Anderson, realizing the desperation of his situation, dodges Page for a second time. Page's elbow strikes the mat and now both of his arms are damaged. This gives Anderson a moment to recollect himself. Page gets to his feet and comes after the kneeling Anderson, but this brief respite has given Anderson the time he needs to turn the tide of the match.



## Act 7 - The Comeback

As Page approaches the kneeling Anderson, Anderson lands a punch to Page's gut (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Page responds with a punch to Anderson's face, staggering him back to the corner. Page tries to follow up but receives a straight kick to the gut from Anderson. Page punches Anderson in the gut. Anderson lands some clubbing blows to Page's back, while Page drives shoulders into Anderson's gut in the corner. Ventura describes Anderson's second wind to the crowd on commentary. Excitement is building as Anderson seems fired up and is having increasing success standing toe-to-toe with Page. Page whips Anderson across the ring to the corner and charges after him, only to receive Anderson's boot to his face. This is Anderson's first blow to Page's face in the bout. Page staggers back selling the kick before taking another kick and punch to the gut. Anderson is now Turning the tide and succeeding where he earlier failed. Anderson strikes Page across the face with either a palm strike or a short punch, depending on the angle and what commentary would have one believe.

In a heel move, Anderson rakes Page's eyes across the top rope (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This is a dirty tactic, though in some sense it is fairer game due to Page's constant fouling. It is also accepted by fans as they are well aware of Anderson's rise to fame as a top heel in the NWA and WCW. Anderson whips Page into the ropes and hits a chopping blow to Page's gut, sending Page doubling over to the mat. An enthused Anderson signals to the crowd that it's over, facing directly into the stationary hard camera for the pose. Anderson whips Page off of the opposite set of ropes and hits a back body drop on his towering opponent. This use of all four sides of the ring is great visual stimuli for both the live and television audience. It is also a display of ring generalship from a master craftsman like Anderson. Page sells his aching back as Anderson climbs the ropes. As Anderson reaches the top rope, Page rushes over and knocks Anderson off the ropes and out to the floor some three meters below.

## Act 8 - The Finish

The referee counts as Anderson struggles to collect himself on the outside (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Page celebrates to the crowd that he has again stopped their hero's momentum. The Diamond Doll cheers with her arms up stretched for her paramour's success. Page's celebration is interrupted by the shooting pains he sells in his gut

from Anderson's attacks. In this moment, Page believes he has secured a win via countout, having the referee count ten seconds of a wrestling being outside of the ring. Somehow, Anderson musters the wear with all to slide back under the bottom rope at a count of nine.

Page, incensed that Anderson made it back into the ring, attacks the downed man, soccer kicking him in the rings as he had during the initial cutoff (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). A desperate Page begins strangling Anderson in the middle of the ring, committing a blatant foul and wildly unsportsmanlike conduct. Again, Page releases the illegal hold at 4 but is admonished by the referee for his conduct. Page brushes past the referee and attempts another bodyslam. In his desperation, Page is attempting again what worked earlier in the match. However, the savvy and experienced technician Anderson has evolved his tactics. Anderson slips out of the lift of the bodyslam and lands behind Page. As Page turns, Anderson delivers another kick to the gut. As Page doubles over, Anderson hooks on a textbook rolling inside-cradle, also called a "small package." This move is a traditional technical wrestling hold and is executed with perfect technique, antithetical to the lax covers and sloppy execution that Page had shown earlier in the match. Anderson's use of precision wrestling technique, and necessary toughness, carried him to a victory over a game challenger.

#### Act 9 - The Denouement

Anderson is able to hook the hold and keep the large Page down despite being close to the ropes. The referee counts the three and the bell rings (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The crowd pops for their familiar hero. Anderson instinctively pops up and raises a triumphant fist to the crowd, but he immediately feels the pain of his injuries from the bout. Anderson leans on the corner as the referee raises his hand. The commentators discuss how Anderson caught Page off-guard for the final hold. Page lumbers to his feet and claims that Anderson had used the ropes (the audio is unclear), either way, it is a lie and demonstrates Page's unscrupulousness from committing those exact fouls earlier in the match. Anderson promptly leaves the ring and makes his way to the backstage area, waving politely to the Diamond Doll as he passes by, to her mild chagrin. The scantily clad Doll bounces gratuitously as she consoles her paramour. Replays of the decisive moments of the comeback play out on the screen with commentary over them.

## 2.5.a Analysis of the Effects of the 9-Act Match: DDP vs Arn Case Study

This match successfully elevated all of the performers involved (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Anderson is a savvy veteran undergoing a character realignment as a babyface. Here he had a quality 12-minute match against a larger, up-and-coming heel. Page, though having lost the match, was defeated by a well-respected veteran and multiple time champion in the organization. Moreover, Page's clear advantage throughout the bout made him appear to be on Anderson's level, thus elevating him to a higher place in the escalating of talent. Anderson did not simply overpower Page in every aspect of the match, he had to scrap his way back from a severe beating and use his technical skills on the imposing Page. Anderson winning via slick wrestling hold rather than a definitive finishing maneuver left the matter somewhat in doubt as the upstart page was literal inches from escaping that maneuver. Anderson's victory over a game opponent helps to elevate him. By selling for Page throughout the match, Anderson built the equity of Page's character with the crowd. Though he lost, Page is now a more valuable character than when he entered the match from having given the great Arn Anderson everything he could handle. For Anderson, this meant that he had beaten a larger, (apparently) younger, and tough opponent thereby increasing his own equity. For her part, The Diamond Doll received some valuable television exposure which raised her profile with fans, though some of the then-acceptable commentary from 1994 from a Governor and television executive does not age well. Nevertheless, her presence does add interest, visual stimuli and glamor to the match, as well as enhancing age's character.

In the Page vs Anderson match, this occurred when Page struck Anderson with a knee to the midsection, threw him from the ring, and attacked him on the floor (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). It appeared that Page had the advantage. This then precipitated Anderson's "little comeback" which saw him dodge Page's strike against the post and continue to out wrestle DDP for a few minutes using technical holds. The proper cutoff came when Page pulled Anderson into his back elbow and abandoned all pretext for catch-as-catch-can wrestling. This extended structure is ocular among many wrestlers and commonly used among more advanced storytellers in longer matches. This 9-Act match structure unfolds as follows:

In all, this match serves as a great example of in-ring storytelling (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This match is not considered a classic. It is not considered particularly memorable. Neither performer was anywhere near the peak of their career. Instead, this is a rank-and-file match from a standard episode of a barely memorable period of a professional wrestling television show. It was chosen because it demonstrates the norms of the storytelling format enumerated in detail in this section. Applying the understanding of the match framework to professional wrestling matches will demonstrate the in-ring storytelling apparatus that is at the core of most American matches. This same analysis can be applied to nearly any American professional wrestling match. It does not always apply so neatly to matches in one of the international styles, many forms of gimmick match, or on American matches that follow other non-traditional formats. However, this is the match structure upon which American professional wrestling is built. Toots Mondt is widely reported to have innovated the concept, but that is not provable at the time of this writing. This match structure, and its similar tag-team counterpart, is the foundation upon which professional wrestlers learn to perform, and which fans (largely unknowingly) have been spellbound by for at least a century.

## 2.6 Gimmick Matches

Now that the general psychology and approach of the standard American professional wrestling match has been established, some of the common variations on that style can be discussed (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Matches that deviate from the rules of this style are common as a narrative device depending on how far along an angle is at the time of presentation. These matches are usually used for as special attractions as discussed above, or as a narrative device to show the escalation of tensions between characters. It is common for these matches to be more violent than standard singles matches, as the expanded rules to allow for otherwise illegal and dangerous tactics, including improvised de facto weapons to be used. This can be expressed in a number of ways.

This section will give a brief overview of a number of common gimmick matches. The common rules and features of these matches will be discussed. There will also be a discussion of the reasons for the popularity of these matches. This section will also discuss controversies

surrounding various gimmick matches, and the tactics used therein. Some matches fall into more than one overlapping category of gimmick match.

### 2.6.a The Steel Cage Match

The most well-known among the gimmick matches is the steel cage match (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Two or more competitors are locked in a cage made of steel to settle their grudge. There are dozens of cage designs that vary between promotions and events. These varied events can also have particular rules, usually when involving more than two performers. This section will focus on the most commonly seen iteration of the steel cage match.

The most common design of a steel cage is a mesh fence affixed atop the edge of the ring apron around all four sides of the ring (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This fencing typically stands at least three meters (10 ft) above the surface of the ring. Most often, the cage does not feature a ceiling/roof, though this varies based on the design of the cage itself.

The purpose of the match in the literal sense is often to prevent interference in the match from outside parties (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This can be helpful in a storyline where one or the other character has been aided by other performers during matches with their opponent. It can also be used to prevent one competitor from running away from their opponent. The competitors being ostensibly trapped together is a main feature of the bout.

This format is also free of disqualifications, and so competitors may attack one another more recklessly and viciously than before (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). There are no rope breaks to escape holds. There is no penalty for the use of weapons, if they can somehow be brought into the cage. These matches are often particularly bloody. The artistic reasoning behind this is that it is a staple of these matches to slam an opponent's head into the bare steel, while the literal reason is self-administered razor cuts to the forehead.

There are different traditions about how these matches can be won or lost (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The differences in traditions about this are largely based in geography. In most parts of the United States, a cage match could only be won by pin or submission. This would keep the match entirely within the cage walls. It also dictated that there must be a decisive winner in the contest. This formatting also made roofed cages common. The northeastern territory of the WWWF and later WWE used an unroofed cage and allowed competitors to win by escaping the cage. This allowed competitors to lose the decisive match of a feud without having to accept defeat in the fictitious bout. This match design variation is often lamented as a method of brand and ego protection by performers.

### 2.6.b Ladder Match

A ladder match is perhaps the most popular of the mainstream gimmick matches (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). These bouts require a particularly high amount of spectacular danger and are typically high stakes contests. In these bouts, a talisman of some kind is suspended high above the ring. This item is most typically a championship belt. A popular variation of this match would have a briefcase containing some manner of covetable contract above the ring. There have also been various other tokens suspended dangerously high above the ring.

These coveted items can only be retrieved by setting up a ladder in the ring, climbing up, and singularly securing the item. These matches are won by whichever participant removes the item from the raising apparatus it is secured to and takes sole possession of it. There are sometimes more than one item to secure, so these items are either attached to a shared apparatus or secured simultaneously.

In these bouts, performers cannot be disqualified, so the use of weapons is perfunctory (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The most common weapon is the ladder or ladders themselves. Over the past three decades, performers have innovated a seemingly limitless variety of increasingly creative ways to attempt to make one another with the ladders. They are used as platforms, bridges, springboards, clubs, traps, as tools to compress anatomy, and a seemingly unending list of new tactics.

The most common, and perhaps most dangerous feature of these matches is that while one competitor is high atop the ladder with victory close at hand, their opponent will tip the ladder over causing a spectacular fall and terrifying landing (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). These are termed “big bumps” in the parlance of the industry. Another very common tactic in these matches is for one competitor to lay another prone on the ground or some other flat surface, only to have the attacking wrestler climb to the top of a ladder and jump onto their opponent. This presents a tremendous danger to both competitors.

This match was first popularized in Stampede Wrestling (Hart, 2010). There are many wrestlers that claim ownership of the type of match. This manner of bout was popularized in the mid-1990’s in the WWF. The concept was brought to the WWF by Bret “The Hitman” Hart. The first ladder match in the WWF took place at a house show on 21 July 1992 at an un-televised live event in Portland, Maine, USA. The bout saw perennial in-ring and backstage rivals Bret Hart and Shawn Michaels compete for the Intercontinental championship, with Hart eventually securing the title belt suspended above the ring. The first televised ladder match was the famed bout between Michaels and Scott “Razor Ramon” Hall at Wrestlemania X for that same title at Madison Square Garden.

The ladder match has become a staple contest in both major and minor promotions around the world (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This particular variety of match often sees several competitors performing simultaneously, creating a chaotic atmosphere during the match. It is not uncommon to see six or more combatants scrambling to climb the ladder, with a myriad of spectacular falls and scary landings eliminating performers from the match narrative throughout. There are also a number of common variations on this bout which feature the use of particular weapons, most commonly folding chairs, collapsible tables, chains, and metal rubbish cans.

### 2.6.c The Scramble Match

The presence of the “scramble match” is a relatively new phenomenon (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Since the inception of the performance style, professional wrestling was largely formatted in a one-on-one or evenly numbered teams against one another. However, in the 1990’s matches with a non-traditional number of

participants became increasingly common. This began with matches where three performers would compete. This is most commonly called a “triple threat match, but it is referred to as a “three-way dance” by a vocal minority of promotions and fans. This also became a familiar happening in tag-team matches. It also increased to a quartet of competing performers in “fatal four-ways” shortly thereafter. From that point on, the number of participants in the match could vary wildly.

The most popular contemporary term for these matches is a “scramble match” (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). In these performances, a seemingly endless cavalcade of action takes place with a seemingly endless cascade of action. These matches are popular among promoters as they give many talents an opportunity to perform on the card, without dedicating much episodic narrative time to them. They are also favorites of audiences as the matches tend to feature very consistent and seemingly unpredictable action. Performers, while appreciative of getting a spot on the show, sometimes lament the matches because they are often difficult to choreograph effectively and don’t allow them much feature time.

There are some particular features of these matches (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The format of winning is either a single fall or an elimination style. It is most common for these matches to end with a single fall, as it simplifies the narrative, and only one performer has to lose. There is no set number of competitors in these matches, though usually it is less than ten. These matches usually feature some kind of stakes which all of the characters would mutually pursue, usually a secondary championship or an opportunity at a match for a secondary championship at a subsequent show.

#### 2.6.d Battle Royal

The Battle Royal, alternately spelled “Battle Royale,” is one of the most popular and spectacular types of gimmick matches (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This type of match features a ring filled with several performers, typically from 10-30. The mass of humanity attacks itself and wrestlers proceed to try to throw one another over the top rope to the floor. The final performer in the ring is the winner of the battle royal. The most common number of participants is around 20. These matches are popular with fans because they display a wild spectacle and a variety of characters. Winning battle royales can



have some particular stakes, like a match for a championship, or it is often a title and an end unto itself. Battle royals are convenient for promoters, as if there are between 10 and 40 wrestlers who need a spot on the show, this is a way to give them one.

Professional wrestling folk hero Andre the Giant spent decades winning battle royals across the United States and internationally (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). His (figurative and literal) stature in this regard led the WWE to having an annual tradition at their Wrestlemania event, where 30 male competitors will compete in the Andre the Giant Memorial Battle Royal, for a gold trophy featuring the colossal Franchise grappler. This event also features a Women's Battle Royal with 30 female performers for a golden trophy cup.

There are variations on this format wherein wrestlers fill the ring one after the other in timed intervals, or in pre-set groups (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The most prominent example of this is the Royal Rumble in the WWE. This format of match sees two participants begin the match, and then the remainder of the participants enter on at a time in regularly timed intervals. There are traditionally thirty participants in these matches, though they have featured up to fifty performers. They are usually contested for either a top championship belt or for a match against a champion at that year's Wrestlemania.

There are several other famous variations of the battle royal (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). One widely known version of the battle royale is the 60-man World War 3 match of WCW fame, where three rings would be filled with a total of 20 performers, and the winner would be the last man standing in the ring. Another well-known example of this was the Bunkhouse Stampede from the NWA, where wrestlers would perform in street clothing and were allowed to use weapons throughout the bout. There are also a number of battle royals wherein the final two wrestlers will compete in a standard match for the victory.

#### 2.6.e The "I Quit" Match

An "I Quit" match is a variety of submission match where a wrestler must be made to verbally surrender the bout (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This can also be achieved by tapping out. Referees also have the authority to stop bouts by way of

technical submission if they deem a wrestler unable to continue. These matches do not have disqualifications or count out. They are often particularly brutal affairs. A wrestler forcing their opponent to verbally submit is considered a massive public humiliation. The bouts typically occur in the midst of a particularly hostile feud. Due to the decisive nature of their finish, these matches usually conclude feuds. Wrestlers have been known to be forced to submit by being beaten or threatened with improvised weapons, being placed in debilitating submission holds for extended periods, or from losing consciousness due to pain from a submission or prolonged beating.

## 2.6.f The No-Holds-Barred Match

The term “no holds barred” originated in the catch wrestling era (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). It literally meant that there would be no submission holds outlawed from the contest. However, over the years, this has become a catch-all term for a match wherein performers cannot be disqualified or counted out for any reason. In broader society, it is an idiom used to reference situations where there are no rules. In contemporary professional wrestling, this is the most common form of gimmick match. While cage matches and ladder matches require complex set-up, and scramble and battle royals require organizing many performers, the no-holds-barred match is an elegantly simple escalation of cooperative staged violence.

These matches demonstrate a curious unwritten rule of professional wrestling (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). In regard to weaponry, in professional wrestling all weapons are *improvised*. There are no actual weapons used in professional wrestling. If intentional weapons appear, they are never effectively used for their intended purpose. This is the notion of the “foreign object.” This functions as a sort of Chekhov’s gun in professional wrestling. The principle of Chekhov’s gun dictates that if there is a gun on the mantle in Act I of a play, it must go off by Act III. This principle dictates that there should be no superfluous details within the world of the play. While the metaphorical purpose of this notion is expressed in the in-ring narrative, the literal expression of this is abundantly clear with foreign objects in professional wrestling. In professional wrestling, if a performer carries an object to the ring, they *must* attempt to use it as a weapon.

Typically, this rule is demonstrated by everyday objects being used as blunt force instruments (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). If a performer carries out a cane or a flagpole, it will be used as a weapon. Championship belts are commonly used as weapons as well. If a wrestler carries out any spraying instrument like a perfume atomizer or hair spray, it will inevitably be sprayed into the eyes of an opponent to blind them.

The most common of these is the steel folding chair, which is the favored tool for bodily harm among competitors (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Every physical item in the ringside area can be used in this way, including television cameras, the ring bell, the hammer used to ring that bell, television monitors, and even the announcer's table itself. There is also usually a horde of potential weapons under the ring, such as tools, metal trash cans, collapsible tables, ladders, and fire extinguishers. It is also common for there to be items under the ring that have no business being there, such as sledgehammers, road signs, lead pipes, large badges of thumbtacks, and cooking sheets. The only weapons typically used for their intended purpose in professional wrestling are brass knuckles and kendo sticks/Singapore canes.

When legitimate weapons appear, they are usually part of a presentation and almost never used with lethal intent (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). On the few occasions where actual weapons have made their way into professional wrestling, they have been largely ceremonial or somehow ineffectively used. While wrestlers like Drew McIntyre and Kenzo Suzuki respectively carried a traditional Scottish Claymore and a katana to the ring, these weapons were never used to stab or slash opponents. Likewise, in an infamous television segment from *WWF Raw is War* in 1997, wrestler Brian Pillman fired a revolver at "Stone Cold" Steve Austin while Austin was invading his home; while the camera cut to black after the shot as a cliffhanger, Austin returned the next Monday without suffering a gunshot wound. That segment was widely panned by critics and fans alike. The hyper realism of intentional weaponry being used for bodily harm violates the mutually accepted notion by performers and fans that the exaggerated cartoonish violence be just that.

In "no holds barred" matches, these improvised weapons are put on full display (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Wrestlers strike one another with various items around ringside. These bouts have a variety of slight variations in their layout, rules and

branding. Some bouts are called “no disqualification/no count out.” The match must still end in the ring, unless the stipulation “falls count anywhere” allows competitors to win anywhere (conceivably) in the world. The “falls count anywhere” stipulation also means that the referee will follow the wrestlers as they brawl throughout the venue, and occasionally outside of it. They can also be called a “street fight,” a “taped fists” match, or even a “brass knuckles,” bout, even though in those bouts brass knuckles are seldom used. The most prominent names for this style of match are either “hardcore” or “extreme.” While the WWF had a Hardcore division from 1998-2002, and competitor WCW had a similarly branded title until 2001, the divisions were abandoned. The well-known Extreme Championship Wrestling promotion heavily featured and popularized this content in the United States, however, because of its severity and influence, it was discussed in section 2.10.c.

These matches have been widely popular for decades (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). From the 1970’s-2000’s, they were a staple of long feuds that played out episodically. These matches were often criticized for being horrifically bloody and gratuitously violent. They were also criticized for allowing performers to inflict severe head and bodily trauma using improvised weapons. During the early phases of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980’s, many promotions banned the use of blood, and many performers ceased the practice to avoid it and other blood-borne illnesses. The WWE has outlawed intentional bleeding via self-mutilation by performers and imposed strict controls over incidental/accidental blood during matches. They have also banned striking the heads of performers with improvised weapons. In 2016, a slew of former WWE talents filed a lawsuit over allegedly suffering chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) from head injuries suffered while performing for the organization. Though the lawsuit was eventually dismissed, increased public awareness about the effects of CTE has led to an aversion to engaging in potentially hazardous practices with weapons during professional wrestling performance.

However, a vocal segment of the professional wrestling audience laments these moves towards the safety of performers (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). There are four distinct features to this opposition. The primary feature is the nostalgia for the presentation of professional wrestling from earlier eras. Nostalgic fans pine for the wilder days of wrestling’s past. The other three features of this phenomenon also play into the existence of the controversial “deathmatch” subgenre of professional wrestling. The second

feature of the lamentation is the fans who seek an adult-oriented wrestling product. During the professional wrestling boom of the 1990's, promotions targeted the male 18-35 demographic with racy and violent content. This era saw the peak mainstream public interest in American professional wrestling, and the fans who grew up during that era developed their tastes towards it. The sole surviving professional wrestling company from that era is the WWE and since 2008 it has presented family-friendly "TV-PG" content. The third feature of this is a sense of realism provided by these violent features. It is easy to suspend disbelief when supposed enemies are beating one another over the head with blunt objects or bleeding profusely from their face. It takes very little imagination to see the actual harm those actions cause, though it does subtract from the art of simulated violence which the medium is built around. Finally, there is an aspect of sadistic voyeurism by a relatively small and wildly passionate segment of the fan base.

#### 2.6.f.i Deathmatch - Red Equals Green

A famous quote in wrestling circles is that "red equals green" (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This means that anything featuring red, human blood will draw green American dollars. During the kayfabe era, bloody matches were a favorite of fans. Wrestlers became adept at "getting color" meaning to engage in the process of "blading" by cutting their foreheads with trimmed razor blades that they could hide on their person. This became a feature of many top stars, then eventually any storyline which called for visual vitriol between characters. It was also helpful that before there were large television screens in arenas, that fans could see the distinct blood of performers at any distance.

The popularity of the no-holds-bard match has spawned a massive subgenre within professional wrestling (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This subgenre has been through several evolutions of its branding over the previous decades, having been called "hardcore," "extreme," "ultra-violent," and perhaps most commonly today "deathmatch." This particular brand of no-holds-bard matches is known for gratuitously over-the-top blood and violence. At some point, every major promotion has hosted matches that would fall under this subgenre. However, the emergence of promotions dedicated solely to this style will be discussed in this section.

As with many origin stories in professional wrestling, the birth of the deathmatch is murky and debated among historians (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). What is known is the practice of blading in professional wrestling was developed by Kirby “Sailor” Watkins in the 1930’s (Hyde, 2022). The process of cutting one’s own forehead with a fragmented razor blade made it relatively easy for willing wrestlers to wear the fabled “crimson mask” of blood covering their face to build drama in a match (Hyde, 2022). Likewise, wrestlers were typically willing to do so for a bump in pay. The earliest known championship specifically targeted at a bloody, no-holds-barred division is the NWA Texas Brass Knuckles Championship, which was created in 1953 and saw Fred Koury crowned its inaugural champion under his ring name “Wild” Bill Curry (Tanabe et al., 2022). This would be the longest-running title in the subgenre, existing in some iteration from 1953-1987. Luminaries to hold this title included Fritz Von Erich, Johnny Valentine, “Iron” Mike DiBiase, Stan Stasiak, Baron Von Raschke, Walter “Killer” Kowalski, Jose Lothario, Blackjack Mulligan, Blackjack Lanza, “Superstar” Billy Graham, “Mad Dog” Vachon, Terry Funk, Rocky Johnson, Bruiser Brody, Dusty Rhodes, “The Big Cat” Ernie Ladd, Tony Atlas, Terry Gordy, Abdullah the Butcher, and “Gentleman” Chris Adams, among others. Subsequent versions of the title were revived in 1998-2001 but deactivated by 2001.

The earliest known use of the term “deathmatch,” also came from Texas (Thompson & Jarrett, 2021). Dory Funk Sr is believed to have hosted the first ever “Texas Deathmatch” in 1965, when he took on Mike DiBiase in a wild, three-hour affair. This and other varieties of no-holds-barred bouts were popular gimmick matches throughout the 1950’s-1980’s. While these prominently violent and bloody matches were popular in the United States, they were used as major action beats in long-term story arcs. During this time period, wild, bloody bouts were popularized in Japan by the years-long feud between Dory Funk Jr and Giant Baba (Thompson & Foley, 2022). Perhaps the territory that is most associated with this style of match was Puerto Rico’s World Wrestling Council (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Known widely as a “blood and guts” territory, the WWC heavily featured blood brawls and no-holds-barred stipulations (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This reputation was credited to a large degree to Victor Quinones, who bought into the promotion in 1984 (Thompson & Foley, 2022).

This approach changed in Japan in 1989. Wrestler Atsushi Onita had been a featured Junior heavyweight under the All-Japan Pro Wrestling banner from 1974-1985 (Tanabe et al., 2022). He even secured the NWA International Junior Heavyweight championship in his feud with Chaco Guerrero Sr. Onita retired due to his injuries in 1985. After taking several years of convalescence, Onita opened Frontier Martial Arts Wrestling (FMW) in 1989. FMW was innovative in its business approach, as it exclusively promoted no-holds-barred matches (Thompson & Foley, 2022). These matches also became increasingly outlandish as time went on. Stipulations became winding descriptions of a litany of horrors. “No roped, barbed wire” matches saw the ring ropes removed and replaced with strings of barbed wire. Cacti, piranha tanks, explosions, fluorescent light tubes, panes of glass, and all manner of improvised weaponry became the norm.

By 1994, this subgenre was so popular in Japan that a rival, the International Wrestling Association of Japan emerged under the guidance of Victor Quinones (Thompson & Foley, 2022). This promotional war created an arms race of increasingly dangerous and wild stipulations. This game of promotional one-upmanship led to ever-more-perilous matches for wrestlers making severe sacrifices of their own health and safety. This gory spectacle entranced an ever-more-passionate fan-base that exhausted the courage and toughness of the battered wrestlers.

The tales of epically bloody and mind-bendingly violent matches from Japan became the talk of the professional wrestling media (Thompson & Foley, 2022). An international community of “tape-traders” emerged, where the most dedicated wrestling fans in the United States would bootleg copies of these matches and distribute them among the informal network of super-fans. These matches became the stuff of legend.

Also in 1989, what would become the American counterpart to the Japanese hardcore promotions emerged with what would become Extreme Championship Wrestling (Heyman, 2004). Eventually, ECW came to only promote hardcore matches. They became a wild mid-point in American professional wrestling, where performers had creative freedom and Heyman’s guidance to create adult-themed characters, raunchy storylines, and incredibly dangerous matches. ECW also boasted of a raucous fanbase who reveled in the unpredictable counter-cultural approach to the art form. ECW popularized this style in the United States.

Eventually, the style reached the two largest promotions in the United States, at the time, the WWF and WCW (Thompson & Prichard, 2016; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Locked in their own promotional war, the WWF and WCW sought to use ECW talent and style to get an edge over their adversaries. Both big money promotions would come into and out of promotional agreements with ECW, and both would periodically raid the talent roster of the fledgling promotion. An aging Terry Funk became the Godfather of the deathmatch style and is famed for having been a featured talent at FMW, IWA Japan, ECW, WCW, and the WWF in his capacity as a no-holds-barred stylist (Thompson & Foley, 2022).

However, wrestler Mick Foley<sup>29</sup> became the most famous practitioner of the subgenre after his performance at the WWF King of the Ring 1998 pay-per-view (Foley, 1999). Foley had long been a famed practitioner of the no-holds-barred style. His utter lack of regard for his body's welfare, combined with an appreciation of ring psychology taught to him by Dominic DeNucci, and deceptively engaging promo style made him a top star across the industry. Foley had come to fame in WCW as "Cactus" Jack Foley, and eventually became an ECW and WCW mainstay. Foley was brought to the WWF in 1995 to feud with the Undertaker in a series of violent matches, including boiler room brawls and a "buried alive" match. By the summer of 1998, Foley was looking to refresh his "Mankind" character and was set to engage in a "Hell in the Cell" cage match with the Undertaker. Foley and Callaway had agreed to engage in several incredible stunts in the match, however some would go awry. In what was the most spectacularly violent matches in the history of mainstream professional wrestling, Foley forever ingratiated himself to fans (Thompson & Foley, 2022). This would change Foley's career trajectory and saw him become a 4-time primo uomo (Tanabe et al., 2022). Some months later, Foley was anointed the first WWF Hardcore Champion and has gone by the moniker of "Hardcore Legend" ever since (Foley, 1999).

Upon ECW's closure in 2001, a large gap emerged in the American market for deathmatch wrestling (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). To fill this space, several independent deathmatch wrestling promotions emerged, the most prominent of which are Combat Zone Wrestling, IWA Mid-South, and Juggalo Championship Wrestling (Admin,

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<sup>29</sup> This period in Foley's career is discussed at length in Section 2.8.f.



2021). Likewise in Japan, FMW closed in 2002, only to be replaced by Big Japan Professional Wrestling, which continues to be the premiere deathmatch promotion in Japan (Admin, 2021). The top deathmatch promotion in the United States currently is Game Changer Wrestling, which is a member of the constellation of niche wrestling promotions on the Fite premium video streaming service (Admin, 2021). Impact Wrestling has also featured hardcore matches prominently throughout its ongoing 20-year run (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). AEW is currently the second-largest promotion in the United States and frequently features bloody hardcore matches (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). FMW founder Onita announced in 2021 that FMW will be returning after 20 years as “FMW-Explosion” which will focus heavily on matches featuring explosives (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001).

This subgenre is widely lauded for its dedicated fan base. The performers in this style are also respected for their willingness to sacrifice their health to entertain the fans. However, the genre is often criticized for a number of reasons. The gratuitous violence is seen as unseemly by many mainstream observers. The health implications of engaging in matches featuring broken glass, barbed wire, thumbtacks, explosions, pits of salt, fire, and all manner of elaborate improvised hazards are extremely dire. There is also considerable danger of legitimately life-threatening injury in this style. Several incidents of this kind have been documented. There is widespread drug-abuse among practitioners of this subgenre. The practice of this style is also criticized by professional wrestling purists as lacking artistic quality, as professional wrestling as a physical medium of storytelling is intended to have *simulated* violence and injury. There are also concerns for a lack of oversight or regulation for the style. However, part of the commercial appeal of deathmatches is that much of the suffering and injury is real, and unavoidable. There is also criticism that promotions should not willingly indulge the sadistic voyeurism of a small segment of fans. There are also concerns that observers, particularly children, will attempt these highly dangerous stunts unsupervised, though that criticism exists across all of professional wrestling.

Indeed, the deathmatch subgenre is the most controversial style of professional wrestling. Heroes of the genre like Onita, the Funks, Foley, Douglas, Sabu, Taz, Rob Van Dam, the Dudley’s, Tommy Dreamer, The Sandman, Raven, Eddie Kingston, Abyss, Jon Moxley, and the Necro Butcher are almost worshiped by fans. However, each of the above has paid a considerable price for that adoration. The art of simulated combat combined with the

unavoidable injury from elaborate improvised weaponry is a paradoxical take on an already controversial art form. As of this writing, the game of hardcore one-upmanship in professional wrestling continues, with no end in sight.

#### 2.6.g Container Match

A wide subcategory of gimmick matches can be called “container matches” (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). In these matches, a wrestler wins by placing their opponent into some manner of container. These matches are typically won by either closing that container or by removing it from the designated area. The containers can be ostensibly anything that can hold a human body, and the specific container is named in the title of the match. This container could be a vehicle, as in the case of an “Ambulance Match” or a dumpster as in a “Dumpster Match.” A disproportionate number of container matches are almost exclusively associated with WWF/WWE mainstay Mark “The Undertaker” Callaway. Examples of famous container matches where the WWF/WWE promoted Callaway’s zombie-necromancer-biker character to participate in includes: the recurring “Casket Match” where the winner would close their opponent inside of an oversized casket, this would become the Undertaker’s signature match; there were also several uses of the “Buried Alive Match” wherein a wrestler would toss their opponent into an open grave and bury them in dirt; the “Body Bag Match” which required a wrestler to zip their opponents up in a body bag; or a “Last Ride Match” where a wrestler must stuff their opponent in the back of a hearse and drive it from the arena. The other famous example of this is the “Stretcher Match” where a wrestler must place their opponent on a stretcher and push it out of the designated area to win.

#### 2.6.h Attachment Match

A number of common gimmick matches includes rules which require adversaries to be attached to one another via some manner of tether (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). These tethers are often related to the gimmicks of the wrestlers involved in the bout. The tethers are invariably used as a weapon during the bouts. Example of these include: the “Strap Match” where wrestlers are arranged at the wrist by a leather strap; the “Chain Match,” which is sometimes called a “Russian Chain Match,” wherein wrestlers are chained together at the wrist; a “Dog Collar Match” requires wrestlers be chained together, though in this instance the chain is connected to a dog collar around the wrestlers’ necks; and

the “Bull Rope Match,” sometimes called the “Texas Bull Rope Match” wherein competitors are attached at the wrist by a large rope with a steel cowbell in the middle.

### 2.6.i Knockout Match

A knockout match is a subcategory of match that requires one wrestler be counted down for a designated period of time (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The most common iterations of these types of matches require that a wrestler remain down for a ten-count by the referee. One common example of this is the “Last Man Standing Match” where a wrestler wins by rendering their opponent unable to stand for a count of ten seconds. Another common historic example of this is the “Texas Death Match” where the rules require a wrestler to score a pinball over their opponent, and thereafter the referee’s ten-count begins. The brutality of the tactic to achieve those pinball/ten-counts in Texas Death Matches helped to spawn the deathmatch subgenre.

### 2.6.j Specific Bodily Harm Match

A large subcategory of matches allows for competitors to win by performing some manner of specific bodily harm on their opponent (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Examples of this include: the “First Blood Match” where the first wrestler to make their opponent bleed is the winner; a “Bodyslam Challenge” requires a wrestler to execute a bodyslam on their adversary to be named the winner; an “Inferno Match” where a wrestler wins by setting their opponent on fire; or a “Tables Match” where victory is achieved by throwing an adversary through a wooden table.

### 2.6.k Specific Weapons Match

A wide category of matches allows performers to attack one another with a specific designated weapon (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Examples of this include: a “Chairs Match” wherein wrestlers are permitted to bludgeon one another with steel folding chairs; the aforementioned “Tables Match” wherein wrestlers attempt to hurl each other through wooden tables; or a “Kendo Stick Match” wherein competitors are permitted to beat one another senseless with kendo sticks but are not bound by the rules of etiquette of kendo. There are almost limitless variations on this match per ostensibly whatever object can be weaponized can be used in the bout. Variations of this match often

include placing the namesake weapon atop a pole affixed to a corner of the ring, such as a “Brass Knuckles on a Pole Match” or a “Baseball Bat on a Pole Match.”

### 2.6.l The Lumberjack Match

A “Lumberjack Match,” or sometimes alternately a “Lumberjill Match,” sees two wrestlers in the ring, and the ringside area filled with other wrestlers (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The wrestlers outside of the ring are tasked with keeping the competing wrestlers in the ring and returning them to the ring if they reach the outside. Based on the traditional ethical binary of professional wrestling, there are usually an equal number of babyfaces and heels at ringside, who tend to congregate on the same side as those who share their ethical binary. In these matches it is common for the heel wrestlers at ringside to attack the babyface competitor and cheat during the match, and for the babyface lumberjacks to oppose this and do so. not engage in similar actions. These bouts tend to have standoffs between the conflicting gang of wrestlers, and often devolve into ringside brawls.

### 2.6.m The Cinematic Match

A cinematic match is a complex narrative match that is filmed prior to its airing on television (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). These matches typically start outside of the traditional wrestling arena. The matches themselves function as short films about an extended fight between two rivals. Famous examples of this type of match include: the “Hollywood Backlot Brawl Match” between Roddy Piper and Dustin “Goldust” Rhodes at Wrestlemania XI; the “Boneyard Match” between AJ Style and The Undertaker at Wrestlemania 36; or the “Stadium Stampede Match” 5-on-5 tag-team empty arena match featuring The Elite vs The Inner Circle stables at AEW Double or Nothing 2020. These matches became much more common during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown era, and particularly after the artistic and critical success of the Boneyard Match, which served as a de facto retirement match for the Undertaker.

### 2.6.n The Ironman/Ironwoman Match

An “Ironman Match” or an “Iron Woman Match” is a bout that requires participants to engage in a multi-fall bout over a designated period of time (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The performer who has won the most falls by the end of the bout is the winner is the wrestler with the most falls, and in the event of a tie the bout is

declared a draw. The most common iterations of time for these matches are either 60 or 30 minutes.

### 2.6.o The Wager Match

This broad sub-category of matches involves the participants in the bout making a wager based on the result (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). This can be for the participants themselves or for their ringside seconds. Stipulation in these matches vary wildly based on the participants and the storylines involved. In Lucha Libre, wrestlers typically bet their traditional luchador mask or their hair in major bouts. The “Hair vs Hair Match” is also common in the United States where the loser will have their head forcibly and shaved. The most famous iteration of this bout was the Wrestlemania 23 “Battle of the Billionaires” where Vince McMahon and Donald Trump both gambled their trademark hair on a bout between their respective representatives Edward “Umaga” Fatu and Bobby Lashley. Other wagers on bouts have historically included the kayfabe ownership of the wrestling company in question, a managerial services or affections of a female valet, or some manner of public humiliation like kissing the feet or buttocks of an enemy or being forced to wear an embarrassing garment for an extended period of time. Perhaps the most common wager match dating back to the Territory Era is the “Loser Leaves Town Match,” wherein a defeated wrestler must leave the town or the wrestling company where the match took place.

## 2.7 Global Approaches Reflective of Culture in the Craft and Methods of Professional Wrestling

Several competing theories exist as to how the craft of professional wrestling is best executed and best presented. As has already been discussed, professional wrestling is a reflection of culture. As a culture wherein professional wrestling is a visible performance art changes, so too does the style of the performance art. This section will dissect some of the various competing theories of professional wrestling’s presentation. This will be related to both the in-ring and melodrama of the presentation. This section will also share an abbreviated look at highly influential professional wrestling styles from various countries. This will be an incomplete list, as professional wrestling as an art form has had a presence in many countries for a century or more, the specific conventions that are generally accepted to be the most influential will be discussed here. Much of the appeal of these various styles is subjective and

cultural. Gaining familiarity with these common conventions is important to gaining a holistic understanding of both the scope of the global art form and grasping how these cultural changes and international influences affect the execution of professional wrestling in the United States.<sup>30</sup> This section will also examine how the American style of professional wrestling has influenced the art form internationally.

### 2.7.a The Foundational 7-Phase American Match & 9-Act Variant

This study has discussed in great length and detail the outline of the most basic form of American wrestling match (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). While matches can vary in length and some conventions discussed may be altered by experienced craftsmen, the format is ostensibly universal. This method is built around the idea of both wrestlers establishing their characters, displaying their skills, demonstrating their positions in the ethical binary, showcasing effort in the face of adversity, and manipulating the ebbs and flows of excitement among the viewers to a crescendo. Most American professional wrestling matches have followed this format for generations. The exact origin of the format is unknown and unprovable. Toots Mondt is often cited as the innovator, but this has not been proven. Just over a century ago (at the time of this writing) Mondt did effectively apply the methodology of having more exciting maneuvers used in the format of the performance art (Sweeney, 2014). The Kayfabe Conspiracy consumed the entirety of the American professional wrestling business in the 1920's.

This format of storytelling in American wrestling has persisted since then (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). While other influences on the moves and action that happens during the match has changed, the story structure remains largely the same. This physical story-driven style based on callbacks and related maneuvers interspersed with heavy crowd interaction is often associated with professional wrestling from the "Old South," the southeastern United States. The style is often criticized for its slow pace and simplistic maneuvers.

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<sup>30</sup> The craft, history, and cultural prominence of professional wrestling in various countries and cultures warrants considerable study and ostensibly its own subgenre in academia. Academic scholarship on the expression of cultural values through professional wrestling for various cultures could also be justified.

## 2.7.b Japanese Professional Wrestling Styles

### 2.7.b.i Puroseu - Japanese Strong Style

The father of Japanese professional wrestling went by many names, Kim Sin-Rak, Mitsuhiro Momota, but history knows him by his ring name Rikidozan (Ojst, 2021). Born in North Korea, he worked on a farm as a child and learned Korean traditional Ssireum wrestling. At age 15, he moved to Japan to study sumo following the death of his father. He joined the famed Nishonoseki sumo stable, where he was given the ring name of Rikidozan. Rikidozan would compete in sumo for five years before retiring in 1950. Shortly after his retirement, Rikidozan and several other Japanese athletes were recruited to learn professional wrestling and tour with two affiliates of the NWA, Mid-Pacific Promotions in Honolulu and NWA San Francisco. Capitalizing on the anti-Japanese sentiment across much of the United States after the Second World War, Rikidozan toured the US for years as a foreign villain. During this time, he also studied catch wrestling with American grapplers. Rikidozan would create the first-ever Japan-based Japan Pro Wrestling Alliance, an affiliate of the American NWA in 1951. Rikidozan innovated the Japanese style of professional wrestling. The method, called puroseu, roughly translating to “strong style” heavily leans on the use of martial arts techniques, high impact strikes which are “stiff” by American standards, and a sports-like presentation of the bouts. This technical, hard-hitting approach with the ornamentation of legitimacy made it easy for fans to suspend their disbelief. This also led to the recruiting of many legitimate Sumo, Judo, Jujutsu, and Karate practitioners into the Japanese training dojos. These dojos served as laboratories for testing, teaching, blending and hybridizing martial arts. Rikidozan would eventually gain the first generation of Japanese professional wrestling promoters, including Shohei “Giant” Baba and future MMA pioneer Kanji “Antonio” Inoki. Rikidozan would go on to claim the NWA International Heavyweight title from in-ring rival and real-life friend Lou Thesz (Thesz et al., 2000). Thesz, a traditionalist in the catch-adjacent professional wrestling style, loved the sporting atmosphere in Japan and lobbied the NWA to improve their partnerships with Japan to nurture their professional wrestling market. Defeating Thesz for the title made Rikidozan a national hero. The title he won would go on to be unified as part of the All-Japan Triple Crown title, a world professional wrestling championship defended from 1973 until today in Japan.

Inoki and Baba would go on to study catch wrestling with Karl Gotch, Billy Robinson and Lou Thesz (Grant, 2011). Inoki and Baba would both leave Rikidozan's Japan Wrestling Association in 1972 to start their competing organizations. Baba would promote All-Japan Professional Wrestling until his death in 1999, though the organization would continue to promote up until the time of this writing, its influence has waned considerably. Inoki founded New Japan Professional Wrestling, and though he would sell his controlling share and leave the promotion in 2005, New Japan would continue to be the dominant professional wrestling promotion in Japan and is widely regarded as the second most successful professional wrestling promotion in the world.

The Japanese style also appeals to western professional wrestlers who perform in a more realistic style (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Some American wrestlers who were never box office draws in the United States due to their lack of showmanship were able to become massively successful stars in Japan. Notable examples of this are Johnny Ace, Stan Hansen, Scott Norton, Gary Albright, The Dynamite Kid, "Dr. Death" Steve Williams, Matt Bloom, and Tonga "Meng/Haku" Fifita. Some wrestlers were able to maintain simultaneously successful careers in both Japan and the United States like Vader, Brock Lesnar, Hulk Hogan, the Steiner Brothers, and many others. Only an elite group of top stars have held top championships in both Japan and the United States in the modern era of professional wrestling. Luminaries on this list include Hulk Hogan, Brock Lesnar, Keiji Mutoh, Kenny Omega, AJ Styles, Shinya Hashimoto, Leon "Vader" White, Giant Baba, Antonio Inoki, and Shinsuke Nakamura.

This style is massively popular with some American critics (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Dave Meltzer of *The Wrestling Observer* shows a distinct proclivity towards praising the style above its American, Mexican, or European counterparts (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). While wrestling personalities characterize this as subjective bias, many professional wrestlers still seek the accolade. At the time of this writing, only 212 matches have received this critical acclaim (Admin, 2022). Of them, 138 took place in Japanese promotions (65%). Notably, four highly regarded Japanese wrestlers have been awarded over 20 of the publication's "Five Star Match" ratings including Mitsuhiro Misawa (25) Kenta Kobashi (23), Kazuchika Okada (22 and counting) and Toshiaki Kawada (21) with renowned active foreign professional wrestling stars who are



most known for their work in Japan with American Kenny Omega (19) and British Will Osprey (24). Meanwhile the WWF/WWE has only 15 matches to earn this acclaim in their history.

#### 2.7.b.ii Modern Super Junior/Cruiserweight Style

Sayama had emerged from the New Japan dojo with coaches that included Karl Gotch (Grant, 2011). After debuting in Japan, Sayama would hone his craft in the United Kingdom and Mexico, before returning to Japan and reaching superstar status as the original Tiger Mask (Billington & Coleman, 1999). Tiger Mask was a Japanese manga comic book and cartoon superhero, and now New Japan Professional Wrestling was bringing him to life. Because of Sayama's style which included flashy high-flying maneuvers, impressive martial arts techniques with solid ground wrestling, he was considered a perfect fit. The character debuted against infamous English professional wrestler "the Dynamite Kid" Tom Billington. Billington is regarded as being one of the most influential innovators in the history of professional wrestling, as his flashy, high-speed, high-impact, technique-heavy style would become the litmus that defines one of the major artistic philosophies of modern American professional wrestling. Sayama and Billington engaged in a months-long feud that forever changed professional wrestling. The smaller competitors engaging in wild, unpredictable, fast-paced, high-impact wrestling, while displaying precise technique, timing, and coordination created a stunning new style of wrestling. This style is often called the "Cruiserweight" or "Super Junior" style of wrestling. The WWF Junior Heavyweight title was a belt that the WWF leased exclusively to Japanese promotions, but it was brought to Madison Square Garden in 1983 for a bout between "The Dynamite Kid" and "Tiger Mask." This bout was a watershed in professional wrestling history and is considered one of the most influential matches of all-time. Billington would go on to great success in the WWF as one half of the championship tag-team known as "The British Bulldogs" with his cousin Dave's Boy Smith. After considerable success as Tiger Mask, including being the only man to simultaneously hold both the WWF and NWA World Junior Heavyweight titles simultaneously, Sayama would go on to be a pioneer of mixed martial arts by founding Shooto in 1985 (Grant, 2012; Tanabe et al., 2022).

The goal of this style is to display all of the effective aspects of the other style of professional wrestling. It combines the speed and excitement of lucha libre, the high impact of puroseau,

and the technical acumen of European wrestling. In the United States, this amalgamated international style has been criticized by some and embraced by others. Criticisms of the style maintain that the style often sacrifices realism and structured storytelling for choreographed gymnastics displays. An early criticism was that the style could only be performed by physically smaller wrestlers and that smaller wrestlers could not draw public interest; since then both aspects of that criticism have been empirically disproven by heavyweights able to work the style and top-drawing Cruiserweight wrestlers, respectively. Several of the top professional wrestlers of the 21st century have taken to blending this style with American storytelling, notably Brian Danielson, Chris Jericho, and Samoa Joe.

### 2.7.b.iii Japanese Match Narrative

The narrative structure of Japanese professional wrestling does not exactly match the American style (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Rather than a routine arc of in-match storytelling, Japanese professional wrestling unfolds more like a martial arts contest, wherein the style of the competitors are more determinate of the in-ring action than the accepted format. The style of storytelling where wrestlers often suffer devastating maneuvers without selling the impact befuddles American wrestling traditionalists but demonstrates a cultural difference in mythic stage combat between Americans and the Japanese. There are several similarities in the Japanese and American styles. Both styles base the charisma of a babyface on their passion expressed in competition, which in American wrestling is called “babyface fire” and in Japanese wrestling is called “fighting spirit.” The character of the competitor is also central to the performances and affects the narrative. Japanese culture also highlights complex etiquette, which is often displayed when fans will quietly watch a professional wrestling match and never boo either performer but clap politely when impressed. This style of respect is often considered unnerving to unfamiliar international wrestlers competing in Japan for the first time.

Perhaps the best demonstration of the balance of the American and Japanese style is Keiji Mutoh, who also wrestles under the moniker of “The Great Muta.” Mutoh has held both American and Japanese world titles in his career and been featured on television as a top global star since his 1984 debut. Mutoh is known for hard-hitting, high-flying technical wrestling, in the Puroseau and even Super Junior styles, while also having a wild, colorful and elaborate character with mystic powers and massive merchandising potential.

### 2.7.c Lucha Libre

The Mexican style of professional wrestling emerged in the early 20th century (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). In Spanish, the term *lucha libre* itself can be used to refer to professional wrestling, or its amateur Freestyle and Greco-Roman counterparts. This quirk in the terminology is also linked to the emergence of *lucha libre* as a performance art from the sport of amateur wrestling in the early 20th century. This emergence mirrored similar phenomena in Europe and the United States during the same time period.

With some significantly distinct rules from American professional wrestling, this colorful approach to professional wrestling has been widely influential (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Mexican wrestlers (and other wrestlers in the style) are known as *luchadores*. *Luchadores* are widely regarded as more athletic than their counterparts, particularly with their gymnastic abilities and proclivity toward fast-paced matches. The style often displays wrestlers performing acrobatic and gymnastic maneuvers. While wrestlers flip and fly around the ring, it is also common for wrestlers to perform any number of spectacular dives from the ring. *Lucha Libre* also promotes more weight classes than its northern counterparts. While the United States typically has only one or two weight classes, some top Mexican promotions showcase as many as eight weight divisions featuring their own championships, which were historically co-sponsored by American promotions like the NWA or WWF.

The Mexican style of professional wrestling is known for having colorful masks worn by wrestlers (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). Many wrestlers are so dedicated to keeping their masks that they will never be seen in public without them. Wrestlers engaged in a long feud will often build to bouts called “*Luchas de apuestas*” which literally translates to “matches with wagers.” These matches are often contested as Mask vs Mask, wherein the loser must unmask publicly; this is viewed as the ultimate humiliation of a *luchador* and often signals a career shift for that wrestler. If a wrestler has already lost their mask, then they will often substitute wagering their hair in the bout, creating “Hair vs Hair” or “Mask vs Hair” bouts.

Some of the top luchadores would go on to become major mainstream stars in Mexico (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The most famous of which was Rodolfo “El Santo” Guzman Huerta. The silver masked luchador became a giant of the craft in Mexico. His success in the ring would lead to becoming a cultural institution in Mexico. El Santo’s active career would stretch from the early 1960’s to the early 1980’s. Thanks to palpable merchandising, comic books inspired by his exploits, and a series of over 50 feature films about his fictional adventures. In addition to being the most famous luchador in history, El Santo was dedicated to the lucha libre kayfabe, as he wore his mask at all times outside of his home, won all 37 of his career “luchas de apuestas” matches, and claimed the NWA world title at both the Welterweight and Middleweight. El Santo would retire in 1982. During a television interview in January 1984, he abruptly and without warning removed his mask in public for the first time. Just over a month later, he would pass away from a heart attack and be buried in his mask.

Several other luchadores would rise to considerable fame in Mexico (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The top stars in Mexican wrestling history are widely called the “Big Three.” This trio included El Santo and his contemporary top stars Blue Demon and Mil Mascaras. This list includes but is not limited to luminaries such as Octagon, Perro Aguayo, Silver King, Gran Metalik, El Canek, Vampiro, Konnan, and La Parka. Many of these luchadors would also go on to star in feature films in the luchador sub-genre.

The top lucha libre promotions today are Consejo Mundial de Lucha Libre (CMLL, formerly EMLL) founded in 1933, and its highly successful offshoot and competitor Lucha Libre Asistencia Asesoria y Administracion (AAA) founded in 1992 (TPW Admin, 2021). The Universal Wrestling Association, another CMLL offshoot, was a top Mexican promotion from 1975-1995 (Tanabe et al., 2022). While the style itself has struggled to gain a long-term foothold among the American mainstream audience, a number of luchadores have gone on to become incredibly popular, including Rey Mysterious Jr, Eddie Guerrero, Psychosis, Juventud Guerrera, Super Crazy, Samuray Del Sol (Kalisto), Sin Cara (Hunico) and Ultimo Dragon. There is also a short and elite group of professional wrestlers to hold both American and Mexican heavyweight titles. This list includes Jeff Jarrett, Kenny Omega, Blue Demon Jr., Lou Thesz, Leon “Vader” White, and Dos Caras Jr.

### 2.7.c.i Lucha Libre Storytelling as Compared to its American Counterpart

Lucha Libre, as with other international styles, has a different narrative structure to its matches than American wrestling. Traditionalist American wrestlers lament that the style appears devoid of narrative and realism. While many fans enjoy the slick, precise style, the overly smooth choreographed performance of acro-gymnastics is seen to at times make it difficult to sustain one's disbelief. However, the narrative structure of lucha libre is reflective of Mexican culture's different standards in demonstrating mythic stage combat. The bravado of American wrestlers is also similar to the machismo of their luchador counterparts, with luchadores often being the more flamboyant of the two. There is also a tremendous intersection of lucha libre performance and fandom among the American audience, as Mexican-Americans make up large swaths of the population of the United States. This has led to a number of lucha libre promotions in the United States, as well as a number of Mexican and Chicano stars emerging who fueled that style with American wrestling. The undeniably spectacular moves in lucha libre have become normal throughout American professional wrestling.

Lucha libre also has a different approach to the ethical binary of the art form than American professional wrestling. While it has good and evil, in this case with "technicos" serving as virtuous babyfaces and "rudos" serving as abrasive heels, lucha libre celebrates both ends. Fans are free to cheer or jeer whichever wrestlers appeal to their own preferences, rather than being forced into a structured Pavlovian response to the ethical binary. This attempted forcing of a Pavlovian response to the opposite ends of the ethical binary has caused a great deal of frustration with a great many fans rejecting the anointed heroes of American professional wrestling promotions, such as John Cena and Roman Reigns in the WWE. Meanwhile, Mexican crowds are often rowdier and more engaged than their American counterparts. Lucha Libre is also a widely accepted part of mainstream Mexican culture with major sponsors buying portions of the ring canvas in major promotions, as well as massive live audiences throughout the "cyclical boom and bust" periods in American professional wrestling.

Though these differences may seem stark, Kincaid pointed out an unexpectedly similar story structure:

The lucha libre storytelling structure is almost identical to the USA style, the main difference would be that it's more like chain-shine-cutoff-HEAT - in all caps because there's little to no hope spots and the heat is primarily kick/punch/choke/trash-talking. Unlike the American style, working a body part is técnico behavior not rudo - unless there happens to be a pre-existing injury. Then the double-down or a sudden turnaround) -comeback-finish.

Another difference is the comeback might have high spots you would normally see in an opening in the USA or Japan. The idea being to add as much crescendo as possible by using a lot of running and spectacular moves to build toward the finish.

Also, submission holds are highly revered, so they're rarely reversed and often the tap, more often an immediate verbal "yes, I give up!" There's no trying to tough it out - the holds are simply too painful, which is actually more realistic in a grappling sense.

- Jason "The Gift" Kincaid on Lucha Libre storytelling (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022)

#### 2.7.d European Technical

Professional wrestling in Europe evolved into a highly technical style with rules that harkened closer to the performance art's sporting roots than other styles (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). European matches are typically conducted in a set number of three-minute or five-minute rounds, are conducted two out of three falls, and have a series of warnings by the referees that often include yellow or red cards for fouls. This style also highlighted the option of winning a bout by a single knockout. Some of these distinctions eroded in popularity as the influence of American professional wrestling grew in the latter decades of the 20th century. In Europe a patchwork of promotions litter the continent, with the dominant or largest promotions in the latter half of the 20th century being in the United Kingdom and Germany. These British and German promotions operated under similar rule sets and displayed similar wrestling styles.

British professional wrestling would, much like its American counterpart, become ostensibly entirely performance art in the late 1910's and 1920's (Austin, 2010). After being ravaged by

the First World War throughout the 1910's, the style of professional wrestling from the Hackenschmidt era never returned. Instead, matches would follow less of the strict structure of Greco-Roman and Catch Wrestling and become more wild affairs similar to the Slam Bang style of the Gold Dust Trio Era. In British wrestling this would be called the "all-in" era. All-in wrestling features some of the first known "chair shots" where one competitor is struck by an adversary with a folding chair, in professional wrestling history. Rumors of fixed matches were flatly denied by then-top promoter Sir Atholl Oakeley. Oakeley would become the first British Heavyweight Champion of professional wrestling in 1930, prior to becoming the second-ever European Champion in 1932. These titles were under the British Wrestling Association, which existed under Oakeley's care from 1930-1950. The titles would continue to exist, through changing ownership, for decades to come, with the British Heavyweight title being defended until today. However, the violent all-in style was banned in London in the late 1930's, and with the Second World War looming, performance art once again stalled in lieu of war.

British wrestling was given new life in 1947 when war hero and adventurer Edward Evans, the 1st Baron of Mountevans, and member of the House of Lords decided to throw his considerable political weight behind remaking the performance sport in a more gentlemanly manner (Austin, 2010). Evans formed a committee with Olympic wrestler/professional wrestling promoter Norman Morell, Labour MP Maurice Webb and naval commander-turned-radio host Archibald Campbell to codify the new rules for British professional wrestling. Admiral-Lord Mountevans rules would define the distinctly British style of professional wrestling for the next several decades. The style was billed as "modern freestyle wrestling" further confusing the already impenetrably entangled nomenclature of professional and amateur wrestling. Some versions of these rules would also be used in much of Europe during this era. The top promoter in the UK for much of the mid-20th Century was Dale Martin, who ran Joint Promotions. Founded in 1952, Joint Promotions used a similar approach to the American NWA, by using rotating pools of talent among various promotional territories, while also attempting to block out-of-network competitors from promoting in those territories. Joint Promotions would create a nationwide Saturday morning television program to showcase their performers and advertise the live shows, this was often featured on British sporting news magazine *World of Sport*, would be a staple program of British

professional wrestling from 1964 until 1985. At its peak, the Joint Promotions constellation of wrestling events was promoting over 4,500 events annually in Great Britain.

Arguably the top British professional wrestling star of this era emerged in the late-1950's with a former bodybuilder and rugby player Shirley "Big Daddy" Crabtree (Greer, 2018). Crabtree would become a top star as a babyface, or a "blue eye" in British wrestling terms, in the 1960's before retiring for six years. Crabtree would return in 1972. Max Crabtree, the younger brother of Big Daddy, would be named booker of Joint Promotions and ushered in another boom period for British professional wrestling. Big Daddy would feud with Martin "Giant Haystacks/Loch Ness" Ruane for the remainder of his career. Crabtree became so popular that even Queen Elizabeth II named him her favorite wrestler. As his in-ring skills diminished with age, Big Daddy would have a host of young upstart wrestlers as his tag partners, featuring both of the WWF's British Bulldogs (Davey Boy Smith and Tom "Dynamite Kid" Billington), Olympic judoka turned professional wrestler "Gentleman" Chris Adams, and venerated English wrestler Darren "Steven/William Regal" Matthews.

This period also saw the rise of several of the top wrestling stars from the style, including Fit Finlay, Dave Taylor, Johnny Saint, Marty Jones, "Cyanide" Sid Cooper, "Rollerball" Marc Rocco, and Mick McManus (Billington & Coleman, 1999). Several of these more athletic and dynamic stars resented the seeming nepotism of the Brothers Crabtree, with Max as booker and Shirley as top star. Many of those stars would leave for better opportunities overseas with Finlay and Taylor becoming stars in the United States, Marc Rocco donning a mask to become the original Tiger Mask comic book foil "Black Tiger" in Japan, and the future British Bulldogs becoming stars in Japan, Canada, and the US. With a competing All Star Wrestling snatching up most of the other native British talent, Joint Promotions gradually faded from prominence in the United Kingdom in the 1980's (Greer, 2018). This erosion of influence was sped up by the explosion of popularity of the World Wrestling Federation during the Rock n' Wrestling Era. This was combined with the British press becoming increasingly persistent with their attempts to expose the Kayfabe conspiracy in Great Britain.

From the 1990's until today, British wrestling has seen a schism of the interest of local fans (Greer, 2018). While professional wrestling remains wildly popular in the United Kingdom, the Admiral-Lord Mountevans rules are not enforced. The popularity of the more wide-open



American style and the public acceptance that professional wrestling is performance art have contributed to this. Much the way that some American promotions use the traditional NWA rules to appeal to professional wrestling nostalgia among fans, some British promotions use the Admiral-Lord Mountevans rules today. While there are many successful independent promotions across the nations of the British Isles, the most prominent British organization today is the WWE's NXT: United Kingdom promotion. The WWE promotes NXT:UK as a farm league to attract, train and adopt European talent that they later hope to bring to the United States. Several top professional wrestlers from the British Isles at the time of this writing include Drew McIntyre, Will Osprey, Wade Barret, Zach Sabre Jr., Sheamus, Becky Lynch, and the retired legend Nigel McGuinness.

From 1973-2000 the largest professional wrestling organization in mainland Europe was the Catch Wrestling Association (CWA). The organization, named for the pro generator sport of professional wrestling, was founded by Austrian boxing champion and bodybuilder Otto Wanz (Oliver, 2017). Wanz would promote the CWA primarily in Austria and Germany, along with much of mainland Europe and internationally. Wanz would choose himself to hold the title for 5,635 days split across 4 career reigns (Tanabe et al., 2022). Wanz would also briefly hold the American AWA world heavyweight championship in 1982. Other top American stars who would hold the title include Hall of Famers Vader (as "Bull Power") and Road Warrior Hawk, and WWF Alumni Michael "Duke" Droese. The promotion and style were seen as a venue for more technically skilled wrestlers lacking in showmanship to showcase their skills and be celebrated for it (Oliver, 2017). Wrestlers with superior technical skills who would become weight class world champions in the CWA included Irishman Fit Finlay, Englishman Steve Wright, Canadian Lance Storm and long-suffering American Barry "The Winner" Horowitz. At its peak, the CWA was considered to be a top continental promotion, regarded as a legitimate world title in professional wrestling. In the German tradition, months-long carnivals would be held with professional wrestling as a top attraction. Wrestlers would compete in all manner of round-robin action until final championships were held at the end of the carnival. The CWA would cease operations in 2000. Wanz would pass away in 2017. Currently several independent promotions run across Germany, including New Europe Professional Wrestling, promoted by former WCW star Alex "Der Wunderkind" Wright, who is the German-born son of CWA mainstay Steven "Bull Blitzer" Wright (Scharf,

2020). The WWE is also set to launch a European exclusive brand called “NXT Europe” in 2023 (Roy, 2022)

Perhaps the most decorated and venerated professional wrestler to cross the gap between British and European professional wrestling in the latter half of the 20th century was David “Fit” Finlay (Koon & Regal, 2022). Finlay is a second-generation wrestler born in Northern Ireland in 1958. Finlay would wrestle his first match at age 16 and would wrestle across Ireland for four years before joining Joint Promotions in 1978. Over the next 18 years, Finlay would establish himself as a nasty, tough-as-nails, and deceptively colorful heel across Europe. He became a weight class world champion for both Joint Promotions and the CWA. In 1996, Finlay was hired by World Championship Wrestling, the then-top professional wrestling promotion in the United States. He was hired by then-WCW promoter Eric Bischoff on the recommendation of legendary wrestler Terry Funk who described Finlay as “the best heel in the world.” Finlay would be given the ring name of “The Belfast Bruiser” and engage in memorably brutal matches throughout his time with the promotion, and even capture the WCW world television title. When WCW was purchased by the WWF in 2001, Finlay would be hired as a wrestler and continue his in-ring career over the next decade as a shillelagh-wielding, ill-tempered, Irish fighting man. He would win the WWE United States Championship during this tenure and perform as the straight man in a comedic partnership with Leprechaun-themed little person wrestler Hornswoggle. Upon his retirement from in-ring performance, Finlay was hired as a trainer for the WWE development system. He was personally assigned as the leader and coach of the entire women’s division of the WWE. The assignment, thought by some to be a practical joke, turned out to be a turning point in professional wrestling history. Until that point, women’s wrestling in mainstream American professional wrestling had been largely a side attraction, and at times a gratuitous display of juvenile fantasy by women in revealing costumes. Under Finlay’s leadership, the women’s division in the WWE was changed into a legitimate division featuring hard-hitting action, complex characters, bitter rivalries and impressive athleticism. Finlay’s coaching of the division is directly linked to the “Women’s Revolution” in the WWE. This narrative shift saw a women’s title match headline Wrestlemania 35 in 2019 and continues to have the women’s professional wrestling divisions portrayed as co-equal to the men’s divisions in the world’s top professional wrestling promotion.

#### 2.7.d.i European Professional Wrestling Storytelling and its American Counterpart

The influence of European professional wrestling on the American style is more understated than that of Japanese or Mexican professional wrestling (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The United States never operated matches under the Admiral-Lord Mountevans rules, however the two styles do largely reflect the same narrative style. Much of this is owed to the common simultaneous and intersecting origins of professional wrestling in the United States and the United Kingdom in the late 19th Century. The similarities in match structure serves as a hint that perhaps matches were being fixed in a structured narrative further back than originally thought. This also points to cultural similarities between Americans and the British. As with those cultural differences, the more wide-open, wild, louder style of professional wrestling that became popular in the United States while a more subdued version of the art form reigned in the United Kingdom might serve as an analogy to discuss the cultural intersect of British and American culture. The ethical binary wherein fans boo the villains and cheer the heroes is also shared between the European and American styles. Verily, it seems that the mainstream audience of American professional wrestling being largely of European extraction demonstrates its cultural influence in the art form.

#### 2.7.e Conclusions and Analysis of International Professional Wrestling Styles

Professional wrestling is now a global art form. With the fomentation of worldwide television and internet streaming, fans today are able to access a much wider variety of sub genres in the performance style than in earlier eras. In decades past, the only way for die-hard fans to access international professional wrestling was through a network of bootleg videotape and DVD copies. Today, fans have the greatest variety of professional wrestling available to them in history.

Not covered in this section is the “Deathmatch” sub-genre of professional wrestling. Though it is a widely practiced style internationally, it is not reflective of or based in any one particular culture. That style has been influential on a fringe approach to certain matches in mainstream professional wrestling culture and is a niche sub-genre all its own. That sub-genre was covered in section 2.6.f.i.

“Culture amalgamated as it is shared” (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). With the death of the territory system in the 1980’s, modern wrestlers had to travel internationally to hone their craft and increase their earning potential. This method of studying the craft saw a new generation rise in the professional wrestling business bringing in elements of a variety of international flavor to their presentations. Likewise, performers creatively stalled in the United States often find new life by traveling overseas and find their creative niche. Much of the American awareness of the international style was propagated by Eric Bischoff of WCW’s creation of the Cruiserweight division and high-profile international partnerships in Mexico and Japan in the 1990’s. That praise is also owed to Todd Gordon and Paul Heyman of ECW, which was able to use its niche platform in the United States to first showcase and elevate many of the top international stars in professional wrestling history. It is also worth acknowledging that the only individual who (at the time of this writing) has held the world heavyweight titles in the American, European, Mexican and Japanese styles is Leon “Big Van Vader/Bull Power” White (Tanabe et al., 2022).

There are also emerging styles of professional wrestling coming from South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and China. These styles are not covered herein as at the time of this writing their in-ring styles and culturally distinct approaches to the art form are not well documented or understood. Contemporary professional wrestling promotions boast of some of the most diverse rosters in the history of the art form. The global community of professional wrestling performers and fans share a love of the performance art and are often fascinated with the varied approaches to it. Likewise, the great variety of cultural and technical approaches allows for a broad pool of performance tactics for performers to draw from as they perform to ever-more-knowledgeable audiences.

## 2.8 Booking 101: Introduction to Episodic Storytelling in American Professional Wrestling

Within the world of professional wrestling, there is no point of greater debate, criticism, frustration, and internal politics than “booking.” Ostensibly, booking is often used as a catch-all term for the creative process in professional wrestling. In the parlance of professional wrestling, booking refers to the process of writing ongoing episodic storytelling. Individual matches, promos, and encounters are booked, as are longer storylines involving several episodes or events. In professional wrestling, each event is a live performance of a canonical episode of an ongoing story. A slight variation of this exists with televised professional wrestling, where most promotions with television distribution only include the televised episodes as automatic story canon, leaving untelevised live events as non-canonical unless expressly stated otherwise. Because professional wrestling is a theoretically endless series, it requires the constant creation of new narrative content. The episodic nature of professional wrestling requires that characters and their conflicts continue to navigate through the violent melodrama of a fictitious wrestling league where there is no off-season. The writing process of this content is complex, controversial, and methodology varies wildly between promotions and individuals in the industry. This section will give an overview of booking processes at various levels of the professional wrestling industry. The esoteric philosophies of how to book storylines or individual performers are optimally booked is the source of limitless debate and conflict within the creative space of the industry. This section will not select a single booking philosophy. Rather, it will dissect the components of the collaborative creative process as it currently exists within the sub-genre. This section will discuss the writing, choreographing, and production roles and processes within professional wrestling. Similar to the section discussing match choreography, this section is not designed to capture the full breadth of the artistic practice of booking professional wrestling.<sup>31</sup> Instead it will introduce the fundamental knowledge of the requirements of the task of booking professional wrestling.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> This subject could justify considerable scholarship and is the subject of limitless artistic and economic discourse within the professional wrestling industry and its adjoining fandom.

<sup>32</sup> Any critical response to this work within the professional wrestling community will undoubtedly include strong discourse regarding this particular section and the philosophical and factual discussions herein.

Most of fandom is centered around the booking process in the professional wrestling industry. Regardless of the spectacle and production quality of a promotion, the viewing audience rightfully fixates on the characters and storylines which draw their attention to the show. Fans who have a cursory understanding of the creative process have and share strong opinions about how professional wrestling should be booked, usually in such a way that highlights their favorite performers/characters. Likewise, there is an antagonist relationship between many members of professional wrestling's tabloid media and online community, based around those publications' and that community's frustration with or contempt for the booking in major promotions. Such criticism comes part and parcel with any creative endeavor and is up to the subjective preferences of the critic, fan or craftsman what is best. No matter how enthusiastic the following of something is, all artistic pursuits and achievements will have their detractors. The only objective metric of success in professional wrestling in its current form is the draw, the amount of revenue generated, and profit banked for a commercial production. As such, despite the lamentations of critics and die-hard fans, in the era of corporatized professional wrestling, priority is given to promoting those performers and storylines which extend business over those which necessarily please fans (M. Weir, personal communication, 17 September 2023).

### 2.8.a Getting Booked and Doing the Job: Opportunity and Ego in Fictional Matchmaking

Performers in professional wrestling covet bookings and being booked for prominent storylines above all other things. Being booked gives a performer opportunities to ply their craft, entertain the audience, generate revenue for the promotion, and make money for themselves. Providing entertainment to fans in such quality and quantity that those fans feel compelled to purchase access to more of it is the goal of any promotion. The style and type of performance that entertains different fans and different groups of fans varies wildly based on any number of demographic and dispositional factors. Verily, the booker generates the creative vision for a particular promotion and that vision guides the content. When a booker's plans are at odds with the audience's entertainment, the audience will eventually stop coming. Ross insists that fans vote with their dollar, and the primary cause of low fan attendance, low merchandise sales, low interest, low ratings, and/or low revenues is promotions attempting to sell a product that the fans do not want to buy (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Performers compete for a limited number of roster spots on promotions at every level

of the industry. Promoters are (or should be) inclined to book only performers who do or can draw audience interest, though in practice lesser performers are often granted coveted roster spots due to personal relationships with bookers and promoters.

Once booked, performers continue to compete to be booked into prominent or top storylines (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). These positions within a promotion's artistic hierarchy bring with them status, fame, and considerably high income. Likewise, less prominent positions bring with them lower income, less fame, and lower status. Within the industry, losing is called "doing the job" or "doing the honors," and performers paid to always lose are somewhat pejoratively called "jobbers." A wrestler's prominence in a promotion's booking is referred to as their *push*, which Ross derisively terms as "the almighty push" (Thompson & Ross, 2019). For performers, nothing is so coveted as a push. Ross contends that a wrestler's job satisfaction is based on a combination of "the money and the miles" and "the almighty push." This refers to the performer's travel obligations, income, and their prominence within the stories being told in that promotion. Individually, they respectively represent the health, prosperity, and ego of a performer. Ross often cites the egos of performers refusing to lose a scripted match as a major impediment to effective narrative content in professional wrestling, as well as a generator of considerable stress for bookers and agents. A wrestler refusing to "do the job," meaning refusing to lose a fictitious match, is typically cast in one of two lights: usually viewed as a sign of disrespect towards another wrestler; alternatively, it is sometimes viewed as a savvy wrestler protecting their push and position. However, even in the latter circumstance, this refusal is perceived to be a projection of the refusing wrestler's ego to some degree. Indeed, the novel *Fall Guys: The Barnums of Bounce* follows the psychological journey of a jobber wrestler with low self-esteem who is always paid to lose, to that performer becoming self-actualized after he is given a push and is booked to win worked matches (Griffin, 1937).

The effect of booking on the ego of professional wrestlers is a well-documented issue within the industry (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). To an outsider, the winning or losing of a fictitious bout would not appear to be a major issue, but within the insular world of professional wrestling, the performance of winning or losing and the way in which those wins and losses play out is the source of constant, passionate, limitless conflict. Debate, scrutiny, complaint, criticism, and frustration regarding booking philosophies and

styles has spawned a peripheral industry unto itself dedicated to the booking practices and decisions within prominent professional wrestling promotions. Who should or should not be booked or pushed and how to achieve that are esoteric matters for only those working in the industry, the most dedicated fans, and purveyors of for-profit professional wrestling media.

For insight into the current state of the episodic creative process, former WWE writer Matt Weir agreed to be interviewed for this study. Weir was a writer for WWE from 2016-2018 (M. Weir, personal communication, 17 September 2023). The majority of his time at WWE was focused on the *Smackdown* and *NXT* brands. Prior to his time in WWE, Weir was a successful writer in New York City, with a background in comedy, improv, television, and sketch. A lifelong professional wrestling fan Weir was first recruited by WWE as a writer on the WWE Network exclusive sketch and variety series *The Edge and Christian Show That Totally Reeks of Awesomeness*. From there he began the arduous application process of joining the creative team of the WWE. After repeatedly submitting sample storylines, receiving harsh feedback to test his ability to work under pressure and to withstand criticism, Weir was brought on as a writer. During his time at the world's largest professional wrestling promotion, he participated in the writing of notable storylines, scripted promos, gave acting coaching to performers, produced live television, and collaborated with many of the top names in the industry.

### 2.8.a The Intoxicating Power of the Pencil

The booker is the individual with final say over who will perform for a professional wrestling show, and what stories will be told therewithin. The role is most analogous to a director in other forms of performance. In the contemporary minor leagues of professional wrestling and in the traditional territories, this role often fell solely to an individual. This placed tremendous power in the hands of a single person. A single person decided the result of every fictitious match, and thus who would be the more prominent character/performer in the company. Long-time professional wrestling commentator and executive Jim Ross often refers to the metaphorical “power of the pencil” in his discussions of choosing talents and creating their storylines in the industry, as well as the power of its eraser to cancel those plans for any number of reasons (Thompson & Ross, 2019). With that power comes the responsibility to create content that fans want to spend money to see. Failure to do so would result in a promotion's eventual collapse. When the bookers themselves were also wrestlers/performers,



it was common practice that they would exploit this conflict of interest to put themselves, their friends, and their family members in prominent roles. As with many power brokers across genres of entertainment, people in the role of booker have been purported to have abused that power and exploited many people under their power throughout the history of professional wrestling. The position of booker is, however, a key role in professional wrestling storytelling. Without a central architect, the world of a fictional organization collapses. Thus, this role will be examined as the leading artistic figure in any professional wrestling company.

The stress and demands of this role has regularly caused high turnover throughout the industry, due to constant conflicts with talent, audience acquisition, production, and business concerns. Since the corporatization of professional wrestling in the 1980's and 1990's, this role has been redesigned in most larger promotions to delegate the creative process to teams of writers with a single decider serving as the booker. WCW famously had a rotating head of its "booking committee" throughout its history (Flair, 2004). In the WWF/WWE, Vince McMahon remained the chief architect of storytelling from the founding of Titan Sports to his resignation in 2022 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). In WWE, the demands of the production schedule necessitated the staffing of a team of administrators in varying collaborative roles. This team expanded from two or three veteran wrestlers/performers to dozens of writers, producers, and choreographers over the decades. The current creative process in AEW has Tony Khan as decider with his team of Executive Vice Presidents (EVP's) and Coaches advising the process (Thompson & Ross, 2019).

### 2.8.b Building the Match for Public Consumption

The match itself is a collaboration of the two or more performers. The choreography of the match is determined in varying degrees by the performers (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). The generally accepted *modus operandi* for untelevised professional wrestling is that the booker will decide the winner and the match time, while the performers themselves will be largely tasked with choreographing their own matches. Televised professional wrestling required tighter constraints on timing, thus the role of overseeing match choreographer is often delegated to a veteran performer who can help cultivate the match into the timeframe, physically articulate the character journeys within that match effectively, and (if applicable) weave that incident into the booker's overall story (M.

Weir, personal communication, 17 September 2023). There is no set term for the role of overseeing match choreographer within the industry. The WWE has used the terms “road agent” or “producer” for this role, while AEW uses “coach.” These choreographers are typically experts in in-ring storytelling and know a number of match story structures<sup>33</sup> to help communicate these stories.

### 2.8.c The Segment: The Elemental Unit of Performance in Professional Wrestling

A professional wrestling event is a collection of loosely aligned segments that combine to create an entire event. Successful professional wrestling is often described as a variety show with many different characters and types of stories to appeal to a wide and diverse audience (Thompson & Bischoff, 2019). For a performer, being booked for an event means that they will be featured in a segment on that show. The most common content for segments is matches, promos, interviews; televised wrestling often also includes vignettes and video recap packages. The final order and content of the segments is decided by the booker. The scale and complexity of the segments varies wildly based on the promotion.

Most booked performers, particularly wrestlers in matches, are only featured in a single segment per event due to the implied (or actual) damage done to their body from their matches. Non-wrestlers like managers, authority figures, and valets may be featured in multiple segments due to the limited implied damage. Prominent performers may be featured or mentioned in multiple segments to engage the crowd and build that character’s importance. The number of segments and characters able to be featured therein varies based on the length of the event, whether or not it is televised, the budget, promotional interest, audience interest, and the performer’s availability (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). For all professional wrestling, a performer’s quality is judged largely by their ability to engage the live crowd during their allotted segment, whatever its content. Throughout much of the televised professional wrestling ecosystem, one of the primary metrics by which to judge a performer’s value is their ability to draw, hold, and/or expand the viewing audience during their segment (Thompson & Ross, 2019).

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<sup>33</sup> Including the 7-Phase and 9-Act match story structures discussed earlier in chapter 2.

For WWE televised wrestling, the roster is broken into tiers of performers who have differing levels of importance to that event, or the promotion as a whole at the time (M. Weir, personal communication, 17 September 2023). Top performers would be featured heavily, mentioned often, used in prominent storylines, and perform on most events, thus making the most money. Mid-tier performers or “Mid-Carders” are typically featured, wrestle, and have ongoing televised storylines. Low tier performers are usually used as enhancement talent, or in untelevised or internationally syndicated programming. Still a tier below that is local talent who often attend events hoping to be used as a background actor or as an easily defeated opponent for contracted performers, so as to establish relationships in the promotion. In professional wrestling now and throughout its history, the word-of-mouth recommendations of industry insiders is paramount to performers finding work at every level of wrestling promotion (Tate & Kincaid; Tate & Weir).

The number of segments on a professional wrestling event varies based on time constraints. For WWE television, the average two-hour *Smackdown* is 11 segments with ten commercial breaks, and a rank-and-file three-hour episode of *Raw* is 16 segments with fifteen breaks (Tate & Weir; Full Raw Script, 2023). When all of an event’s segments are tallied up and organized, then the production itself can begin. Weir commented that the segments at the top and midpoint of every hour were prioritized (M. Weir, personal communication, 17 September 2023). In practice, this means the programming order puts on something expected to catch the audience’s attention, as channel surfing viewers are more likely to be searching for a new program at those times. He also pointed out that during his tenure on *Smackdown* the top storyline was usually featured in an extended promo to open the show and was revisited in a 12–15-minute main event, while a prominent B-story would be featured at the midway point of the program. Meanwhile other segments were typically designated for amalgamated short-form segments, such as squash matches, backstage interviews, video packages, promotional content, etc.

Most jobs in professional wrestling become multi-hyphenates, and a writer for WWE is no different. Writers for the top promotion in the world are expected to perform a number of duties beyond the intuitive image of a creator at a keyboard (M. Weir, personal communication, 17 September 2023). Unlike many promotions which allow their performers greater creative latitude when delivering promos, the WWE requires carefully scripted and

memorized promos to be delivered on television. Not only must the writer create a character's promo or interview, but the writer must also then provide acting coaching for the performers. This is antithetical to the industry's traditions of improved dialogue and creates a gap between many performers' experience and the expectations of their role. Most professional wrestlers are not classically trained actors, and thus require considerable direction and rehearsal to successfully perform in this way. The responsibility to do so falls onto their writers and segment producers. Additionally, for the live performance of these segments, writers are expected to travel to the respective arenas and act as assistant stage manager and television producers calling cues on headsets for the performance. These duties come in addition to drafting stories to pitch to management. At that time, the management of WWE creative was structured as a pyramid with various intermediaries between an idea's progenitor and the final decider, allowing for alterations throughout the process. This process could include assistant writers feeding to writers, who would feed to lead writers, who would feed to head writers, who would feed to lead head writers, and further up until the now altered pitch to the creative leader, Vince McMahon. Writers would also be asked to pitch and write for potential WWE narrative projects, without an expectation of wider compensation. Weir confirmed that in addition to receiving no on-screen credit for their work, all content created by WWE writers is considered "work-for-hire," a distinction for non-union writing wherein the creators are given no financial stake in the content they create, no residuals, no cut of merchandise their writing inspired, and no ownership of characters or stories they created.

#### 2.8.d Undisputed Era: A Case Study of an Episodic Story in Professional Wrestling

Weir commented that one of the storylines he was most proud to have been a part of was the creation of the Undisputed Era stable on WWE *NXT* (M. Weir, personal communication, 17 September 2023). This storyline was judiciously executed over six weeks and four segments in the summer of 2017. At the time, *NXT* was filmed in 4-week blocks at Full Sail University in Winter Park, Florida. Weir commented that this allowed for storylines to be produced more succinctly for television, as there were fewer possible incidents of performer injury or (apparently weekly) creative alteration to an angle by upper management. In this instance, the storyline was designed to debut three performers new to WWE audiences, to align them and a well-known character, to legitimize the group as a force to be reckoned with in the

promotion, establish all as top contenders for the singles and tag-team title on the brand, and to get the act over with the audience.

The story began with the opening segment of the 12 July 2017 episode of NXT (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). Bobby Fish, an acclaimed former champion in the Ring of Honor Wrestling promotion, debuted in the opening segment in a match with Aleister Black. Despite his defeat, Fish made waves in his debut and was lauded on commentary for his performance. On the 2 August 2017 episode of NXT, Kyle O'Reilly debuted in a main event match against Black. The show's broadcast commentators mentioned the former association of Fish and O'Reilly as a tag-team. Black defeated O'Reilly after a long and highly competitive match. Fish and O'Reilly had both debuted and lost to the same opponent and the same move. They had not yet been seen on television together, but the seeds of their association were being sewn to the audience. On 19 August 2017, NXT hosted the *Takeover: Brooklyn III* event at Barclays Center in Brooklyn, New York in front of over 15,000 attendees. The tag-team of Sanity (Eric Young and Alexandre Wolfe) won the NXT tag-team titles from the Authors of Pain in a featured match at the event. Just after the match, Fish and O'Reilly reformed their tag-team and attacked both of the teams, successfully beating both in an unsanctioned fight. Later in the evening, Drew McIntyre won the NXT title from Bobby Roode, only to have Fish and O'Reilly re-emerge and distract him. As McIntyre was distracted, a debuting Adam Cole arrived and attacked him from behind.

The three new characters had now debuted and aligned in a matter of four televised segments (M. Weir, personal communication, 17 September 2023). Not only that, but these new performers had also immediately and successfully established themselves as legitimate contenders in NXT and stars in WWE. The emphatic debut of their combined forces was a hit with audiences, management, and critics alike. The stable would be dubbed "The Undisputed Era" and with the addition of Roderick Strong in April 2018. The group had one of the most popular and acclaimed runs of any stable thus far in the 21st Century.

## 2.8.e Raw #1090: A Case Study of an Authenticated Script for a Live Large-Scale American Professional Wrestling Episode

The script for the 14 April 2014 episode of WWE's flagship program *Raw* from Birmingham, Alabama is included herein (Full Raw Script, 2023). This was the 1090th episode of the television program. This document provides a detailed breakdown of each segment of the production. It also contains an internal roster breakdown of all of the performers who wrestled on the show, all of the performers who appeared on the show, all of the rostered performers who did not appear or wrestle on the show, the ethical alignments of all characters, the cues throughout the show, the duties of each member of the production team during that episode, the timing of each segment and break, the results of each match, the scripts for each promo, acting tips for the characters, recaps of the previous performance in this city, the advertised attractions, stage directions, staging instructions, commentary notes, a pre-production checklist for "writers" with multi-hyphenate duties to complete and more. Weir was able to confirm the authenticity of the document and give insight into the document and noted several coded symbols which persisted during his time at WWE, including a triple asterisk (\*\*\*) to delineate a built-in pause to allow for live audience reactions (M. Weir, personal communication, 17 September 2023). This primary historical document establishes the heft and complexity of a WWE televised performance. It also gives insight into how major promotions organize and book performers, write storylines, and keep track of the canonical occurrences in the world of their play. This document also highlights the amount of logistical difficulty is incurred when creating a spectacle of this magnitude. The creation of an experiential attraction of this kind requires a staff of hundreds working in sync to provide fans with the level of content and production value that they have come to expect. Another astounding fact is that a new script of this length and complexity is created 52 weeks per year. Compounding the weekly broadcast requirements, it is noteworthy that this is one of three weekly live televised programs that the WWE distributes each week, equating to 7 hours of live content, plus taped content for the one-hour streaming exclusive/internationally syndicated program *WWE Main Event*. Weir noted that the average hour of WWE television had 5-6 segments, meaning that the WWE is producing over 40 segments of professional wrestling content each week, with the support of three full rosters of performers headed by three primo uomos of their brands and hundreds of dedicated touring staff members putting

on the multiple weekly televised and untelevised performances (M. Weir, personal communication, 17 September 2023).

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**Monday Night RAW #1090 – 3<sup>rd</sup> Draft**  
**“The Evolution of Justice”**  
**04/14/14**  
**Three Weeks to *Extreme Rules***

**Location: Birmingham Jefferson Convention Center – Birmingham, AL (82% Utilization – 86% w/ Comps)**

**Last Time We Were Here: Birmingham, AL**

SD TV (38% Utilization, 43% with Comps on 10/22/2013)

- Daniel Bryan, Big E, Cody Rhodes and Goldust defeated Randy Orton and The Shield.
- The Usos defeated Luke Harper and Erick Rowan (w/ Bray Wyatt) due to a distraction by The Miz.
- Divas Champion AJ Lee (w/ Tamina) defeated Nikki Bella (w/ Brie Bella).

RAW LE (49% Utilization, 55% with Comps on 2/3/2013)

- John Cena & Ryback defeated CM Punk & Dolph Ziggler.
- United States Champion Cesaro defeated The Miz in a No-Disqualification Match.
- Tag Team Champions Team Hell No defeated Seth Rollins & Roman Reigns via DQ, due to interference by Dean Ambrose.

**WWE Superstars Match #1: Dolph Ziggler vs. Damien Sandow**

**Producer: Joey Mercury**

**WWE Superstars Match #2: Cody Rhodes (w/ Goldust) vs. Curtis Axel**

**Producer: Brian James**

**\*\*\*BEFORE THE SHOW: DISTRIBUTE ULTIMATE WARRIOR MASKS TO THE AUDIENCE // JERRY LAWLER PRE-CONDITIONS THE AUDIENCE TO PUT ON THEIR ULTIMATE WARRIOR MASKS WHEN THEY HEAR THE ULTIMATE WARRIOR'S MUSIC\*\*\***

**Segment One: The Ultimate Warrior Tribute**

**Writer: Steve G., Steve O, Kirsh**

**Time: 8:00**

- (1:00) IN-ARENA: Establish WWE Superstars and Divas on stage
- Jerry Lawler Promo: Please join the WWE Superstars as they pay tribute to the Ultimate Warrior
- (2:45) PACKAGE: Ultimate Warrior Tribute
- 10 Bell Salute
- Ultimate Warrior Music
- Audience (wearing Ultimate Warrior Masks) and Superstar reactions
- BREATHE
- (1:30) COLD OPEN: The Shield – Authority Story from *RAW #1089* and *SmackDown #764*
- RVD Music and Entrance – Announcers note RVD is in action – NEXT!
- Crash to Break



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8:14:00 + 3:00 = 8:17:00

\*\*\* DURING THE BREAK ON THE WWE APP: TBD\*\*\*

Segment Two: RVD vs. Alberto Del Rio

Producer: John Laurinaitis

Time:

- Fade up with RVD in the ring – RVD Music Playing
- Alberto Del Rio Music Playing
- GRAPHIC: Intercontinental Championship #1 Contender's Tournament Bracket – Starting tonight! Del Rio and RVD are both competitors in the tournament
- Match
- Crash to Break

8:23:00 + 3:30 = 8:26:30

\*\*\* DURING THE BREAK ON THE WWE APP: MATCH CONTINUES \*\*\*

Segment Three: RVD vs. Alberto Del Rio

Producer: John Laurinaitis

Time: 6:00

- Match continues
- Finish – RVD over
- Music
- Reactions
- Music Out
- BREATHE
- (1:00) BACKSTAGE: Start on a TV showing footage of Evolution. Pull out to reveal Triple H (\*\*\*) in The Authority's office with Randy Orton (\*\*\*) and Batista (\*\*\*). Triple H says, "Dave, Randy, I know you still want your title opportunities against Daniel Bryan. Daniel Bryan isn't here tonight and right now we have a bigger problem on our hands. The Shield had the audacity to attack me last week. And we have to squash this before it spreads. There are only three people who can exterminate this vermin...Evolution. (\*\*\*)" Orton says, "Well, that's where you're wrong, Hunter. See, *you've* got a bigger problem. My only focus is getting my title back." Batista says, "Hunter, you can't live in the past. That was then. You know I came back here for one reason and one reason only: To become WWE World Heavyweight Champion. And The Shield has nothing to do with that. As far as I'm concerned, that's not my problem. It's your problem." Batista and Orton exit.
- (:15) BACKSTAGE: Bray Wyatt and the Wyatt Family. Bray Wyatt says, "Birmingham, we're coming."
- (:30) BUMPER: Ultimate Warrior vs. The Honky Tonk Man > Intercontinental Championship Match from *SummerSlam 1988*
- Crash to Break

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8:33:00 + 3:15 = 8:36:15

\*\*\* DURING THE BREAK ON THE WWE APP: TBD \*\*\*

\*\*\* DURING THE BREAK: R-TRUTH MUSIC AND ENTRANCE (XAVIER WOODS w/ R-TRUTH) \*\*\*

Segment Four: Cody Rhodes and Goldust vs. Ryback and Curtis Axel

Producer: Mike Rotunda

Time: 5:00

- (KD) Toys R Us Commercial
- Fade up with Ryback and Axel in the ring – RybAxel Music Playing
- Cody Rhodes and Goldust Music and Entrance
- Match
- Finish – RybAxel over
- Music
- Reactions
- Music Out
- BREATHE
- (:15) ON-CAMERA: Michael Cole, Jerry “The King” Lawler, and JBL react, segue to announcing the WWE Universe can sign up for a one-week trial and start watching *WrestleMania 30* right now, brand new programs including a week-long tribute to the Ultimate Warrior, *WrestleMania XXX* Fallout, and the premiere of *Legends House* this Thursday! Announcers toss to...
- (KD) WWE NETWORK PROMO: *Legends House*
- Crash to Break

8:41:00 + 3:15 = 8:44:15

\*\*\* DURING THE BREAK ON THE WWE APP: Byron Saxton talks about Fandango and Summer Rae’s break-up on social media and how Summer Rae hasn’t taken the news well. Byron segues and tosses to exclusive WWE.com video of Fandango with his new partner, Layla. **WWE.COM VIDEO: *SMACKDOWN* BACKSTAGE FALLOUT – FANDANGO AND LAYLA** \*\*\*

\*\*\* DURING THE BREAK: SANTINO MARELLA MUSIC AND ENTRANCE (w/EMMA) \*\*\*

Segment Five: Paige vs. Alicia Fox > Non-Title Match (FIRST TIME EVER)

Producer: Dave Finlay

Time: 7:00

- (:30) VIGNETTE: Bo Dallas #3



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- (:15) ON-CAMERA: Michael Cole, Jerry "The King" Lawler, and JBL react, set up and toss to...
- (KD) PACKAGE: Personality Package on Paige including Paige's NXT history //
- Paige Music and Entrance
- B-roll from Last Week on *Monday Night RAW*: Paige defeats AJ Lee for the Divas Championship
- Match
- Finish – Paige over
- Music
- Reactions
- Music Out
- BREATHE
- (:15) GRAPHIC: The Usos vs. Batista and Randy Orton - Announcers note The Usos have demanded a rematch against Batista and Randy Orton – NEXT!
- Crash to Break

8:50:15 + 2:45 + 5:00 (KD) = 8:58:00

\*\*\* DURING THE BREAK ON THE WWE APP: TBD\*\*\*

Segment Six: The Usos vs. Batista and Randy Orton > Non-Title Match

Producer: John Laurinaitis

Time:

- Fade up with Monsoon Quarter Carry – The Usos Music and Entrance
- Randy Orton Music and Entrance
- Batista Music and Entrance
- Match
- During the match
- The Shield Music and Entrance (via the audience)
- The Shield pull Batista or Orton off the apron
- Non-finish
- Music
- Aftermath – The Shield get to Orton and Batista
- Orton and Batista powder
- The Shield Music
- Reactions
- Music Out
- BREATHE
- (:15) GRAPHIC: Mark Henry vs. Cesaro (w/ Heyman) – Intercontinental Tournament first round match – NEXT!
- (:30) BUMPER: Ultimate Warrior vs. Hulk Hogan > Champion vs. Champion from *WrestleMania VI*
- Crash to Break

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9:07:45 + 3:00 = 9:10:45

\*\*\* DURING THE BREAK ON THE WWE APP: Byron Saxton talks to Rob Van Dam and asks him about his recent return to WWE. Rob mentions watching Daniel Bryan's quest to become WWE World Heavyweight Championship and being inspired to make his return and try for another run at the top. Rob Van Dam takes on Bad News Barrett – next! \*\*\*

**Segment Seven: Mark Henry vs. Cesaro (w/ Paul Heyman) > Intercontinental Championship #1 Contender's Tournament Match**

Producer: Arn Anderson

Writer: Kevin M (Home) // Steve G. (Road)

Time: 6:00

- (:30 – LIVE! – Phil and Tom) BACKSTAGE: Randy Orton and Batista make their way backstage when they pass Triple H. Triple H says, "Told you so." Orton and Batista continue walking.
- IN-ARENA: Paul Heyman Entrance (to Stage w/ RF Mic)
- Paul Heyman Promo: Ladies and Gentleman my name is Paul Heyman and I am the mastermind behind the eradication of the streak! May it rest in peace...I am also the advocate of the Superstar who dominated the Andre the Giant Memorial Battle Royal; He is your next Intercontinental Champion... The King of Swing...Cesaro (\*\*\*)!
- Cesaro Music and Entrance (w/ Paul Heyman)
- Mark Henry Music and Entrance
- GRAPHIC: Intercontinental Championship #1 Contender's Tournament Bracket
- Match
- Finish – Cesaro over
- Music
- Reactions
- Music Out
- (:15) GRAPHIC: The Shield vs. ??? – TONIGHT!
- Crash to Break

9:18:45 + 3:30 = 9:22:30

\*\*\* DURING THE BREAK ON THE WWE APP: MATCH CONTINUES \*\*\*

**Segment Eight: Xavier Woods (w/ R-Truth) vs. Alexander Rusev (w/ Lana) (FIRST TIME EVER)**

Producer: Brian James

Writer: Joe

Time: 4:00

- WIDE SHOT: Justin Roberts announces, "Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome 'The Ravishing Russian' Lana..."
- Lana Music and Entrance (to Stage w/ RF Mic)



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- **Lana Promo (in Russian; smiling):** Ladies and gentlemen, greetings from Russia. It is your honor to bask in his presence. You are fortunate to be living during his time.
- **Lana Promo (continues in English):** And now, people of America. It is futile to resist. His greatness unfolds before your eyes. Superiority is what drives him. Monuments will be erected bearing his name...And all of you will be the ones who build them. Now rise in appreciation, for the Bulgarian Brute; the Super Athlete – Alexander Rusev!
- **Alexander Rusev Music and Entrance (w/ Lana)**
- **Establish Xavier Woods in the ring (w/ R-Truth)**
- **Match**
- **Finish – Rusev over**
- **Music**
- **Aftermath – Truth gets in the ring**
- **Truth physicality backs off Rusev**
- **Rusev steps through the ropes to exit**
- **As Truth tends to Xavier...**
- **Rusev attacks R-Truth**
- **Reactions**
- **Music Out**
- **(:15) ON-CAMERA: Michael Cole, Jerry “The King” Lawler, and JBL set up and toss to...**
- **(KD) WWE NETWORK PROMO: Legends House**
- **(:15) GRAPHIC: The Shield vs. ??? – TONIGHT!**
- **Crash to Break**

9:29:45 + 3:15 = 9:33:00

\*\*\* DURING THE BREAK ON THE WWE APP: Byron Saxton reacts and is interrupted by 3MB. Drew gloats about the beating the Usos took from Randy Orton and Batista last week on RAW. Jinder says “When I say ‘Oos,’ you say ‘OH NO!’” Jinder says “Oos” and Heath and Drew chime in with “Oh, no!” They laugh and exit. \*\*\*

Segment Nine: Sheamus vs. Jack Swagger (w/ Zeb Colter)

Producer: Dave Finlay

Time: 4:30

- **(:30) BUMPER: Ultimate Warrior vs. Rick Rude > Steel Cage Match from SummerSlam 1990**
- **(:15) ON-CAMERA: Michael Cole, Jerry “The King” Lawler, and JBL react, segue to announcing the WWE Universe can sign up for a one-week trial and start watching *WrestleMania 30* right now, brand new programs including a week-long tribute to the Ultimate Warrior, *WrestleMania XXX* Fallout, and the premiere of Legends House this Thursday! Announcers toss to...**
- **(1:30) PACKAGE // TRAILER: *Journey to WrestleMania: Daniel Bryan* – EXCLUSIVELY on THE WWE NETWORK!**
- **Fade up with Jack Swagger in the ring (w/ Zeb Colter) – Real Americans Music Playing**

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- Sheamus Music and Entrance
- Announcers note both Sheamus and Swagger are in the Intercontinental Championship Tournament
- Match
- Finish – Sheamus over
- Music
- Reactions – Announcers note if this happens in the tournament, Swagger will be eliminated
- Music Out
- (1:45 - Kevin M. (Home) // Phil and Tom (Road)) **BACKSTAGE: Stephanie McMahon** is in The Authority's office, speaking to someone off camera. "Your job performance has been less than satisfactory – hitting a new low last week when you let your personal problems with the Shield gets out of hand." Reveal **Kane (\*\*\*)**, sitting opposite her. Stephanie says, "Now, on top of having to deal with that troll as WWE Heavyweight Champion, Hunter and I have to handle the Shield going rogue." Kane replies, "Ma'am, apologize for causing you and Hunter this distraction, and I take full responsibility for it. I only ask that you let me make things right." Stephanie says, "It seems to me you've been failing to put the Shield in their place for some time. Do you realize the stakes here? Everything we've done, everything my family has sacrificed – all of it's in jeopardy. I don't know why I should give you another chance. How do you expect anything to be different this time around?" Kane says, "I can only agree that I haven't been operating at my full potential. I am capable of so much more." Stephanie eyes Kane, but Kane stares past Stephanie. She turns and realizes he's staring at his **mask**. Stephanie contemplates the mask in the case, and then pulls a key from around her neck. As Kane looks on with anticipation, Stephanie unlocks the case and holds the mask up, staring at it. Stephanie says, "They say desperate times call for desperate measures. In this case I have to agree (\*\*\*)".
- **Crash to Break**

9:37:30 + 3:15 = 9:40:45

\*\*\* **DURING THE BREAK ON THE WWE APP: Byron Saxton** talks about how people are still reeling from the end of The Undertaker's streak, but how the internet also made one member of the WWE Universe into a meme due to his expression of disbelief. Byron tosses to exclusive video from WWE.com of "Shocked Undertaker Guy" meeting WWE COO, Triple H.  
**WWE.COM VIDEO: SHOCKED UNDERTAKER GUY MEETS TRIPLE H. \*\*\***

\*\*\* **DURING THE BREAK: DAMIEN SANDOW MUSIC AND ENTRANCE // SANDOW BEGINS TO CUT A PROMO\*\*\***

Segment Ten: Big Show vs. Damien Sandow

Producer: Arn Anderson

Writer: Steve O.

Time: 7:00

- (:30) **VIGNETTE: Adam Rose #2**
- **Fade up with Damien Sandow in the ring, cutting a promo mid-sentence**



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- **Damien Sandow Promo:** Disparages the audience and WWE
- **Big Show Music and Entrance**
- **Sandow continues to cut his promo as Big Show makes his way to the ring**
- **Big Show KO's Sandow**
- **Music**
- **Reactions**
- **Music Out**
- **BREATHE**
- **(:15) BACKSTAGE: Bray Wyatt and the Wyatt Family.** Bray Wyatt says, "Birmingham, we're coming and we're next."
- **(:30) BUMPER: Ultimate Warrior vs. Macho Man Randy Savage > Retirement Match from *WrestleMania VII***
- **Crash to Break**

9:49:00 + 3:00 + 5:00 (KD) = 9:57:00

\*\*\* **DURING THE BREAK ON THE WWE APP: Byron Saxton** talks about last Monday's shocking upset and introduces new WWE Divas Champion, **Paige**. Paige talks about her emotional reaction to winning the WWE Divas Championship and her family's history in the industry. She'll face Alicia Fox one on one later tonight. \*\*\*

**Segment Eleven: Bray Wyatt In-Ring Promo**

**Writer: Nick**

**Time: 8:00**

- **(?) (KD) *WWE MAIN EVENT* GRAPHIC: Big Show vs. Kane (?)**
- **HORROR GRAPHIC**
- **The Wyatt Family Music and Entrance**
- **WYATT LIGHTING**
- **Bray Wyatt Promo:** I am not like any of you. You see what they tell you to see. Feel what they want you to feel. You obey unconditionally. You wouldn't have it any other way. When you see a blank canvass, I see a beautiful painting. When you hear silence, I hear a symphony. I've learned that fire is cold and ice is hot, but I cannot feel. I have a thousand faces and many names. Accuser! Seducer! Destroyer! I am the reaper...and *she* guides me...
- **Bray pauses for a few seconds before continuing**
- **Bray Wyatt Promo:** Just like I can see the sun rise, I can see her. I can hear her voice singing out to me. I can smell the sweet magnolias that lay at her feet. She tells me that she's drawn to you John, like a moth to a flame. We know how close you were to revealing your true self. To revealing that monster to the world. But more work needs to be done. You're at the edge, and all you need is one more little push. And I'm going to go to new extremes to make sure you fall off. She is my sword in this crusade. But I am not looking to slay the monster...At least not yet. Right now, I just want it to come out and play.
- **John Cena Music Interrupt and Entrance (to Stage w/ RF Mic)**
- **NORMALIZE LIGHTING**

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- **John Cena Promo:** First of all, your Sister Abigail sounds like a lovely woman. Hopefully you're not twins because then she might qualify as the ugliest woman on planet Earth. And yes, I'm in a pretty good mood Bray. That's what beating you at *WrestleMania* did – it means for all your talk, all your threats, there is NOTHING to be afraid of. You want me to take me to the extreme? Well, I'm down with that. But this has to end. And it will end at *Extreme Rules* with just me and you. A monster belongs in a cage...a Steel Cage (\*\*\*)!
- **Bray Wyatt Promo:** You DO want to play! I like that John, I really do. Do you think a cage can contain the eater of worlds!? You live in a world of rules, while I've taken this world and dropped it right on its head. When I leave the cage I won't be alone. I'm taking the whole Cenation with me.
- **John Cena Promo:** Here's what I think...the only thing dropped on its head was you as a baby...At *Extreme Rules*, I finish what I started at *WrestleMania* until there's nothing left. I'm no longer afraid of you, but instead a steel cage, you should damn well be afraid of me.
- **John Cena Music**
- **Cena exits**
- **Wyatt reacts and then falls on his knees in the ring**
- **WYATT LIGHTING**
- **Bray Wyatt sings "He's got the whole world in his hands"**
- **HORROR GRAPHIC**
- **BREATHE IN BLACK**
- **(:15) GRAPHIC: The Shield vs. ??? – TONIGHT!**
- **(:15) BACKSTAGE: Fandango (w/ Layla) make their way to the ring – Announcers note Fandango and his new dance partner Layla will be in action – NEXT!**
- **Crash to Break**

10:05:30 + 3:00 = 10:08:30

\*\*\* DURING THE BREAK ON THE WWE APP: Byron Saxton interviews Alicia Fox about the new WWE Divas Champion, Paige. Alicia calls Paige's victory a fluke and vows to teach Paige a lesson when they square off later tonight. \*\*\*

\*\*\*DURING THE BREAK: ALICIA FOX MUSIC AND ENTRANCE \*\*\*

Segment Twelve: Santino Marella and Emma vs. Fandango and Layla > Mixed Tag-Team Match (FIRST TIME EVER)

Producer: Joey Mercury

Time: 5:00

- **(:30) VIGNETTE: Bo Dallas #4**
- **Fade up with Monsoon Quarter Carry of Santino Marella and Emma (w/Santino Marella Music Playing)**
- **Fandango Music and Entrance (w/ Layla)**
- **Announcers bring forward that Fandango dumped Summer Rae last week on the WWE APP and toss to...**



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- **GRAPHIC: Tweets between Fandango and Summer Rae concerning Fandango's breakup with Summer Rae**
- **(Cary) INSERT – BACKSTAGE: Fandango and Layla address the camera.** Fandango says, "Summer, it's nothing personal. For me, our relationship was always...professional. But you had to go and fall in love with Fandango. I don't blame you for that. But this is a classic case of...it's not me...it's you."
- **Match**
- **Finish – Layla over Emma**
- **Music**
- **Reactions**
- **Music Out**
- **BREATHE**
- **(:30) BUMPER: Ultimate Warrior returns at *WrestleMania VIII* – Announcers note that we'll take a special look back at the Ultimate Warrior's poignant worlds from last Monday on *RAW* – NEXT!**
- **Crash to Break**

10:17:30 + 3:30 = 10:21:00

\*\*\* DURING THE BREAK ON THE WWE APP: Byron Saxton interviews Titus O'Neil about his match later tonight against Big E. Titus complains about the match being non-title, but says that he's going to beat Big E, because Cesaro may be #1 Contender, but Titus is a future champion. \*\*\*

Segment Thirteen: Ultimate Warrior Promo (From *RAW* #1089)  
Time: 5:30

- **(:15) ON-CAMERA: Michael Cole, Jerry "The King" Lawler, and JBL set up and toss to...**
- **REPLAY from Last Week on *Monday Night RAW* #1089: The Ultimate Warrior's Promo**
- **Fade to Break**

10:26:15 + 3:30 = 10:30:45

\*\*\* DURING THE BREAK ON THE WWE APP: TBD\*\*\*

\*\*\* DURING THE BREAK:

Segment Fourteen: Dolph Ziggler vs. Bad News Barrett > Intercontinental Championship #1 Contender's Tournament Match  
Producer: Mike Rotunda  
Time: 6:00

- **(:30) VIGNETTE: Adam Rose #3**
- **(:15) ON-CAMERA: Announcers react, segue and toss to...**

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- (KD) PACKAGE: Kane's Most Twisted Moments
- IN-ARENA: Fade up with Dolph Ziggler in the ring (Dolph Ziggler Music Playing)
- Bad News Barrett Music and Entrance
- GRAPHIC: Intercontinental Championship Tournament Bracket
- Match
- Crash to Break

10:37:30 + 3:30 = 10:41:00

\*\*\* DURING THE BREAK ON THE WWE APP: MATCH CONTINUES\*\*\*

Segment Fifteen: Dolph Ziggler vs. Bad News Barrett > Intercontinental Championship #1 Contender's Tournament Match

Producer: Mike Rotunda

Time: 6:00

- (KD) *SMACKDOWN* PROMO: Sheamus vs. Batista – Last Man Standing
- Match continues
- Finish – Bad News Barrett over
- Music
- Reactions
- Music Out
- (:15) GRAPHIC: UPDATED Intercontinental Championship #1 Contender's Tournament Bracket
- (:15) GRAPHIC: The Shield vs. ??? – NEXT!
- Crash to Break

10:47:00 + 3:00 + 5:00 (KD) = 10:55:00

\*\*\* DURING THE BREAK ON THE WWE APP: TBD\*\*\*

Segment Sixteen: The Shield vs. ???

Producer: Brian James and Joey Mercury

Writer: Steve O

Time: 10:00

- The Shield Music and Entrance (via the audience)
- PAUSE
- Alberto Del Rio, Jack Swagger, Bad News Barrett, Alexander Rusev, Fandango, 3MB, RybAxel, Titus O'Neil, and Damien Sandow Entrance en masse
- Match
- During the match, all of The Shield's opponents enter the ring and attack The Shield
- Evolution Music and Entrance (Triple H, Randy Orton and Batista)
- Triple H instructs the Superstars to exit the ring, leaving The Shield alone

11

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- Evolution individually hit their finishing maneuvers on The Shield, ending with Evolution standing tall
- Triple H grabs an RF mic
- Triple H Promo: Announces the reformation of Evolution.
- Music
- Reactions
- Music Out
- END OF SHOW – 11:05:00

Advertised Main Event: John Cena vs. Bray Wyatt  
Producer: Billy Kidman

Advertised Live: Randy Orton, Triple H, Batista, and RVD



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**TALENT NOT WORKING A MATCH AT RAW #1090**

<p>John Cena Mark Henry Goldust Cody Rhodes Dolph Ziggler Kofi Kingston R-Truth Xavier Woods (NXT) Diego Fernando (w/ El Torito) Sin Cara</p> <p>Booker T Alex Riley Jason Alberto Ricardo Rodriguez</p> <p>Nikki Bella Naomi Cameron Natalya Eva Marie (NXT)</p>	<p>Randy Orton Batista Bray Wyatt Luke Harper Erick Rowan (Paul Heyman) Alberto Del Rio (INJ) (Zeb Colter) Curtis Axel Damien Sandow Jinder Mahal Brad Maddox</p> <p>Vickie Guerrero Tamina Snuka Lana (NXT)</p>
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**TALENT NOT REPRESENTED ON RAW #1090**

<p>Mark Henry Goldust Cody Rhodes Dolph Ziggler Kofi Kingston R-Truth Xavier Woods (NXT) Diego Fernando (w/ El Torito) Sin Cara</p> <p>Booker T Alex Riley Jason Alberto Ricardo Rodriguez</p> <p>Nikki Bella Naomi Cameron Natalya Eva Marie (NXT)</p>	<p>Alberto Del Rio (INJ) Curtis Axel Damien Sandow Brad Maddox</p> <p>Vickie Guerrero Tamina Snuka</p>
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**RAW TV Available Talent Roster – Birmingham, AL**

<b>WWE World Heavyweight Champion</b>	
<b>Intercontinental Champion</b> Big E	<b>United States Champion</b> Dean Ambrose
<b>Tag Team Champions</b> The Usos	<b>Divas Champion</b> Paige
<b>BABYFACES</b>	<b>HEELS</b>
John Cena Sheamus Big Show Dean Ambrose Roman Reigns Seth Rollins RVD Mark Henry Big E Goldust Cody Rhodes Dolph Ziggler Jimmy Uso Jey Uso Kofi Kingston Santino Marella R-Truth Xavier Woods (NXT) Diego Fernando (w/ El Torito) Sin Cara Darren Young (INJ) Hornswoggle  Sami Zayn (NXT)  Sgt. Slaughter Booker T Alex Riley Jason Albert Ricardo Rodriguez	Randy Orton Batista Kane Bray Wyatt Luke Harper Erick Rowan Cesaro (w/Paul Heyman) Alberto Del Rio (INJ) Jack Swagger (w/ Zeb Colter) Ryback Curtis Axel Bad News Barrett Fandango Damien Sandow Alexander Rusev (NXT) Titus O'Neil Heath Slater Jinder Mahal Drew McIntyre Brad Maddox  Bo Dallas (NXT)
<b>BABYFACE DIVAS</b>	<b>HEEL DIVAS</b>
Paige (NXT) Nikki Bella Naomi Cameron Natalya Eva Marie (NXT) Emma (NXT) Eden (NXT)	Vickie Guerrero Tamina Snuka Alicia Fox Aksana Lana (NXT) Layla

## WWE TALENT ROSTER – 4/10/2014

WWE World Heavyweight Champion Daniel Bryan		
<b>Intercontinental Champion</b> Big E	<b>United States Champion</b> Dean Ambrose	
<b>Tag Team Champions</b> The Usos	<b>Divas Champion</b> Paige	
<b>BABYFACES</b>	<b>HEELS</b>	
John Cena Daniel Bryan (Off – Apr 20) Sheamus Big Show Dean Ambrose Roman Reigns Seth Rollins Rob Van Dam Rey Mysterio (INJ – TBD) Mark Henry Big E Goldust Cody Rhodes Dolph Ziggler Jimmy Uso Jey Uso Kofi Kingston Santino Marella R-Truth Xavier Woods (NXT) Diego Fernando (w/ El Torito) Adam Rose (NXT) Sin Cara The Great Khali (Off – May 24) Darren Young Tyson Kidd Zack Ryder Justin Gabriel Yoshi Tatsu Hornswoggle	Randy Orton Batista Kane Bray Wyatt Luke Harper Erick Rowan Christian (INJ – TBD) Alberto Del Rio (INJ – TBD) Cesaro (w/ Paul Heyman) Jack Swagger (w/ Zeb Colter) The Miz (Off – May 16) Ryback Curtis Axel Bad News Barrett Fandango Damien Sandow Alexander Rusev (NXT) (w/ Lana) (NXT) Bo Dallas (NXT) Titus O'Neil Heath Slater Jinder Mahal Drew McIntyre Brad Maddox Brodus Clay David Otunga Camacho Curt Hawkins JTG	
<b>BABYFACE DIVAS</b>	<b>HEEL DIVAS</b>	
Paige (NXT) Brie Bella (Off – Apr 20) Nikki Bella Natalya	Eva Marie (NXT) Naomi Cameron Emma (NXT)	AJ Lee (INJ – TBD) Tamina Snuka Aksana Rosa Mendes Lana (NXT)
<b>MISCELLANEOUS</b>	<b>AMBASSADORS</b>	<b>TRANSACTIONS</b>
Undertaker Triple H Stephanie McMahon Brock Lesnar Evan Bourne Booker T Teddy Long Road Dogg Billy Gunn CM Punk (INJ – TBD) Ricardo Rodriguez Alex Riley Jason Albert	Stone Cold Steve Austin Shawn Michaels Eve Torres Mick Foley Ricky Steamboat Sgt. Slaughter Bob Backlund	<b>New Champions:</b> Daniel Bryan, Paige  <b>Added to Roster:</b> Paige, Rob Van Dam, Adam Rose, Bo Dallas  <b>Removed from Roster:</b> Ezekiel Jackson, Warrior  <b>Unavailable:</b> The Miz, Summer Rae, The Great Khali, Daniel Bryan, Brie Bella  <b>Roster Move to Misc:</b> Brock Lesnar, Road Dogg, Billy Gunn  <b>Injured:</b> Rey Mysterio, Alberto Del Rio, AJ



## Writer's Pre-Tape Checklist

- DOES THIS PRE-TAPE MAKE SENSE
- HAVE A BIG FINISH
- GRAB THE AUDIENCE'S ATTENTION
- TELL A STORY/MAKE IT ENTERTAINING
- Talk to talent
  - Provide approved verbiage
    - If talent has verbiage changes, present changes to VKM or Paul
  - Make sure Talent knows what NOT to do
    - Don't look directly into camera
    - Don't mention certain buzz words (feud, belt, etc.)
    - Don't mention current location/city where applicable
  - Character Motivation
    - Make sure talent understands their motivation
- Talk to stage manager and crew
  - Review locations with coordinating producers
  - Rehearse in location with crew and talent (or stand-ins)
  - Be aware of audio issues in an arena environment
  - Assign a time to shoot pretape
- Bring stories forward
  - What happened in the last segment (should the interviewer reference something that just happened?)
  - Make sure talent looks sweaty if they just competed
  - Make sure talent is selling if they sold in the match
- Grab the audience at the start of the scene with verbiage and production value
  - How are you making the talent stand out?
    - Are you starting on the talent's face?
    - Are you starting on the interviewer?
    - Do we start on the talent's back then have them turn around?
    - What is a "signature" pose we could use for talent for backstage interviews to differentiate them as characters?
- Make it Real
  - Make sure people are filling the hallways
  - Characters have the proper tone in conversation
- Hit allotted time for shot
  - Make sure stage manager informs the truck of the time of the pretape
- Be cognizant of what talent is in foreground (which talent you want to appear bigger if any)
- Props – Make sure all necessary props are available and on set (suitcase, notebook, pens, pictures, etc.)
- \*\*\*If you're unsure with what the talent's tone or delivery should be (angry, frustrated, happy, etc.), use Dave Kapoor or Ed Koskey as resources and if needed confirm with VKM or Paul\*\*\*

## 2.8.f The Three Faces of Foley: A Case Study of Long-Term Episodic Character Evolution in Professional Wrestling

The earlier description of the internal narrative of a professional wrestling match used a straw-man example that has literally innumerable examples of effective demonstration. For the description of a long-term professional wrestling character arc which includes hundreds of segments over a years-long period, this study will now provide an historically significant case study. The terms “storyline” and “angle” will be used largely interchangeably in this subsection. This case study will examine a unique professional wrestling character from a soft reset to the denouement of a years-long story. This section will examine the evolving psychology of the character’s choices, the performer’s tactics to engage and connect with the audience, and their effect on the industry as a whole by elevating and enhancing their performance partners. This section will also see the character go through angles of varying length, including short-term angles that go from 4-6 weeks, intermediate-length storylines that stretch for 3-4 months, and long-term arcs that amalgamate shorter stories into an overarching character journey. Angles, storylines and arcs are also not totally linear, and can be left dormant by, revisited in, or reintegrated into later stories. This will be an “aspirational babyface” story arc. We will follow a deranged character’s journey of redemption and analyze the performers who made the wrestling world fall in love with that character.

The story arc case study discussed in this section is the famous “Three Faces of Foley” storyline from the WWF. The difference in approach on these sections is because there is a single generic structure from which the narratives of singular matches are built, while there are various options of a long term character angle. In professional wrestling, these cover all six of the known “rise-fall” narrative variations, and still persist with the central question of a protagonist actualizing their identity by answering, “Who am I?” Never was there a storyline in professional wrestling which made that question so abundantly more important than Mick Foley’s journey on this story arc. The storyline runs from a sit-down interview between Foley and broadcaster Jim Ross which aired on Monday Night Raw on 19 May 1997, to the 4 January 1999 edition of Raw is War (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). This 19-month period would see Foley’s performances emerge as a touchstone of his era in professional wrestling. Foley’s unique emergence as four intersecting personae serves as a fascinating case-study of both short-term and long-term story arcs in the professional wrestling context. This time period



also took Foley from a journeyman wrestler, to a minor pop culture icon in the late-1990's. Foley's journey in this time took the character through several arcs which, while changing his ethical alignment, consistently made him more sympathetic, while elevating his performance partners, who one and all, became top stars of their era. Another reason for Foley's inclusion in this section is that he is reputed to have unimpeachable personal and professional ethics. From all reports, he is as close to universally beloved by fans, staffers, producers and fellow wrestlers as any single figure in the industry. His status as a lovable family man and a kind-hearted individual away from the ring allows his rise to superstardom to be showcased without caveats about troubling behavior in his professional or personal life. The writing team responsible for this storyline included Foley himself, Vince Russo, Pat Patterson, Jim Cornette, Bruce Prichard, and Vince McMahon, among other collaborators.

The storyline began on 26 May 1997, when a series of pre-taped interviews with Foley and Jim Ross aired on Raw is War (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). Prior to this interview, Foley spent much of the early 1990's as the fearless outlaw "Cactus Jack" persona (Thompson & Foley, 2022). Cactus Jack was a daredevil wrestler, apparently unafraid of self-injury, and crazed in his commitment to attacking his adversaries. He would become a top star in WCW, ECW and in the IWA hardcore promotion in Japan. Foley favored no disqualification bouts, with palpable brutality. Standing 193cm tall and weighing over 120 kg, Foley was an imposing presence. His bloody wars involved any number of improvised weapons including a signature 2x4 board wrapped in barbed wire. These matches also often involved barbed wire and explosives. Despite his position as "King of the Deathmatch," Foley was considered an oddity by the management of WCW. Though he had exceptional promo skills and often had acclaimed matches, his pudgy frame, mane of frayed hair, and "blood & guts" style prevented him from consideration as a top star. The most controversial example of this came when his WCW contract was up for renewal, and then-WCW booker Ric Flair derisively asked the rest of the booking committee, "Do you see Cactus Jack as the world champion?" Foley was let go shortly thereafter. Foley would join ECW and develop a more human style, giving more passionate promos, while changing his in-ring style to basic fundamentals in a successful bid infuriated the fans. At the time, ECW had been positioned as a feeder league by the WWF, under a cooperative deal between the companies. Foley was also a star in Smokey Mountain Wrestling, a significant regional and developmental promotion that ran televised and live wrestling throughout the Appalachian Territory from 1991-1995 under the leadership of Jim

Cornette. Foley caught the attention of WWF management, which included Cornette at the time, and was signed to the New York juggernaut. Foley entered the WWF as a foil for the Undertaker in 1996, defeating the federation's intergenerational artificer on consecutive pay-per-views, and creating a rift between the Undertaker and his longtime manager William "Paul Bearer" Moody. Mankind was a deranged, masked, masochistic, maniac, who would stop at nothing to defeat his opponents. His relationship with "Uncle Paul" had helped to elevate him to being a pay-per-view main eventer, unsuccessfully challenging both Shawn Michaels and the Undertaker for the WWF Championship. Foley had also had memorable failed attempts to become the world champion in WCW and ECW.

By the time the interview aired, the WWF was on a colossal losing streak in the promotional war against WCW (Thompson & Foley, 2022). WCW had been handily in control of the "Monday Night War" for some time, and despite a crop of young rising stars, they could not surmount the public interest in WCW and the nWo storyline. Clad in his Mankind persona, had a sit-down interview with Jim Ross in a combined interview and video package with Jim Ross. This interview would serve as a reset for the character, explaining his childhood, and the struggles of "Mickey Foley" to be liked, and how his passion for professional wrestling had led him to becoming a deranged creature of the shadows. He recounted stories from childhood about hitchhiking to Madison Square Garden to watch a steel cage match between Superfly Jimmy Snuka and Don Morocco. In the bout, Snuka famously leapt from the top of the cage onto Morocco. In his bitter shriek, Mankind described how that move changed his life. He said, "I realized Jimmy that I wanted to do the same thing. I wanted to hear expletive cheer for me because of some act of bravery that I committed. I wanted to hear-see peoples' emotions, I wanted to see children cry out of love for me, for the things I could do inside a ring. That's my first time in Madison Square Garden. My parents weren't there. I did it just like I've done just about everything else in my life...all by myself." This promo segment established the relatable loneliness and aspiration that fans could relate to. Though at different times in his evolution over the next 19 months, from this point, Foley's story arc would be centered on achieving his dream of becoming the heroic wrestler beloved by the people. His loneliness and the fear of it would plague him and guide him into many errors in judgment along the way, particularly regarding who to trust.

Mankind would also discuss his imaginary wrestling character as a child, and how he wished to become a lady's man, a hippie wrestler named "Dude Love" (Thompson & Foley, 2022). He shared a story of jumping off a roof onto a mattress to emulate his hero, and the home video vignettes he made as Dude Love in his teenage years. He discusses his low self-esteem, sexual frustration, and escapism in professional wrestling. This struck a chord with massive swaths of the audience, who themselves struggled in such a way. The interview recounted his meeting with former adversary "The Heartbreak Kid" Shawn Michaels. When Michaels inquired about the scarred and damaged Foley, he asked if he had envisioned himself that way, Foley said he replied, "No, you what the strangest thing is I always imagined myself being you. —I mean... the girls, the jewelry, the tattoos, the love...."

The vignette showed a promo of a teenage Foley playing wrestler, promising to bring home the WWF Championship belt (Thompson & Foley, 2022). It also recounted Foley's years of commuting to Pittsburgh to train with Dominic DeNucci and sleeping in his 1977 Ford Fairmont. He talked about his development as a young performer, "I knew I wasn't ready to be Dude Love yet. I never wanted to be Cactus Jack. I figured here is a horrible name for a horrible wrestler. And by golly as soon as I get the ability... that I'll get that heart-shaped tattoo on my chest, I'll put those earrings in, and I'm gonna get the girls.... And it never really worked out that day, did it Jimmy?!—I guess nature didn't really cooperate with me, did it. Cactus Jack was supposed to be around for three months... he stayed for 11 years." This was the first time that Foley or the WWF had acknowledged his previous character on television. This was abnormal, as the WWF usually does not feature characters that are not copyrighted IP by the company. During this time, WWF creative had sought to take on a more realistic product, blurring the lines between fiction and reality. This also established that Mankind was suffering from a manner of dissociative identity disorder, wherein he would slip into different personae dependent on his emotional state.

In the second portion of his interview, Foley discussed the details of the Cactus Jack persona (Thompson & Foley, 2022). He discussed his as though he were a separate entity, contrasting his multiple identities and their differences. According to Mankind, Cactus Jack's ability to absorb hardship and make sacrifices in every aspect of his life to be victorious was his defining characteristic. He also drew attention to how Cactus Jack had succeeded "He's someone that in an era of bodybuilder physiques who carved out his own niche. He said, I'm

gonna make it on my own style. He said no one else is gonna tell me what to do.” The video package recounted his career in the hardcore and deathmatch style, along with the horrifying brutality he endured during that time. His success in this niche was attributed in Ross’s voiceover to his defiant non-conformity, a hallmark of babyfaces from the American counterculture movement in the late-1990’s. “It didn’t matter how mutilated I was, I healed myself spiritually. Because for the first time, I was respected. I’ll go so far as to say I was loved. People lined up and chanted my name, ‘Cactus Jack! Cactus Jack!’ They sure as hell didn’t line up like they do here! To spit on me! To pee in paper cups and pour it on me! I had my dignity, and I’m not sure I’ve got it anymore.” Foley would quote the St Crispin’s Day monologue from Shakespeare’s Henry IV when discussing his scars from his career and the brotherhood he felt with his fellow hardcore wrestlers. He would go on to discuss how the scars reminded him that he was not alone.

In the final segment of the interview, Foley explained that every time he applied his finishing move, he imagined he was attacking Vince McMahon (Thompson & Foley, 2022). His violent babbling attack was meant to demand an explanation from the WWE founder, “Why didn’t you take me when I was good!? Why didn’t you take me when I was young?! That’s where the Mandible Claw comes from. It’s power tempered with mercy... just like me.” Holding McMahon responsible for his pain in this way would be a vital through line later in the story, as would his seeking of McMahon’s affections. Vince McMahon’s on-screen character “Mr. McMahon” was beginning to emerge on-screen. The narrative of the real-life executive and the storyline authority figure are divergent, though the position of “Owner of the WWF” was the same. Ross inquired about Mankind’s mental health, possible treatment, and Foley’s personal responsibility for his state in life. Mankind became incensed, describing how Ross had erroneously been telling the public that Mankind enjoyed pain, and would brutally attack the beloved commentator, leaving him unconscious in the Mandible Claw. After the attack, a confused Foley would tend to Ross and seek help for him. This attack demonstrated the character’s volatility, and humanity. The differentiation of his behavior based on mental states and persona would become critical in his narrative. While the audience liked the aspiring dorky kid struggling to live his dream, they disliked the raving madman who attacked their heroes, but it is important to know that fans also identified with his anger at being misunderstood.

This interview, broken into three television segments, would forever change Foley's career (Thompson & Foley, 2022). It would set him personally and professionally on a course to become the unlikely leading man of the WWF. It would also tip the Monday Night War permanently into the favor of the WWF. It would forever and fundamentally change the industry. The "Three Faces of Foley" storyline is perhaps the most significant single character arc in the history of professional wrestling. With the WWF firmly behind WCW in the ratings war between their respective flagship Monday night shows, a new creative approach to professional wrestling was being innovated. While in prior eras professional wrestling was considered family entertainment, and while McMahon had built his empire largely marketing to children, the fans of the 1980's Hulkamania era had come of age. Now in the grungy counterculture of the 1990's, fans sought to rebel against what they felt were the antiquated principles of "good and bad" that they had grown up with. Eric Bischoff was the first to capitalize on this with WCW. Bischoff included a more adult-oriented product to contrast with the WWF's kid-friendly approach. The "male 18-35 years old" demographic became the holy grail of professional wrestling for much of the decade.

The WWF had struggled to creatively catch up with the nWo, a trio of former top WWF stars who in storyline had invaded WCW then formed an ever-growing gang of heels (Thompson & Foley, 2022). The best hope for the WWF in 1997 was emerging anti-hero "Stone Cold" Steve Austin. Austin had emerged as a rising heel in the summer of 1996, after a notable run in WCW as "Stunning" Steve Austin. The foul-mouth, working class, beer-swilling, anti-hero was a symbol of the time. The audience had decided that Austin's heel persona was more in-line with their feelings than any present babyfaces in the WWF, so their unignorable cheers precipitated a face turn at Wrestlemania 13 in March 1997. Though Austin would go on to become the biggest star of the era and the most popular professional wrestler in history, Foley would play a key role throughout his initial runs as a top star. While Austin waged a one-man rebellion against his employer's authority, Foley waged an internal war for self-actualization. Foley's character wanted to be loved, while Austin wanted to win at all costs. This dichotomy between them made them an unlikely babyface duo throughout this run, checkered by storyline collisions with the spot of primo uomo of the WWF at stake.

Mankind was a strong character that was often featured in the upper-card and in main events at this time (Thompson & Foley, 2022). After middling in a tag-team with Vader for much of

early 1997, Mankind would be elevated back to the main event picture in April 1997, when the Undertaker needed a proven opponent for his freshly minted second run as WWF Champion. Mankind acted as a heel, throwing a fireball in the Undertaker's face. At this point, Mankind had a 2-1 advantage over the Undertaker in their pay-per-view rivalry, and on the occasion of the loss, had conspired with several fellow heels to successfully bury the Undertaker alive on live television (though as a zombie-necromancer, the character emerged unharmed). Foley had proven himself to be a capable high-level for the better part of a decade, but his prospects of upward mobility seemed limited and the creative options for his existing character appeared increasingly limited. Following the airing of the multi-part interview, Mankind was pushed as a babyface and was the runner-up in the 1997 King of the Ring tournament. He was denied his first-ever championship in the WWF by the aristocratic heel Hunter Hearst Helmsley and his muscular valet Joanie "Chyna" Laurer.

Austin had captured the WWF tag-team championships with rival Shawn Michaels (Thompson & Foley, 2022). While Foley's life story was being told, Austin and Michaels would defeat real-life brothers-in-law Owen Hart and Dave's Boy Smith for the WWF tag-team championships. The tumultuous partnership would last until Michaels was suspended following a real-life backstage brawl with Bret Hart. On the 9 June 1997 edition of WWF Raw is War, where Stone Cold Steve Austin was attacked by four members of the Hart Foundation faction, only to have Mankind unexpectedly come to his aid. After the pair fought off the faction, Austin flipped off Mankind. This incident sowed the seeds of a bond growing between the two characters. Mankind would lobby Austin to become his partner, through the next several weeks. Austin would crassly and unequivocally reject these pleas and characterize Mankind as a "freak." Fans had begun to warm up to Foley, as he had been opposing the Canadian nationalist faction of The Hart Foundation, which included brothers Bret and Owen Hart, their brothers-in-law Davey Boy Smith and Jim "The Anvil" Neidhart, and longtime Calgary wrestlers "The Loose Cannon" Brian Pillman. The Hart Foundation was the top heel faction of the WWF for 1997. Pillman had been Austin's former tag-team partner in "The Hollywood Blondes" in WCW. The real-life friends engaged in a wild on-screen rivalry, which included supposed home invasions and gun play.

While Austin and Michaels were stripped of their tag-team titles, Smith and Owen won a tournament to challenge Austin and a mystery partner on the 14 July edition of Raw is War

(Thompson & Foley, 2022). Because of his motto of “Don’t Trust Anybody,” Austin decided to take on both members of the Hart family alone. Austin was understandably overwhelmed in the task, until the massive video-screen above the entrance ramp called the “Titantron” illuminated during the match. There Foley had morphed into his 1960’s hippie love machine persona of “Dude Love” clad in white boots, a tie-dyed shirt and bandana, powder blue tights, painted-on heart tattoos, and sunglasses despite the evening hours. Dude Love emerged dancing and the San Antonio crowd went wild. The everyman wrestler had emerged as his childhood dream character and came to Austin’s aid. The fantasy of becoming a wrestling character and tagging with their hero is common among wrestling fans, and WWF fans got the opportunity to live vicariously through Foley here. Austin would tag Dude Love in, and the heroes would triumph over the Canadian scourge to claim the tag-team championships. This was Foley’s first championship in the WWF. Throughout the rest of the summer, Dude Love and Austin would reign as unlikely tag-team champions. The Dude softened Austin’s image as a mean loner by giving him some levity, and Austin’s popularity elevated Foley’s popularity through their alliance.

Throughout that summer, Foley would shift back and forth between his personas of Mankind and Dude Love (Thompson & Foley, 2022). Dude Love would defend his tag-team titles with Austin, and Mankind had an ongoing feud with Hunter Hearst Helmsley. Foley and Helmsley would wrestle one another dozens of times throughout 1997 on un-televised live events. The two displayed tremendous in-ring chemistry and working with Foley helped to drive Helmsley towards a more aggressive in-ring style. Meanwhile, Austin was often otherwise occupied with his bitter rivalry with the Harts. During his feud with Helmsley, Foley was tasked with elevating the rising star and giving the dandy character a much-needed edge. After Helmsley emerged victorious in their King of the Ring bout, he and Foley would square off at the In Your House: Canadian Stampede pay-per-view event in July. The event is remembered for having one of the most raucous crowds in the history of professional wrestling. Foley and Helmsley would fight to an inconclusive double count out.

The 1997 SummerSlam event would prove to be pivotal in both of Foley’s storylines (Thompson & Foley, 2022). Because of the constant interference from Chyna, Foley and Helmsley would battle it out at the August SummerSlam pay-per-view event in a Steel Cage match to prevent interference. Despite the stipulation, there was some interference by Chyna.

In this match Foley again played the role of an aspirational babyface living out his childhood dreams. At the climax of the bout, Mankind climbed to the top of the cage, removed his mask (effectively transforming into Dude Love in real time), revealing his true face, ripped open his shirt, raised his arms up holding the “I love you” sign like “Superfly” Jimmy Snuka, and dropped his signature elbow on Helmsley from the top of the cage. The fans responded to both the spectacle of the maneuver, and the emotion of the story behind it. Foley would escape the cage for the victory. Later in the evening, Austin would suffer a broken neck due to a botched piledriver by Owen Hart and suffer momentary paralysis. Austin would sloppily win the bout and the Intercontinental Championship, due to a stipulation that if he lost, he would kiss Owen’s bare buttocks. While Austin was injured, Dude Love would defeat Owen the following night on Raw is War.

Austin and Dude Love would be forced to vacate their tag-team championships due to the severity of Austin’s injury (Thompson & Foley, 2022). Foley returned his attention to his ongoing feud with Helmsley. Helmsley had needed to display a deepening vicious streak to get the upper hand on Foley throughout the feud. Helmsley would defeat Dude Love with Chyna’s assistance at the UK-only pay-per-view event titled *One Night Only* on 20 September 1997. In response to Helmsley having defeated two of his personas, Foley went to desperate measures on the 22 September 1997 edition of Raw is War. Needing to get the psychological edge of Helmsley, Foley engaged in the first segment that featured all three of his personae. The segment saw Helmsley in the ring, prepared to engage in a no holds barred match with either Dude Love or Mankind, instead both personae appeared on the Titantron simultaneously. Foley would proceed to interview himself in an acclaimed segment. At the conclusion of the segment, Mankind and Dude Love introduced Foley’s original persona Cactus Jack, who walked through the interview and entered Madison Square Garden to a tremendous ovation. Cactus Jack and Helmsley would engage in a memorable brawl, which ended with Cactus iconically pile driving Helmsley through a table on the stage for the victory. This debut served as a self-affirming experience for Foley’s character, as the persona he maligned months before as being terrible had now debuted to the raucous embrace of the audience and defeated his rival. This experience showed that Jack’s winding and painful road to success had been worth it, a human universal experience.



Foley was not simultaneously playing three distinct babyface roles successfully. Dude Love was a virtuous hippie with an easygoing personality who more of a lover than a fighter and played by the rules; Mankind was a deranged maniac who wanted to share his pain with the world that shunned him who would use his own body and anything he discovered at hand to punish his opponents; Cactus Jack was a kamikaze competitor who usually brought an array of weaponry with him to the fight; and Mick Foley was the double soul at the center of it all just trying to make good in the World Wrestling Federation. In this era, Foley had emerged as close to a Peter Sellers performance as any professional wrestling character had ever gotten. The presence of Mick Foley as the individual contending with multiple personalities was acknowledged by commentators on television often. This led to an interesting unpredictability of action to wrestling fans. It was always something of a surprise as to which of Foley's personae would emerge.

Another important character would emerge for Foley at the In Your House: Badd Blood pay-per-view event on 5 October 1997 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). During this event, Glenn Jacobs would debut as "Kane" the fictitious long-lost brother of the Undertaker who had purportedly been killed in a fire during their childhood. Kane's existence had been teased for months by the Undertaker's former manager Paul Bearer, prior to his debut. Kane was equal in size and stature to the Undertaker and used many similar moves in the ring. Kane also wore a leather red and black mask to hide the apparent burn scars from his injuries in the fire. Kane would cost the Undertaker the first-ever Hell in a Cell cage match against Shawn Michaels, which would be a widely acclaimed bout by both fans and critics. Kane would proceed to run ruck shod over much of the WWF for the next several months to build to a Wrestlemania XIV match against the Undertaker. Foley was again tasked with helping the emerging star get over with the fans (Foley, 1999). Due to Paul Bearer having disassociated with Mankind some months before, Mankind and Kane entered into a short-term feud, which saw Kane defeat Mankind at the 1997 Survivor Series pay-per-view in November. Meanwhile, Austin was still too injured to fully perform but would again take the Intercontinental championship from Owen Hart.

The 9 November 1997 Survivor Series event is infamous in professional wrestling history (Foley, 1999). Then-WWF Champion Bret Hart was departing the company for a multi-million dollar per year deal with WCW but had refused to give the WWF title to Shawn

Michaels in the ring at the Molson Centre in Montreal. Hart cited his status as a Canadian hero and real-life animosity between he and Michaels for the decision. So, Vince McMahon conspired with Shawn Michaels, referee Earl Hebner, and a select few others to change the outcome of the match live on-air to put the title onto Michaels. This incident is known as the Montreal Screwjob. After seeing these events unfold, Foley quit the promotion in protest, but soon thereafter found that he was alone in doing so, and thus returned to work. According to his autobiography *Have a Nice Day*, Foley was apparently the only person who was not a direct relative of Hart to actually miss a day of work, and after the incident, Neidhart and Owen remained with the company. During the lead-up to Survivor Series 1997, Foley had been often tag-teaming with Austin and the Undertaker in six-man matches against members of the Hart Foundation. Foley was positioned at the side of the two top babyfaces in the company and was usually defeating the top heel stable in the promotion during these in-televised events.

On the 11 November 1997 edition of Raw is War, Foley would be paired with another emerging star, Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). Johnson was a former member of the national collegiate football champion Miami Hurricanes, a third-generation performer, plus being the son of one future and the grandson of another. These factors taken in concert made Johnson a “blue chip prospect” (Thompson & Ross, 1999) Johnson debuted at Survivor Series 1996 as “Rocky Maivia,” a name taken from his father Rocky Johnson and maternal grandfather Peter Maivia. Johnson displayed adequate and improving in-ring performance during this period and was pushed as a future top star. However, Johnson had struggled to get over with his squeaky-clean image, as fans were more interested in anti-heroes than heroes. In late-summer 1997, Maivia aligned himself with the “Nation of Domination” stable, often called “the Nation” for short. This stable had gone through several iterations, but by this time included mostly African American stars and heavily alluded to black militancy in its presentation. This iteration of the Nation was led by Ron “Faarooq” Simmons, “The Godfather” Kama Mustafa, “The World’s Strongest Man” Mark Henry, D’Lo Brown, Rocky “The Rock” Maivia, and later added Owen Hart.

However, the new heel version of Johnson needed seasoning and a reason to emerge with a mean streak in the ring. Foley was again tapped for the task (Thompson & Foley, 2022). By now Helmsley had aligned himself with Shawn Michaels as part of the counterculture “D-

Generation X” stable, under the new nickname “Triple H.” Appreciating the work Foley had done with Helmsley, he was next paired with the Rock. Foley had defeated the babyface Rocky Maivia at the May 1997 In Your House: A Cold Day in Hell pay-per-view event. Foley would work with the Rock throughout much of late 1997 as Dude Love. The feud was feuded by The Rock having been handed Austin’s Intercontinental title due to Austin’s ongoing injury on December 9th. The Rock would emerge as a superstar athlete, embittered by the rejection of the fans. Fans swiftly found his catchphrase-heavy promos hilarious, and despite his open disdain for them soon came to singalong throughout. By later 1997, Austin and Dude Love were tag-teaming again, and defeated the likes of the Nation, D-Generation-X, the Hart Foundation, and the Road Warriors. This pairing helped to limit Austin’s in-ring liability due to his injured neck and continued to associate Foley with the company’s top star.

It is of tremendous historical importance that on the 15 December 1997 edition of Raw is War that Vince McMahon officially debuted “The Attitude Era” of the WWF (Thompson & Foley, 2022). After years of clinging to the business model which had worked in the 1980’s, McMahon had shifted focus to a late-teens and adult-oriented wrestling product. This era featured racier storylines, more gratuitously violence in-ring content, overtly sexually suggestive content, foul language, and a generally more unpredictable style of presentation. In competition with their rivals at WCW, the WWF opened the floodgates of crash/trash TV to create the most popular era in professional wrestling history. And at the center of it all was Mick Foley building the top stars of the era. On 29 December 1997, Foley’s mentor and in-ring rival during many of his horrifying Japanese hardcore matches emerged from a wooden box on the Raw is War stage, wildly swinging a live chainsaw. Former NWA and ECW titleholder Terry Funk had adopted the persona of “Chainsaw Charlie” and came to the WWF. While commentators often referred to Funk interchangeably with Chainsaw Charlie, this iteration of his character wore stockings on his head and was referred to as “Middle Aged and Crazy.” Chainsaw Charlie was particularly close with Cactus Jack, due to their former rivalry and shared fearless insanity. Foley would tag-team with Funk and Austin on television and at house shows. Often Funk, Austin and Foley would tag-team together against three members of the Nation in six-man tag matches. Occasionally these would increase to eight man matches when the Undertaker joined the babyfaces and a fourth nation member entered the fray.

It was on 18 January 1998 that Foley put on a truly unique performance in the history of professional wrestling (Foley, 1999). At the 1998 Royal Rumble pay-per-view event, Foley would enter the cascading battle royal at number #1 as Cactus Jack. The second entrant would be his tag-team partner Chainsaw Charlie. For the next few minutes, Charlie and Cactus would budge on one another with the blunt objects they had brought to the ring, along with whichever wrestlers emerged during that time, including The Rock. Charlie would eventually eliminate Cactus Jack from the match. At #16 Foley emerged as Mankind and re-entered the match, only to be eliminated shortly thereafter by Goldust. At #28 The 18,000-strong crowd in San Jose went wild when Dude Love emerged from the locker room. Jim Ross exclaimed on commentary, “Mrs. Foley’s baby boy is pulling a triple header tonight!” The final four of the 1998 Royal Rumble came down to former tag-team champions Austin and Dude Love with Nation members The Rock and Faarooq. Dude Love would be eliminated by Faarooq, and Austin would eliminate The Rock to win the bout and the title match at Wrestlemania.

Though Foley would tag with Austin throughout late-1997 and early-1998, Chainsaw Charlie and Cactus Jack became a marriage of chaotic convenience for the WWF (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). The two hardcore legends entered into a feud with an emerging tag-team called The New Age Outlaws (Katz et al., 2022). “The Road Dogg” Jesse James and “The Badass” Billy Gunn had emerged from cowboy and country music gimmicks in the previous era and had reinvented themselves as salty juvenile villains in the early Attitude Era. The WWF live shows and television events were lousy with Foley competing with one or the other members of the Outlaws. Throughout the rest of 1998, Foley would work closely with the Outlaws during their meteoric rise as the most popular tag-team of the era. On the 24 November 1997 edition of Raw is War, the Outlaws defeated the Road Warriors for the WWF tag-team titles. Cactus Jack would be taking on the Outlaws on house shows throughout early 1998. The New Age Outlaws defeated Funk and Foley on the 20 January 1998 edition of Raw is War. Two weeks later, Cactus Jack and Chainsaw Charlie were competing against one another on Raw is War in Indianapolis, when the Outlaws attacked, locked both Funk and Foley in a dumpster, and shoved that dumpster off of the Raw stage. This ignited a feud. At the next pay-per-view, In Your House: Now Way Out of Texas, Funk and Foley allied with Austin and Owen Hart to take on their common enemies the New Age Outlaws, Helmsley and Savio Vega. Vega was a late-replacement for an injured Shawn Michaels. The Hardcore Legends,

Austin and Hart won the main event bout. Foley and Funk would be on a collision course with the New Age Outlaws for a tag-team title match at Wrestlemania. By this point, Brian “Jesse James” Armstrong had developed into one of the most engaging promos in professional wrestling. He would begin promos before the entrance music began and continue them throughout the entrance of the Outlaws, and break into his singalong introduction of the team. Despite their dastardly tactics, the Outlaws were swiftly emerging as a popular attraction. Cactus Jack and Chainsaw Charlie brought their own brand of hardcore insanity to their Wrestlemania XIV match with the Outlaws on 29 March 1998. The vaunted “Dumpster Match” require a team to toss both of their opponents into the designated dumpster and close the lid. Cactus Jack and Charlie would defeat the youthful team by stuffing them into a dumpster backstage to claim the tag-team titles. Foley had now captured the WWF tag-team titles with two of his personae. Of course, the next night, Mr. McMahon determined that due to the “Wrong Dumpster Rule,” requiring that only the designated dumpster be used in a dumpster match, the titles would be vacated and decided in a steel cage match. That night the New Age Outlaws would officially join D-Generation X alongside Sean “X-Pac” Waltman. Within weeks, D-Generation X (Triple H, the New Age Outlaws, Chyna and X-Pac) would be the second-most popular act in the company behind Austin. Helmsley with Chyna and the Outlaws had both feuded directly with Foley just prior to their emergence as top stars for the company. This trend would continue throughout the year.

This match would serve as a key point in the evolution of Foley as a character (Thompson & Foley, 2022). The reformation of D-Generation X would assail Foley and Funk in a 5-on-2 mugging, that saw both men beaten with chairs, Funk cuffed with his arms outstretched to the cage, and Foley spike pile driver onto a steel chair. While the crass young faction celebrated, and the hardcore legends writhed in pain, the crowd chanted for Austin. The crowd was obviously chanting for Austin to come out and make the save on his beleaguered allies, but Foley took it as an insult. He had been robbed of his championship, he had performed as all of his personae, and he had made tremendous physical sacrifices for the love of the fans. The next week on Raw, Foley would come out carrying a steel chair, though it would only be used for its designed purpose in the ring. Foley gave a bitter promo about his disgust that the fans would chant another man’s name while he was lying prone and receiving medical attention. He discussed his evolution through his personas and for the first time made clear that moving between them was a conscious choice, all to gain the love of the fans. The

bitterness Foley displayed here as a result of being overlooked, jealous, unsuccessful, and unloved is another human universal experience that the audience could feel with the character. Foley asked for an apology from the crowd, but only received a light smattering of boos. He then said that it would be a long time before they would see Cactus Jack again. Cactus Jack's debut and run had been an experience of self-acceptance for Foley, but his exit was an expression of the same bitter frustration that Foley had experienced in his earlier career that nothing he sacrificed would ever make him loved or successful.

From the debut of Cactus Jack in late-September 1997 to the final defeat of Cactus Jack and Chainsaw Charlie in early April 1998, Foley had been positioned to make stars (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). While the efforts of his characters were valiant and appreciated by the fans, they all seemed to be ultimately in vain. Foley had fought valiantly against Helmsley, the Outlaws, Kane and the Rock, but each had emerged from the feuds as more successful than him. Helmsley was by this time the WWF European champion and the leader of DX. The New Age Outlaws were the tag-team champions. The Rock had emerged from his feud with Foley as the Intercontinental Champion. Kane had decimated Foley as an afterthought and proceeded to menace the besieged Undertaker. Foley entered the 1998 Royal Rumble thrice, only to see his tag-partner emerge with the victory. Austin had emerged as the top star in the industry, and Foley had always played the proverbial second fiddle in their partnership, which Austin abandoned to pursue a singles championship where he was injured and ultimately cost Foley his first title. Foley had tasted championship glory with loyal friend Funk at his side, only to have it stripped away. Now he had been definitively defeated by an overwhelming alliance of his enemies, and his former partner was nowhere to be found. Austin was now the WWF World Champion, and Foley was still unsuccessful, beat down, and apparently unloved by the people. This was a low point for Foley's character during this run, and in his frustration, he aligned himself with the avatar of evil in WWF canon at the time. And in so doing, he and his fellow WWF performers, would hit a significant breakthrough in the Monday Night War.

The WWF and WCW had been pounding away at one another during ratings war in their directly competing Monday night flagship programs for the better part of three years by this point (Bischoff & Roberts, 2007). Nitro debuted on 4 September 1995, with top WWF star Lex Luger making a surprise debut for the competition. Within a year, Nitro had overtaken

the long-established Raw program, and from 9 September 1996 to 13 April 1998, WCW won the ratings every single week, often by an embarrassing margin. This run of 83 weeks as the top professional wrestling company in the world is still one of the most significant periods in professional wrestling history. The heated rivalry is discussed in greater detail in section 2.7: The Corporate Wrestling Era. However, the key turning points in this ratings war were intimately intertwined with three men: Austin, McMahon, and Foley.

The 13 April 1998 edition of Raw is War ended WCW's 83-week winning streak over the WWF (Thompson & Foley, 2022). The main attraction of Raw that night was a promised match between Austin and McMahon. McMahon and Austin's confrontations on the microphone had been increasing over the prior months, and the feud had been leading to a massive spike in business. It would constantly evolve to see McMahon tap a factory of heels to try to take out the rebellious Austin, and "the Texas Rattlesnake" consistently outfoxing the owner of the WWF. Austin would also periodically attack McMahon, and often be arrested for it. McMahon's alliances with The Rock, Shawn Michaels, DX and Mike Tyson, had all failed to stop Austin's rise to his first WWF world championship. Austin's first title defense was scheduled for April's *Unforgiven* pay-per-view event, though no opponent had been announced. At the beginning of this edition of Raw is War, during a verbal confrontation, Austin and McMahon took to verbally challenging one another to a physical altercation. At one point Austin boasted that he could defeat McMahon with one hand tied behind his back. This confrontation was teased throughout the entire program, until the final segment where McMahon and Austin were set to finally face off in the ring. Prior to the scheduled match, McMahon reminded Austin of his boast, and Austin agreed to fight McMahon with one arm tied behind his back. Just as McMahon and Austin were about to begin their fight, Dude Love attacked Austin from behind. Dude Love would proceed to beat Austin down, while Austin could not defend himself because of the disadvantage. McMahon announced that Austin's former championship tag-team partner would be the first contender for the title. Foley's selection here was due in large part to his reputation for having memorable matches and building stars during this time period. In storyline, a bitter Foley donning the Dude Love costume to jealously punish the fans for not loving him as much as Austin showed a steep transition to the heel end of professional wrestling's ethical spectrum. Austin's first title defense would be a grudge match against his former friend. Foley's alliance with McMahon would prove to be a key step in his story. Foley had gone from a

beloved figure to a hated one by aligning himself with the violent, manipulative egomaniac who controlled the WWF. This began Foley's redemption arc.

Austin and Foley would engage in a memorable title match at *In Your House: Unforgiven* on 26 April 1998 (Thompson & Foley, 2022). Foley would actually win the bout via disqualification. He had succeeded in defeating Austin but had failed to unseat him as champion. This led a frustrated McMahon to chastise Foley for his failure. Foley's insecurity and desire to be loved was now singularly focused on Mr. McMahon. His childlike insecurity frustrated and enraged audiences as he cow-towed to the demands of his abusive boss. McMahon demanded that Foley prove his loyalty by forcing him to compete under his given name against Terry Funk in a No Holds Barred match on the 28 April 1998 edition of *Raw is War*. McMahon installed Pat Patterson as referee. Patterson and Gerald Brisco were positioned as hapless, aged, henchmen of McMahon nicknamed "The Stooges" at this time. Their presence was always meant to stack the deck in favor of McMahon's intentions. Foley would win another shot at Austin's title by defeating Dustin Reynolds on the 18 May 1998 edition of *Raw is War*.

The rematch with Austin took place at *In Your House: Over the Edge* on 21 May 1998. McMahon would install Gerald Brisco as guest timekeeper, Patterson as guest ring announcer, and himself as special referee with the edict that by his hand only could the pin be counted. The No Holds Barred Fall Count Anywhere Match produced a brawl acclaimed by fans and critics alike. Austin and Foley would brawl throughout the arena, destroy much of the set, and batter one another unmercifully in Milwaukee. Austin would eventually knock out Brisco, Patterson and McMahon, before hitting the Stone Cold Stunner on Dude Love. Austin would use McMahon's limp hand to count the three himself to retain the title.

After this McMahon again rejected and apparently fired Foley for his failure (Foley 1999). Foley, now having been defeated for all of the WWF titles which he was eligible for and having been rejected by the fans and his surrogate father figure, was placed into dire psychological straits. This led him to returning to the Mankind persona, which he would maintain for the remainder of the run. However, this version of Mankind wore an oversized button down shirt atop his wrestling gear, along with an improperly tied black tie. He did this to appease Mr. McMahon's desire for a "corporate" look, but his pathetic attempt to put on



these airs was rejected by a disgusted McMahon. Foley instead realigned with his former manager Paul Bearer and former adversary Kane. This developed on television as Kane and the Undertaker were placed into a #1 Contender's match on the 1 June 1998 edition of Raw is War. The Undertaker had the advantage over Kane, but Mankind attacked his longtime rival the Undertaker from behind, allowing Kane to score his first victory over his storyline brother. Austin and McMahon would join the commentary team during this segment and constantly chirp at one another. This would set up Austin versus Kane and Mankind versus the Undertaker at the infamous King of the Ring 1998 pay-per-view event later that month.

The summer of 1998 would see the WWF charge into the lead of their ratings war with WCW, rattling off weeks of victory after their 581-day drought (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). At the top of the program was a four-man title picture starring Austin, the Undertaker, Kane and Foley. At least one of those four men would headline every WWF pay-per-view of 1998, with three of them reigning as champion. This would also create one of the highest-profile tag-team feuds in WWF history. Throughout the month, un-televised live events would be headlined by Austin and the Undertaker versus Kane and Mankind, or with Mankind challenging Austin for the title; all of these matches saw Foley and/or his team lose with Foley taking the fall. On the 15 June 1998 Raw is War, Kane and Foley won a 20-man tag-team Royal Rumble to become #1 contenders for the tag-team titles, which were held by Foley's recent nemeses The New Age Outlaws. Later that same night, Mankind and Kane would battle Austin and the Undertaker to a no contest inside the Hell in a Cell. The next Monday, the pay-preview event was set with a double main event that saw Mankind versus the Undertaker in a Hell in a Cell match, and Austin defending his title against Kane in a "First Blood Match," that required a wrestler to cause their opponent to bleed to win the match. As an added stipulation, Kane promised that if he failed to win the title, he would commit suicide by setting himself on fire live on television. Kane had previously been set on fire during an "Inferno Match" with the Undertaker at Unforgiven; a type of match where a wrestler can only win by setting his opponent on fire.

On 28 June 1998, the King of the Ring pay-per-view took place in Pittsburgh (Foley, 1999). This would be the most famous event of the era, and it would become the defining moment of Foley's career. The double main event followed a crisp undercard featuring a slew of up-and-coming talents. Foley's match with the Undertaker this night would set a bar of shocking

violence in American professional wrestling that has mercifully never again been reached or topped. The legacy of this match looms large in Foley's career. His effort this night would forever ingratiate him to the audience. Though the character would still have several months of twists and turns before becoming a redemptive aspirational babyface, in the minds of the audience, Mick Foley would forever be a hero for his work that night.

Mankind would enter first for his Hell in a Cell match against the Undertaker, hurled a chair atop the massive cage, and climbed to the top (Foley, 1999). The Undertaker entered through an aisle of torch-carrying druids and climbed the steel mesh cage to meet him. The two men, both over 140kg (300lbs), would brawl across the roof of the cage, which was largely held together by bundles of zip ties that popped constantly under their weight. The Undertaker then hurled Mankind tumbling off the side of the cage, down a 5m (16ft) drop, through an announcer's table. Commentator Jim Ross had not been given prior warning of this spot and screamed in terror on commentary, "He killed him! As God as my witness, he is broken in half!" Foley lay motionless until the cage was raised for him to be removed from the proceedings, but evidently the Long Island native heard the call of history and got up from the stretcher. Foley charged back down to the ring and climbed the cage with a legitimately separated shoulder.

They would continue their brawl atop the cage, until the Undertaker choke slammed Foley through the roof of the cage and sent him crashing to the ring below in one of the most terrifying botches in professional wrestling history (Foley, 1999). The cage had been expected to sag down when Foley was slammed, but instead gave way, causing Foley to crash to the mat of the steel and wood ring. The chair Foley had brought to the cage with him fell and landed on his face during the fall. Foley was concussed in the fall, and the impact of a chair had jammed half of one of Foley's teeth through his lip and into his nostril, which would remain for much of the match. Mark Calloway, who played the Undertaker, has said in interviews since that he had thought the fall had killed Foley. Terry Funk Rushed to the ring to check on his real-life friend and recent on-screen foil. Foley apparently told Funk that he was alright. The Undertaker dropped down into the cage on his previously broken foot and grabbed Funk by the throat. Funk told the Undertaker that Foley was alive and alright. The Undertaker then choke-slammed Funk, and Funk sold it by kicking his sneakers off to buy Foley time to recover.

The Undertaker instructed his colleague to stay down, but Foley would not do so (Foley, 1999). A concussed and bloodied Foley proceeded to mount a Herculean effort in the match, regaining enough of his faculties to mount a comeback against the Undertaker. Midway through the match, Foley bled from the mouth, and had an apparent smile on his face, which the baffled commentators shared with the television audience. This reinforced Foley's apparent joy in the wildest of violent circumstances, which added mystique to his character. Foley has given the Calloway all credit for any quality of the match in years since due to Foley's traumatic brain injury during the second fall. Foley would eventually gain the upper hand on his adversary and eventually pile drive the Undertaker on a chair, nearly winning the bout. Foley retrieved a bag from under the ring and revealed it to be full of thousands of thumbtacks. Foley scattered and poured the tacks into the ring, and again nearly won the match by grabbing his Mandible Claw submission hold. The Undertaker would rally from near unconsciousness and slam Foley's entire body into the tacks. The Undertaker would slam Foley through the tacks again, and finally, mercifully pin him after a Tombstone pile driver. The shocked professional wrestling world caught its breath and cheered as Foley limped to the backstage area in a display of tenacity that ingratiated him forever to the audience. For the remainder of his active career, homemade "Foley is God" signed became commonplace in arenas during WWF performances.

The most brutal match in WWF history had ended, but the night was not for Foley or the Undertaker (Foley, 1999). The cage was unexpectedly lowered a second time during the Austin versus Kane match afterward. The Undertaker and Mankind re-entered the performance area. Foley sought to aid his partner in winning the title, and the Undertaker sought to further punish Foley while preventing his brother's suicide. Foley was kneeling in the ring when both Austin and the Undertaker swung steel chairs at him. Foley ducked and the Undertaker knocked Austin's chair into his face, causing him to bleed profusely from the head. The Undertaker then revived an unconscious referee by dousing him in gasoline set at ringside in preparation for Kane's possible burning. The referee recognized Austin bleeding and declared Kane the winner and WWF champion. After the program went off the air, Austin delivered a Stone Cold Stunner to Foley to send the crowd home happy.

This single night was a nexus event in the history of professional wrestling. Foley was now forever etched in the collective memory of wrestling fans around the world. His star exploded from the early viral clips of the various stages of brutality he endured in that match. Foley was now the toast of the professional wrestling world. He would lament for years the legacy of that match, as it largely overshadowed his long career of high-quality matches and memorable promos. Though Foley would eventually come to peace with it as a sort of capstone to a stellar career. The Undertaker's reputation among wrestlers as a consummate ring general was reinforced spectacularly in this bout. The match also served to refresh his presence as perhaps an aging star, to being a terrifying on-screen presence that lasted another 22 years as a top draw in the industry. Kane, who had been playing an evil wrestling dentist or a carbon copy of another wrestler's character on WWF programming two years prior, would now spend 24 hours as the primo uomo of the company. Foley played a direct on-screen role in crowning Kane as a first-time champion that year. In the aftermath of the match, Foley has remarked that Vince McMahon said to him (in the capacity of a real-life boss) "Mick, you have no idea how much I appreciate what you just did... but I never want to see that again!" (Foley, 1999)

In the storyline, Foley had again failed to defeat his rival, but his valiant effort earned the respect of everyone in the world of the play. Foley would also gain a modicum of revenge over Austin by creating the circumstances for his defeat. That moral victory would be short-lived as Austin would regain the title the next night by defeating Kane in an immediate rematch on the 30 June 1998 edition of Raw is War (Tanabe et al., 2022). With Foley's injuries from that bout, and Austin and the Undertaker being promoted as the main event of the 1998 SummerSlam event from Madison Square Garden, most of the remainder of the summer would be focused on the WWF's oft neglected tag-team division (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Kane and Mankind were still the top contenders for the WWF tag-team championship. While Foley had become a heel, the Outlaws had become two of the most popular babyfaces in the company, and likely the most popular tag-team in the world at the time. On the 13 July 1998 edition of Raw is War, Foley gained a modicum of revenge on the New Age Outlaws when he and Kane ended their second run as tag-team champions in emphatic fashion. Now Foley had regained the tag-team championship. Interestingly, all three of his personae had won the tag-team championship: Dude Love and Austin; Cactus Jack and

Terry Funk; and Mankind and Kane. Making the feat more impressive, these title reigns had all begun within the space of a year.

Foley would challenge Austin for the WWF title at numerous house shows, and the team of Mankind and Kane would headline house shows throughout the summer against Austin and his partners, often the Undertaker (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). The main event for July 1998's In Your House: Fully Loaded pay-per-view saw the composite team of Austin and the Undertaker successfully challenge Mankind and Kane for the WWF tag-team titles (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This was a rare instance where the tag-team titles were the main event of a pay-per-view, as usually singles titles headlined such events. Austin would pin Mankind to win the match. Kane and Mankind would continue their run as tag-team champions that summer, feuding with the Outlaws and the Nation (The Rock and Owen Hart). Kane and Mankind would regain the tag-team titles in a "Four-Corners Tag-Team Match" on the 10 August 1998 edition of Raw is War. They would defeat the New Age Outlaws, Austin and the Undertaker, and the Nation (The Rock and D'Lo Brown who replaced an injured Owen Hart). The match planted a seed of dissection between Foley and Kane, and the Undertaker, usually resilient against incredible abuse, took a single slave by Kane and was pinned. This made Foley suspicious that Kane and the Undertaker had begun to cooperate in some secret alliance in pursuit of an as-yet unknown purpose. Foley was now a four-time tag-team champion in the space of roughly 13 months.

In the storyline, Mankind had begun to grow uneasy about Kane, as the Undertaker had masqueraded as Kane to attack Foley in a #1 Contender's match for the SummerSlam pay-per-view (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Since the Undertaker's salvation of his younger brother in June, rumors abound that the pair had formed a secret alliance. This would lead to Foley taking several beatings and becoming paranoid, as he once again had no one to trust. Mankind and Kane were set to face the New Age Outlaws in a dumpster match at SummerSlam 1998. Mankind had entered the event in a hearse, only to have Austin attack it with a sledgehammer, believing that the Undertaker was inside. When it was later revealed to be Mankind in the hearse, he was very upset that he would not get his deposit back from the car rental place. Mankind had planned to stuff Kane in the hearse for abandoning him. Backstage, Mr. McMahon gave Foley a very paternal pep-talk and encouraged him to believe in himself. This further developed the bond between the characters. Mankind would again put

on a valiant effort, but the Outlaws would overwhelm him and stuff him in the dumpster. Kane then emerged from the dumpster and apparently smashed a prone Mankind with a sledgehammer inside.

For the next months, Foley would seek to contend for the WWF title, and would build his relationship with Mr. McMahon (Foley, 1999). The storyline with McMahon would see Foley sympathizing with McMahon, as McMahon was now a universally hated figure, and Mankind knew the pain of loneliness. This kindness, though shown to a truly vile character, displayed Foley's sweetness and despite being aligned with a heel character, made him more likable to the audience. During time Mankind evolved from a dangerous maniac to a lovable buffoon. Rather than shrieking and ripping out his hair, he made corny jokes, and made kind gestures, often to the intense aggravation of his adversaries and friends alike. Throughout the fall months he would participate in matches that included three or four participants on television and house shows. He also would often be paired with the Rock, Ken Shamrock, Vader, and/or Kane. At the September In Your House: Breakdown pay-per-view event, Foley faced off against a newly babyface Rock and former UFC Champion-turned-King of the Ring Ken Shamrock in a steel cage match for the #1 contender ship for the WWF championship. Foley would score the decisive blow by striking Shamrock with a steel chair, but the Rock would steal the victory by pinning Shamrock while Foley climbed out of the cage. Throughout the fall months, Foley would often headline live events in "Fatal Four Way" matches against Austin, Kane, and the Undertaker, with Austin emerging victorious.

Mankind's status as a lovable buffoon would be permanently solidified in a series of segments on the 5 October 1998 edition of Raw is War (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). While Mr. McMahon coalesced in the hospital from an attack by the Undertaker and Kane, Mankind would come to comfort him. He brought McMahon some colorful balloons, and a heart-shaped box of chocolates (though Foley had eaten the chocolates himself). He also brought "female entertainment" alluding to some sort of sex worker, only to introduce Yurple, a female clown carrying a balloon-art rainbow. Continuously they referred to McMahon as "Vinnie" to his growing frustration. Foley blew a kazoo in McMahon's ear, and all the while an EKG machine beeped out the increasing stress on McMahon's heart. They gave him smiley face stickers and a balloon dog. Foley then introduced what would become the greatest character and merchandising hit of his career. "I brought one other visitor, another

special guest... Mr. Socko!” Foley revealed a crudely drawn sock-puppet drawn with black marker on a stained and torn old sweat sock. Foley’s puppet show further agitated McMahon, until Mr. Socko gave McMahon’s “booboo a big kiss!” When the puppet kissed McMahon’s injured leg, it sent him into a truly epic rage, and he ordered Foley and Yurple to leave. Thereafter, Mr. Socko would be part of Foley’s act, Foley would pull the sock from the waistband of his tights to the delight of the crowd, wrap his hand in the puppet and apply the Mandible Claw, which was redubbed, “The Socko Claw.”

As a kind-hearted buffoon, Foley’s naïveté with regards to McMahon manipulating him (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). McMahon treated Mankind with contempt and constantly set him to performing violent tasks against the enemies of the Chairman of the WWF. At October’s In Your House: Judgement Day pay-per-view, Foley challenged Shamrock for the Intercontinental Championship. Foley would find himself trapped in Shamrock’s ankle lock submission hold, but the valiant Foley refused to give up. This further built his status with the fans as a courageous character. Instead of giving up, Foley applied the Mandible Claw to himself until he passed out, rather than tap out in the match. As an apparent act of kindness for Foley’s service, McMahon created a new singles championship, the WWF Hardcore Championship and presented it to Foley. The belt itself was a shattered version of the WWF’s former world title belt, emblazoned with “Hardcore” across the center plate. This was Foley’s first singles title in any major professional wrestling company. He had previously been a tag-team champion in WCW, ECW, and the WWF. This title would only be contested under “Hardcore” rules, meaning that there could be no count outs, no disqualifications, and falls would count anywhere in the building. Foley would successfully defend this title against Shamrock on the 7 November edition of Raw is War. By this time, the WWF title had been vacant for nearly six weeks. Since the Undertaker and Kane had simultaneously pinned Austin in a triple-threat match at In Your House Breakdown, there had been no champion. The main event of the Judgement Day pay-per-view had ended in a highly controversial No Contest, a 14-man tournament to determine the new champion at the 1998 Survivor Series: Deadly Game pay-per-view. This was the first tournament of its kind since Wrestlemania IV.

Entering the tournament, McMahon hired the returning Big Boss Man (Ray Traylor) as his bodyguard and had chosen Mankind to be his emissary in the tournament (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Austin and the Rock were favored babyfaces to win the tournament, and

Foley was positioned as McMahon's heel contender who was oddly beloved by the fans. Foley was paired with enhancement talent Duane Gill in the opening round, whom he easily defeated, then he bested his brother in kayfabe mental illness Al Snow in the quarterfinals. Mankind and Austin met in the semi-finals, where Austin was betrayed by McMahon's son Shane, struck with a steel chair from behind by Gerald Brisco, and pinned by Mankind. This was Mankind's first victory over Austin. Foley met the Rock in the finals. The Rock and Foley were the only two men who had competed four times that night. The Rock had surprisingly pinned the Big Bossman easily in the first round, and when the Bossman apparently tried to toss the Shamrock a nightstick in the quarterfinals, the Rock intercepted. In the semifinals, the Rock was in a spirited match with the Undertaker, when Kane emerged and choke-slammed the Rock, giving the Rock a disqualification victory. and the Rock would eventually apply the sharpshooter submission hold to Foley, much as Shawn Michaels had the year prior to Bret Hart. And much like the year prior, McMahon demanded that the bell be rung and declared the Rock the champion. McMahon's conspiracy had been a massive ruse to place the Rock as champion. The Rock re-established himself as a heel champion and the chosen future of the WWF. McMahon now had a foil for Austin who was loyal to him and the financial windfall that the championship promised. A heartbroken and betrayed Mankind was beaten down by McMahon, the Rock and McMahon's contingent. Foley had now again crowned a first-time world champion, the fourth which he had been directly connected with during this run.

This would kick-off Foley and the Rock's historic feud over the WWF championship (Foley, 1999). This feud would headline four consecutive pay-per-views. The Rock was the prototypical blue chip wrestling star. Foley was the scrappy Everyman underdog. The Rock's greed had led him to ally himself with McMahon, while Foley's human empathy had led him to do the same thing in the prior months. Foley would constantly have the deck stacked against him during this time period. During this time, Foley would also begin referring to himself as "Mick Foley" openly, and the Mankind gear simply became his working costume. Meanwhile Austin would be forced to battle his way back into the title picture by battling the Undertaker, who was swiftly building a quasi-demonic cult which would hang people from the Undertaker's logo in the style of a crucifixion.



The next night on the 16 November 1998 edition of Raw is War, McMahon would announce the creation of his “The Corporation” stable (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This stable was led by McMahon and the Rock, alongside Shane McMahon, the Big Bossman, Ken Shamrock, and newly appointed WWF commissioner Shawn Michaels. Andrew “Test” Martin would join as muscle and Kane would be forced into McMahon’s service under threat of being institutionalized. The Rock’s greed and power had led him to betraying the fans, while Foley had become a lovable, Everyman, underdog babyface. On that edition of Raw, Foley would overcome Shamrock and the Bossman to retain his hardcore title. Austin’s title match with the Rock that night would lead to a disqualification victory, but no title victory. Foley would lose his Hardcore title in a ladder match against the Big Bossman on the 30 November edition of Raw is War. Foley would compete with a flurry of members of the Corporation, and again find himself aligned with Austin during this time period because of their common enemies. Foley would also pick up a televised win over the Undertaker by disqualification on Sunday Night Heat.

December of 1998 would arguably be the peak of Foley’s career (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). He would headline two pay-per-views that month. On 1 December 1998, Foley and Austin would win a tag-team victory over the Rock and the Undertaker via disqualification. At the UK-only Capital Carnage pay-per-view event on 6 December 1998, he would main event against the Undertaker, Kane and Austin, with Austin taking the victory despite Gerald Brisco’s position as guest referee. A week later, Mankind and the Rock met in a rematch of their Survivor Series bout, where Foley prevailed via disqualification, but did not claim the championship. Mankind would then be placed in a “Fatal Four Way Match” against the Rock for the title, but the other competitors were the Rock’s stablemates Ken Shamrock and the Big Bossman on Sunday Night Heat; Foley would immediately be beaten down, overwhelmed and defeated. On the 14 December 1998 edition of Raw is War, Mankind and Kane fought to a No Contest, thus far a career best for Foley against Kane in singles competition. Foley would then defeat Shane McMahon via disqualification when he was attacked by the Stooges on the 15 December 1998 edition of Raw is War, though Foley would win the fight against these enemies (Thompson & Ross, 2019).

On the 28 December edition of Raw is War, Mankind would challenge “The Road Dogg” Jesse James unsuccessfully for the Hardcore title (Thompson & Ross, 2019). This match did,

however, provide a key narrative twist for the storyline. Foley was poised for victory when the Rock would interfere and slam his rival Foley on the concrete floor, allowing an unknown in Road Dogg to crawl over and pin Foley. In the aftermath of the match, the Road Dogg saw this had led to his victory and was disgusted. For weeks prior to this, D-Generation X had been in conflict with the Corporation, because of their anti-authority beliefs. Shawn Michaels quit the Corporation after only weeks due to his loyalty to DX and did so by kicking McMahon in the face. Though they had been at odds for over a year, the common enemy allied Foley and the wrestling world's most beloved degenerates.

The 4 January 1999 edition of Raw would be the fairytale ending the wrestling world had been waiting for and provide Foley's acclaimed memoir with a fitting conclusion (Foley, 1999). Foley would come to the ring and demand a championship match against the Rock at the Royal Rumble in an impassioned promo, after some weeks of getting the better of McMahon in consecutive weeks (Matthews, 2022). McMahon came out to browbeat Foley for his love of the fans, and declared, "Let me say this, you know, and everyone in this building knows, you don't deserve to be the #1 contender. You haven't paid your dues, Mankind, Mick Foley, Cactus Jack, Dude Love, whatever the hell your name is, if you even know. You haven't paid your dues!" McMahon derided and laughed derisively at Foley and proclaimed that the everyman hero would never again challenge for the title. McMahon chided, "You can get close to the WWF title, but now cigar, story of your life."

McMahon would then put Foley into a match against Triple H with a spot in the Royal Rumble on the line (Matthews, 2022). Foley and his former rival Triple H were now competing for a spot in the Royal Rumble, Shane would perform a fast count to make Triple H the winner, an apparent plan that Triple H had conspired with Shane to execute. However, after the match, Triple H revealed that it was a ruse and attacked Shane McMahon with his finishing maneuver, The Pedigree. Foley then grabbed Shane in a hold, threatening to break Shane's arm if Vince did not acquiesce to giving Foley a title match that night, with no disqualifications.

Foley came to the ring with former rivals D-Generation X at his side (Matthews, 2022). The Rock came down the ramp flanked by the Corporation. The match between the two would degenerate into a brawl between the warring factions. Both men would be laid out in the ring

as the Corporations and DX battled at ringside, with McMahon looking on. Suddenly Austin's music hit, and the crowd exploded. Austin stormed down the ramp for his first appearance of the night, smashed the Rock with a steel chair, and pulled his former tag-partner onto the unconscious future cinema icon. McMahon stood by helplessly as Austin flipped him off and the referee counted three. The bell rang and the audience in the arena and at home exploded. Mick Foley, the aspirational everyman underdog, had become the world's champion. The most unlikely primo uomo in professional wrestling history was crowned. Announcer Michael Cole made the historic call:

Mankind did it! Mick Foley did it! Mankind has achieved his dream and the dream of everyone else who has ever been told you can't do it! Mick Foley has come a long way from his first match in Clarksburg, West Virginia 15 years ago. Mick Foley has come a long way. Oh, hell yeah, Mick Foley! He's come a long way from sleeping in his Ford Fairmont, learning to wrestle. He's been known as Dude Love, Cactus Jack, Mankind, but tonight and forever, Mick Foley will simply be known as WWF Champion! —He wanted to hear the people cheer for him, for his ability, for his talent—you can't measure guts, heart, and determination. He may not be the most talented, he may not be the best looking, but he is champion. —He represents the WWF as Champion!

- Michael Cole on Foley's first title win (McMahon, 1999)

In the world of the storyline, an unlikely alliance of former rivals with a common enemy joined together to overcome the machinations of the greatest villain in the wrestling world (Foley, 1999). DX held their former rival aloft in triumph. Austin had repaid the favor of his friend coming to his aid against the Hart Foundation 18 months before and pushed him to the top of the mountain. In the realm of performance art, a large cadre of friends held up a kind and genuinely brilliant collaborator who had made every possible sacrifice of his physical well-being to elevate their careers. It was the rare instance of a feel good moment for the audience coinciding with a cathartic moment for the performers. Foley grabbed the microphone and said, "Hey Vince, I gotta tell you, this feels pretty damn good. At the risk of not sounding very cool, I'd like to dedicate this match to my two little people at home and say, Big Daddio did it!" The broadcast ended with Foley running joyfully around the ring holding the title belt aloft to the delight of the live audience.

This moment effectively ended the initial angle wherein all of Foley's identities merged into his best self (J. Kincaid, personal communication, 15 November 2022). He finally lived up to his aspirations and stood up against his insecurities. Foley emerged as a role model that truly displayed that anyone with enough guts and determination could achieve their dreams. Most wrestling viewers are not superhero bodybuilders, or irrepressibly charismatic badasses; most wrestling fans are everyday people, who have often felt in their lives like they are not and will never be good enough. And in this storyline, Foley demonstrated through a 19-month odyssey the violent melodrama of professional wrestling, that with courage, self-sacrifice, and a little help from your friends, one could overcome anything. In this angle, Foley's character went from the depths of despair and mental illness, rose to prominence to live his dream, saw that dream snatched away, lost itself in his bitterness, redeemed himself through his courage, and overcame colossal obstacle to reach the zenith of his potential.

While this is the end of the aspirational angle, it was not the end of the story. This angle would open to another for the characters involved, and another would follow thereafter. Austin and McMahon would end up at each other's throats in a steel cage, Foley would defeat a human giant and become best friends with the Rock, the Undertaker would become a demonic priest, then a biker, then a zombie-necromancer again, each individual member of DX would eventually form a new faction, and so on (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Notably, *Wrestlemania XV* took place 83 days later with Austin challenging the Rock for the WWF title on the marquee, and Mick Foley as the special guest referee (Foley, 2001). In professional wrestling, episodic stories continue with characters constantly ebbing and flowing with allegiances, ethical alignments, goals and alliances. In this crystallized instance, Foley went from a frustrated individual with multiple identities, to a fully self-actualized individual wherein each identity had given way to a facet of a complex person who would be accepted by the masses for being themselves.

This incident also became the final turning point of the Monday Night War (Foley, 2001). Since April, Raw and Nitro had been trading wins and losses in the rating battle, with the WWF winning more often than not. Nitro was broadcast live on 4 January 1999, with the WWF having been taped. Nitro ran from 8PM-11:05PM, while Raw ran from 9PM-11:05PM. Near the end of the first hour, WCW announcer Tony Schiavone was prompted by Eric

Bischoff to announce that Foley had won the WWF title and derisively declared, “That’s gonna put some butts in the seats.” Foley was watching live on television with his family when this aired, and had his feelings hurt by the remark. However, in the ratings, this spoiler caused more than 500,000 viewers to change the channel to WWF Raw immediately. While WCW had Hulk Hogan win the title by poking Kevin Nash with a single finger, in a massive disappointment to fans. Raw won the ratings that night. Despite over 120 previous victories in the Monday Night War, Nitro would never again beat Raw in the ratings. Foley had been in the final segment when WCW’s steak was broken, and he was in the main event when the WWF seized momentum permanently in the conflict. The popularity of the WWF during 1999 would propel the company into its Initial Public Offering of Stock on the New York Stock Exchange on 19 October 1999, just hours after The Rock n’ Sock Connection (Foley and The Rock) lost their third and final tag-team title, whether this title loss affected the price of stock that fateful day has not been quantified by historians. McMahon bought WCW in March of 2001.

Foley would write his autobiography *Have a Nice Day: A Tale of Blood and Sweatsocks*, in 1999 and conclude the story with his first title win (Thompson & Foley, 2022). Published by ReaganBooks, it was released on 7 November 1999 and reached #1 on the New York Times Nonfiction Bestseller list. Foley would retire from active competition in March 2000, making comebacks as an in-ring competitor in 2004 and 2009. Foley would release four more memoirs *Foley is Good: And the Real World is Faker Than Wrestling* (another #1 bestseller), *The Hardcore Diaries*, *Countdown to Lockdown: A Hardcore Journal*, and *Saint Mick: My Journey from Hardcore Legend to Santa’s Jolly Elf* (a story of his life-long obsession with Christmas cheer and related activities). Foley also wrote novels *Teitam Brown* and *Scooter* from 2003-2005, along with five children’s books between 2000 and 2014, some of which also made the superlative bestseller list. Foley would eventually become a four-time world champion: thrice in the WWF and once in TNA/Impact Wrestling. He was inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame on 6 April 2013. He was inducted in the Madison Square Garden arena, where he had seen Jimmy “Superfly” Snuka leap from the cage those decades before. He was inducted by his fellow hardcore legend Terry Funk and pinned Chris Jericho for the first time on the stage with Phil “CM Punk” Brooks counting the three. Santa Claus and his wife Mrs. Claus also made an appearance, giving Mick some Christmas garb, in Mick’s signature flannel. Foley continues his career at the time of this writing in 2022 as a popular speaker

with his one-man show, and his professional wrestling nostalgia podcast titled *Foley is Pod* with co-host Conrad Thompson on the Ad Free Shows Network.

## 2.9 The Revenue Structure and Business Administration of Professional Wrestling

Though professional wrestling is a performance art, it is most typically referred to as a “business.” This is due to the fact that historically professional wrestling has always been, and continues to be, primarily commercial entertainment. Profitable professional wrestling companies self-perpetuate, and unprofitable ones inevitably collapse. This apparently simple equation is subject to a slew of mitigating factors relating to how the performances and the reformers are presented and marketed. This section will discuss the costs, common marketing practices and well-known revenue sources for professional wrestling. In its most modern integration, successful professional wrestling companies seek to engage fans across multiple media platforms. Some professional wrestling companies, most notably the WWE, have maximized their monetization across an innovative and fluidly evolving multimedia audience engagement strategy.

Professional wrestling is a for-profit performance art. As such, prior to discussing revenue streams to monetize the content, it behooves us to first examine the costs of creating that content. The costs of creating that content vary based on the size and scope of the promotions (Alba & Bischoff, 2022). For a small production, this will require a budget for talent, ring rental, sound system, and venue rental. Most small organizations also invest in some minor video recording equipment, small staging areas, and concessions. If possible, most promotions try to own their own ring. Larger organizations have increased budgets for renting large venues, like ballrooms or arenas. These productions also require better sound systems, along with lighting rigs for the performance area. Traveling promotions must also pay the transportation costs for the ring and equipment, along with those of the performers and staff. Promotions creating a televised product have the most expensive production costs. They must rent either a building, an arena, or a sound stage for their production. They must also use television-quality cameras, sound and lighting grids, which later requires paying the power bills for that area. This also requires both video and sound editing crews, directors, and stagehands. Top promotions also regularly require animators, pyrotechnics, practical effects,

and live broadcast of these complex productions. The most common expense at every level is the cost of talent. Depending on the drawing power and reputation of the performer, they can demand anything from a pittance to a king's ransom for an appearance. Some aspiring performers will work for experience and hope for gas money, while some mega stars will command a seven-figure payday for a single match. Performers are not limited to the wrestlers themselves. Performers in these promotions include managers, valets, commentators, interviewers, ring announcers, and any other person who serves as a character within the world of that particular performance. Promoters always seek to minimize this cost, and performers always seek to maximize it, at least when it comes to the price paid out for that performer's own labor.

The marketing of professional wrestling has evolved somewhat during the Information Age (Alba & Bischoff, 2022). In earlier eras, posters, newspaper advertisements, and local radio played a significant role in creating buzz around an upcoming show. Even now, one of the most common methods of advertising for independent performances is placing flyers strategically in the communities nearby the performance. Televised professional wrestling was created to advertise the upcoming live shows in the broadcast area. Television commercials also became a portion of this. To this day major professional wrestling promotions covet mainstream media attention, and often feature appearances of mainstream celebrities as a "sizzle" to lure fans in, hoping to hook a certain percentage of them on the other content. The rise of the internet and social media has made advertising and distributing professional wrestling content much more streamlined. Even local promotions have YouTube or user-streaming video channels, and a variety of social media accounts to increase their presence, along with the ancillary effects of spreading their performers' respective networks.

The earliest and most intuitive of the common revenue structures in professional wrestling is ticket sales (Alba & Bischoff, 2022). Attracting fans to live events was the primary revenue stream in the earliest days of the professional wrestling industry. Promoters and performers would enter into formal or informal agreements regarding payment based on the "house" or the "draw" for a particular event. Though other revenue structures have emerged, drawing fans to live performances is still a vital pillar of revenue in professional wrestling. This is particularly important for grassroots organizations where the live gate is ostensibly the *only* stream of revenue for the promotion. As with other forms of entertainment, performers often

lament greedy promoters skimping on their pay. This is the cause of a considerable number of conflicts in the professional wrestling industry. Wrestlers having their income cut, being paid less than their agreed upon rate, or being “stiffed” on pay, has led to innumerable walkouts, several decades-long vendettas, and many violent reprisals throughout the years. On the lowest levels of independent professional wrestling, wrestlers often joke about being paid with “a hot dog and a handshake,” as part of the dues paying process of learning their craft. Promoters often receive a portion of concessions for live events, though the exact amount varies based on the organization and the venue. From as small as a rural firehouse, to as large as a football stadium, these negotiations take place between promoters and venues.

Being paid based off of the live gate without a firm guarantee of income for the performance was the modus opera director for ostensibly the entire professional wrestling industry until the mid-1980’s (Alba & Bischoff, 2022). For over a century wrestler’s livelihood was dependent solely upon drawing fans to the live shows. Appreciating this, any behavior by performers that might jeopardize these survival wages was met with extreme hostility by the muscular and ornery stage combatants. This was also a driving force behind the perpetuation of the Kayfabe Conspiracy, as none of the performers wanted to risk their livelihoods on the willingness of working-class fans to watch the violent athletic melodrama.

The largest promotions in the industry regularly put on untelevised live events which bring in gates in the low six-figures. Television events commonly draw between 3,000-10,000 paid fans, with major television events (like pay-per-views or premium live events), drawing over 10,000 paid fans. The largest events can bring in eight-figure gates, and fill stadiums which seat tens of thousands of fans. At the time of this writing, the current record crowd for an American professional wrestling show was the 101,763 attendance for WWE Wrestlemania 32 in Arlington, Texas in 2016. Stadium events of this kind have generated money gates of over \$20 million over the past decade.

Another major pillar of revenue in professional wrestling is merchandising (Alba & Bischoff, 2022). Much like the live draw, merchandising takes different forms in larger and smaller promotions. At many independent wrestling events, wrestlers or their designated stand-ins (usually family, friends or paramours) work at their “gimmick table.” These tables usually sell merchandise specific to a particular wrestler, including signed photographs, t-shirts,



stickers, and other themed merchandise. Some promoters demand a portion of the proceeds of wrestler's gimmick tables, though these promoters are usually met with swift and unequivocal rejection of those demands.

In the largest promotions, the licensing and merchandising of characters is a vital part of the business model (Alba & Bischoff, 2022). This was pioneered by Vince McMahon during the initial WWF expansion in the 1980's. By licensing nearly every conceivable product, the WWF was able to generate considerable additional income for the company and the wrestlers based on the sales of such items. This led to the legendary six-figure checks for action figure sales for wrestlers, which became a major factor luring talent to the New York-Connecticut promotion. This merchandising model included action figures, replica title belts, t-shirts, themed merchandise, lunch boxes, foam fingers, other apparel, comic books, cups, programs, posters, ice cream bars, and an apparently endless litany of other products. These items are for sale at both live events and via the internet at WWEShop.com. The WWE also has a somewhat controversial policy of changing the stage names of performers who enter the organization so that the company can own the intellectual property rights to the characters featured on their programming. This allows the WWE to continue to monetize the character after a performer leaves the company but prevents the performers from doing so. Other organizations have adopted similar merchandising models with varying degrees of success, like AEW, NJPW, WCW, and Impact Wrestling. Notably, AEW makes a concerted effort to allow performers to maintain their intellectual property rights over characters, with IP sharing agreements. At the time of this writing, ProWrestlingTees.com is perhaps the largest independent distributor of professional wrestling merchandise, partnered with hundreds of vendors and performers worldwide, including AEW, NJPW and AdFreeShows.com.

Following the successes of Starrcade and Wrestlemania, the revenue from premium television events became a major source of revenue within the professional wrestling world (Alba & Bischoff, 2022). Professional wrestling companies could generate millions, or tens of millions of dollars through this system. The iterations of this system have evolved with media technology since the 1980's. Closed-circuit theatre television was first, then pay-per-view, and now paid streaming is the primary method of delivery for these events. This method of distribution was typically only in the realm of major professional wrestling companies.

Indeed, recognition by the industry media as a major organization was, and to some degree is, dependent on having some live premium event distribution presence.

Former WCW Head Eric Bischoff said, “Pay-per-view was big for us. Of all the other sources of revenue it was big because that came directly to us, it didn’t go through Turner.” (Alba & Bischoff, 2022) In 1990’s major professional wrestling companies expanded their schedules to having monthly pay-per-view specials, which would command a roughly 50-50 revenue split with the cable and satellite providers. With two major companies at the time, this created a crowded schedule of 24 events per year between the WWF and WCW. Upstart Philadelphia promotion ECW would also enter the fray of the 1990’s professional wrestling boom, by broadcasting its first pay-per-view event titled *Barely Legal*. ECW would produce 21 more pay-per-view events prior to its shutdown in early 2001. WCW would be sold shortly thereafter, joining ECW and a number of the major professional wrestling territories in the WWE’s massive video library.

In 2002, NWA-TNA would debut using a new “pay-per-view only” model (Tompson & Jarrett, 2021). The Jarrett’s invested heavily in talent and production value to create a new alternative in the professional wrestling landscape. This model would prove unsustainable, though the TNA brand would eventually fall into the more traditional model of professional wrestling with cable television presence and monthly pay-per-view events, where it became a popular and profitable brand for a time. TNA would eventually rebrand as Impact Wrestling and continues to follow that revenue model today. Another upstart promotion named Ring of Honor would emerge in 2002 and develop a cult following for its ring-work centered promotion. After years of successful live events and video sales, ROH would become a pay-per-view brand in 2007 with the *Respect is Earned* event. ROH would continue to run regular pay-per-views until their sale to AEW in 2022. Major international pay-per-view distributors include Lucha Libre AAA Worldwide from Mexico and New Japan Professional Wrestling.

This model was changed considerably when the WWE launched the WWE Network in 2014 (Alba & Bischoff, 2022). This premium streaming platform charged fans a monthly fee to access the WWE’s massive video archive, original content, and to have exclusive access to pay-per-views, which would eventually be rebranded as “Premium Live Events.” This streaming model became considerably successful, attracting over 1.5 million subscribers by

2020. The WWE licensed the US domestic rights to stream their content to Comcast-owned Peacock streaming network in 2020 as a part of a 5-year \$1 billion deal. Otherwise, the WWE Network is still available in 186 countries. While AEW uses a more traditional pay-per-view model, several rising promotions produce regular pay-per-view wrestling shows targeted at niche fans through streaming services. Impact Wrestling currently broadcasts their premium events using the Impact Plus App. The most prominent of these is the constellation of wrestling promotions which broadcast over the Fite TV app. Notable promotions that use this platform include several respected independent promotions, including Game Changer Wrestling, Major League Wrestling, and a resurrected one-off of Jim Crockett Promotions. These organizations are able to boost their profile because of worldwide streaming television without network broadcasting restrictions, increase revenue with affordable paid content, and feature their talent on a forum tailored to their die-hard fan bases.

Television ad revenue also plays a significant role in professional wrestling revenue among major promotions (Alba & Bischoff, 2022). The promotions which can sustain television deals are able to collect a considerable percentage of the ad revenue for their television programs. This model dates back to the earliest days of televised professional wrestling. Regional professional wrestling companies would partner with local stations and agree to revenue-sharing arrangements on ad revenue while distributing content that served as advertisement for the live performance. This model persists today. AEW famously captured a four-year \$175 million deal with its host Warner Media in 2020. The WWE has multiple nine-figure deals in place for their content distribution, including over \$200 million each from NBC-Universal and Fox.

The most significant addition to the professional wrestling revenue model is the importance of content ownership (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). There are reports that Vince McMahon had designs on creating a professional wrestling-only television network as early as the mid-1980's. After amalgamating all of the content from bought-out territories into a massive library, the WWE was able to monetize pre-existing footage from their and other promotions. This exclusive video content IP became a major revenue source in the streaming era. Content ownership means that it can be monetized across several digital platforms, and pre-existing content can be repeatedly monetized. For example, the WWE can create the segment of a match of Raw and that segment will generate ad revenue for USA Network, then be clipped

into a YouTube video which will generate more ad revenue, the entire episode will be sent to Disney-owned Hulu for streaming rebroadcast until the end of the designated “season,” then it will be archived on the NBC-Universal Peacock app in the United States for further paid viewing *or* it will be added to the WWE Network internationally for redistribution. The same segment of content can be monetized six times. This does not take into account the international television syndication deals which major professional wrestling content providers have often scored, which can regularly be in the 8-figures. The WWE’s international distribution deals allow Wrestlemania 38 in 2022 to be seen live by over 56,000,000 homes in India alone. Social media monetization is also a significant and rising factor, which again the WWE was an early adopter of, accruing over one billion followers across all platforms, and the 8th largest channel on YouTube at the time of this writing. The aforementioned Wrestlemania 38 generated 2.2 billion impressions across all social media platforms during its broadcast.

While professional wrestling has a completely unique method of performance art, the business of professional wrestling follows many of the same principles as other businesses. Limiting costs and increasing revenues is still at the core of success. Making sure that the cost of expansion does not outpace revenue growth is also a key sticking point that has triggered many financial crises for a professional wrestling promotion. As the media landscape has evolved, so have the monetization methods adopted in the professional wrestling industry. Indeed, the WWE became the first professional wrestling company to post over \$1 billion in annual revenue for fiscal year 2021, with record profits to boot. Whether the rewards of those monetization methods are shared fairly among the workers and management is still a matter of considerable controversy. The calls for collective bargaining in professional wrestling to ensure that these profits will be shared by the major companies will be heard remains to be seen. The calls for minor league promoters to pay performers fairly will, in all likelihood, remain ugly confrontations behind the closed doors of middle school gymnasiums and VFW halls for the immediate future.

## 3.0 The Unavoidable Presence of Professional Wrestling in American Pop Culture

Professional wrestling is a major segment of American popular culture. Professional wrestling promoters prize appearances by mainstream celebrities because of the public interest those appearances generate. Likewise, appearances by pop culture figures on professional wrestling programming, in matches or in storylines, is a valuable promotional tool. Wrestling fans have a soft spot for any outsider who takes the time to enter the world of melodramatic quasi-sport. As such a prominent niche in the cultural consciousness, professional wrestling appears throughout popular culture in crossover events. Professional wrestling-themed films occur regularly, and it is extremely common for American television programs to have professional wrestling-themed episodes. Likewise, because professional wrestling is a style of acting, many wrestlers regularly appear in films and television. This section will highlight an abridged smattering of many prominent professional wrestling-related instances in American popular culture. Likewise professional wrestling occupies a unique place in the sports culture of the United States. This chapter will examine professional wrestling's presence in both sports and popular culture, along with how that cultural footprint has affected the political landscape of the United States.

### 3.1 Professional Wrestling On the Big and Small Screens

Professional Wrestling and professional wrestlers are a widely visible part of narrative entertainment in both television and film. Because professional wrestling is a theatrical art, that means that the performers have some level of basic acting training that intersects with their vocal and physical storytelling. Many professional wrestling performers become actors because of the overlap in skills. As expert stage combatant, many wrestlers moonlight as stunt performers as well. Moreover, professional wrestling itself often appears in entertainment media as it is a colorful and prominent part of the shared American and global culture. This section will examine professional wrestling's overlap with popular culture in the context of film, television and music.

### 3.1.a Professional Wrestling and Cinema

Professional wrestling regularly appears in cinema. This is prominent in the United States and abroad. In Mexico this is most prominent, as campy lucha libre action-adventure films are a widely beloved genre, with some top wrestling stars appearing in dozens of feature films (Mercado, 2017). Popular films centered on professional wrestling or professional wrestling characters have also been well-received by audiences in Japan and South Korea (Good, 2022). In the United States, professional wrestling-centered films have run the gamut of cinematic quality from Oscar-contenders to critical and box office bombs. Many of these films include appearances from professional wrestling performers and personalities. Another prominent example of this is the Oscar-nominated and BAFTA-winning 2008 film *The Wrestler*, starring Mickey Rourke as an aging former top wrestling star with appearances of a litany of wrestlers of the 1990's and 2000's (Good, 2022). The 1962 film *Requiem for a Heavyweight* told the story of a former heavyweight boxer being forced to wrestle and featured appearances from Muhammad Ali and wrestler William "Haystacks" Calhoun (IMDb, 2022). "Gorgeous" George Wagner played the eponymous champion wrestler in the 1949 wrestling-themed crime drama *Alias the Champ* (Jares, 1974). A less beloved film from 1970 of the same name included a number of appearances by top stars of the Territory Era. Sylvester Stallone made his 1978 directorial debut with *Paradise Alley*, a film about the seedy underbelly of the industry (Good, 2022). In addition to *Paradise Alley*, former-NWA and future-ECW champion Terry Funk appeared in 1980's classics *Roadhouse* and *Over the Top* (Funk & Williams, 2012). The early 1980's saw feature films like the drama *Below the Belt* and *All the Marbles* (Jones, 2022). The Rock n' Wrestling Era saw wrestling-themed films like 1986's *Body Slam* and the 1989 Hulk Hogan vehicle *No Holds Barred* (Jones, 2022). The 2000's saw a number of films related to professional wrestling. This included the massive hit comedy *Nacho Libre*, where Jack Black plays a fictionalized story of Fray Tormenta, a Mexican Catholic priest who funded his orphanage by embarking on a 23-year-long career in lucha libre as "Friar Storm." (Tu Decides, 2015) Other offerings of this kind came with WWE Studios films *Fighting With My Family*, a biopic about WWE women's wrestling Paige. The 2019 independent film hit *The Peanut Butter Falcon* follows the story of a man with Down's Syndrome pursuing his dream of becoming a professional wrestler (Good, 2022). Professional wrestling has also been the source of a number of feature-length documentaries or docuseries, such as *The Resurrection of Jake the Snake*, *Hitman Hart: Wrestling With Shadows*, *Beyond the Mat*, *GLOW: The Story of the Gorgeous Ladies of*

*Wrestling, My Breakfast with Blassie, Lipstick and Dynamite, Card Subject to Change, The Last of McGuinness, The Dark Side of the Ring, Piss and Vinegar: The First Ladies of Wrestling, Tales From the Territories* and a host of televised bio-docs on the A&E Network series *Biography* (Shorey, 2020; Ginzburg, 2022; A&E, 2022, IMDb, 2017).

Professional wrestlers have also emerged as prominent film and television actors in increasingly prominent capacities throughout the past five decades. Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson emerged from his professional wrestling career to become the top grossing and highest paid actor in the world (Wrestling 2020; Tagore, 2022; Johnson, 2022; Jwoehr, 2011; Hall et al., 2021). John Cena and Dave Bautista have emerged as leading men in Hollywood as well. All three of those wrestler-actors have been cast as comic book superheroes in well-received DC and Marvel franchises (Hall et al., 2021). Steve Austin would star in several films, notably as a hero in *The Condemned*, and a villainous henchman in *The Expendables* and *The Longest Yard* (Johnson, 2022). Indeed the 2005 remake of the Burt Reynolds classic *The Longest Yard* had a cast lousy with professional wrestling stars, including Austin, Dalit “The Great Khali” Singh, Bill Goldberg, Bob Sapp, and Kevin Nash (Brennan, 2022). Singh would also appear in *Get Smart* (Tagore, 2022). The 1980’s saw a host of professional wrestlers explode into the public consciousness through roles in cinema. Hulk Hogan shot to fame in *Rocky III*, which became an early spark for the WWF expansion (Hall et al., 2021). Hogan’s rival Roddy Piper starred in the 1988 Sci-Fi cult classic *They Live*. Andre the Giant had a prominent role in the beloved 1987 swashbuckling fantasy film *The Princess Bride* (Tagore, 2022). Since the early 1990’s Kevin Nash has appeared in several films, including *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles II: The Secret of the Ooze*, *The Punisher*, *Magic Mike*, *Grandma’s Boy*, and *John Wick* (Hall et al., 2021). Prior to his days as Governor of Minnesota, the self-proclaimed “Sexual Tyrannosaurus” Jesse Ventura was a prominent supporting actor in classic action films like *Predator*, *The Running Man* and *Demolition Man* (Hall et al., 2021). The 2011 action-comedy *MacGruber* featured WWE stars Mark Henry, Kane, MVP, Singh, the Big Show and Chris Jericho (Matthews, 2014). Jericho also performed in films such as Kevin Smith’s *Jay and Silent Bob Reboot*, SyFy Channel’s *Apocalypse Android* and *Albino Farm* (Johnson, 2022). Adam “Edge” Copeland has also appeared in films such as *Money Plane*, and performed in prominent roles on television series *Vikings*, *Have*, and *Sanctuary* (Johnson, 2022). Bill Goldberg would have an on-screen career as a murderous St. Nickolas in *Santa Slay*, a role in the *Universal Soldier* sequel, and a

supporting role in *Ready to Rumble* (Johnson, 2022). As it was a WCW production, *Ready to Rumble* featured much of the WCW roster in 1998-1999 (TV Guide, 2022). Along with his role as a primary antagonist in *Ready to Rumble*, “Diamond” Dallas Page has appeared in *The Devil’s Rejects*, and was cut from *Rat Race* and *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (Hall et al., 2021). Triple H would have a supporting role in *Blade: Trinity*, in the WWE films vehicle *The Chaperone*, and a crime thriller *Inside Out* (Hall et al., 2021). Randy Savage would appear in the colossal hit *Spider-Man* as professional wrestler Bone-Saw. Territory era star Lenny Montana made cinematic history as Luca Brasi in *The Godfather*.

### 3.1.b Professional Wrestling on Television

Professional wrestling is most prominently propagated and is distributed through television. A common refrain among fans and industry professionals alike describes professional wrestling as “a TV show about a wrestling show.” As such, professional wrestling has a tremendous presence on television. Most long-running television shows end up with either a professional wrestling-themed episode and/or an appearance by one or more major professional wrestling personalities. These events are often used to co-promote both the professional wrestling company and the show itself. These episodes of the television program also tend to be beloved by wrestling fans. Examples of television programs with professional wrestling themed episodes includes, *Boy Meets World*, *The A-Team*, *Baywatch*, *Futurama*, *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Workaholics*, *Hannah Montana*, *South Park*, *That 70’s Show*, *The Drew Carey Show*, *Married...With Children*, *Spongebob Squarepants*, *Dexter’s Laboratory*, *King of the Hill*, *Bob’s Burgers*, *The Tonight Show*, *Tosh.0*, *Supernatural*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *Mr. Belvedere*, *The Munsters*, *The X-Files*, *Space Ghost Coast to Coast*, *The Trailer Park Boys*, *The Trailer Park Boys: The Animated Series*, *Sabrina The Teenage Witch*, *Family Matters*, *Archer*, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, among many others (Jwoher, 2011; Hall et al., 2021).

Likewise, the interest in professional wrestling as a subculture has led to a various television series entirely centered around professional wrestling (Naboya, 2022). These programs range from kids shows like *Mucha Lucha*, *Los Luchadores*, *Hulk Hogan’s Rock n’ Wrestling*, and *Tiger Mask*, to adult dramas like the Netflix hit series *GLOW* or *Heels* on the Stars network. Professional wrestling sitcoms like Johnson’s biographical series *Young Rock*, Paul Wight’s family three-camera sitcom about life-after-wrestling *The Big Show Show*, the CW series



*Nikki* about a showgirl and her professional wrestler husband, MTV's oft-resurrected Claymation *Celebrity Deathmatch*, Adult Swim animated series *Mongo Wrestling Alliance*, and the short-lived Territory Era Canadian series from 1986 titled *Learning the Ropes*. There are also a number of anime series about Japanese professional wrestling.

Professional wrestlers also often appear on television game shows and reality show programming. The WWE hosted five editions of the competition reality series *Tough Enough*, where aspiring wrestlers competed for a WWE contract on the MTV and USA Network series (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Some wrestlers have been the host of their own competition game shows, such as Dwayne Johnson's *Titan Games*, Hulk Hogan's rebooted *American Gladiators* and *Celebrity Championship Wrestling*, John Cena's rebooted *Are You Smarter Than a Fifth Grader*, Steve Austin's *Broken Skull Challenge* or *Redneck Island*, Jason "Christian Cage" Reso's *Knight Fight*, Bill Goldberg's *Knife or Death*, Chris Jericho's *Downfall*, and Mike Mizanin's British game show *Cannonball* (Nissen, 2021). Professional wrestlers often appear on celebrity episodes of game shows such as *Family Feud*, *Fear Factor*, *Double Dare*, *Deal or No Deal*, *The Weakest Link*, *The Price is Right*, *Let's Make a Deal*, *Say What? Karaoke*, *Figure It Out*, and *Hollywood Squares* (Pester, 2019; Aitken, 2017).

Owing to the fact that professional wrestlers tend to have bombastic extroverted personalities and a built-in fanbase, wrestling personalities are also often popular choices on Reality Television series. Examples of professional wrestling personalities hosting a reality show include *Straight Up Steve Austin* with the eponymous host, *Total Divas* and *Total Bellas* with the Bella Twins, *Miz & Mrs* with Mike Mizanin and Maryse (Maglio, 2019). Examples of wrestlers performing in an ensemble of a reality show or competing in a competition reality show includes John Morison on *Survivor*, Trish stratus on *Armed & Fabulous*, David Otunga on *I Love New York*, Kenny King on *The Bachelorette*, Maria Kanellis on *The Celebrity Apprentice*, Robert "Robbie E" Stone and Brooke Adams on *The Amazing Race*, Austin "Luchasaurus" Mathewson on the American *Big Brother 17*, or Stacy Keebler's and Chris Jericho's respective entries on *Dancing with the Stars* (Randle, 2016). WWE Studios also creates a number of reality series to promote the promotion's personalities including *Legends House*, *Culture Shock*, *Holy Foley!*, *Kitchen Smackdown*, *Table for 3*, *Breaking Ground*, *Swerved*, *Game Night*, and *My Son/Daughter is a WWE Superstar* (Djeljosevic, 2020).

### 3.1.c Celebrity Crossovers into Professional Wrestling

While professional wrestling will make an occasional appearance in the world of cinema and television, it is far more common to encounter the inverse of mainstream entertainment coming to professional wrestling. Celebrity appearances in professional wrestling can range for a special guest in the audience, a speaking role, physical altercations with characters. These appearances become increasingly common surrounding Wrestlemania, where live musical acts and celebrity crossovers have a prominent role.

Perhaps the most challenging form of celebrity appearance in professional wrestling is when performers become wrestlers themselves. While fans treat altercations between wrestlers and pop culture figures as curiosities, they are typically weary of celebrities trying to wrestle. The reasons for this are fairly straightforward, namely that most celebrities are not trained in the complex performance methods of professional wrestling, so their matches are usually bad. Moreover, professional wrestlers selling for or losing to celebrities in matches can harm their credibility. However, when a celebrity wrestler shows enough respect for the art form to receive adequate training and performs well, they will win permanent fans in the professional wrestling audience. To preserve match quality, celebrity matches are most often tag-team matches where the trained wrestlers can control the bulk of the in-ring storytelling. On extremely rare occasions, some celebrities perform in one-on-one matches with professional wrestlers.

One of the most infamous examples of this is the case of former WCW world heavyweight champion David Arquette. Arquette was appearing on WCW programming to promote the 2000 film *Ready to Rumble*, when a series of altercations lead him to be included in a tag-team match, where through a series of odd stipulations, he scored the pin and won the title on the 26 April 2000 edition of Nitro (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). This move was widely lamented among fans and critics, leading to decades of ridicule for Arquette. As a die-hard wrestling fan, Arquette sought to redeem his legacy by becoming an independent professional wrestler of adequate quality. This journey was the subject of the 2020 documentary *You Cannot Kill David Arquette*. WCW often used celebrities in tag-team matches to promote their programming, notably headlining two consecutive pay-per-view cards with celebrity tag-team matches in the summer of 1998. WCW headlined their July 1998 *Bash at the Beach*

event with Dennis Rodman and Hulk Hogan defeating Karl Malone and “Diamond” Dallas Page, followed by Page and *The Tonight Show* host Jay Leno defeating Hogan and Eric Bischoff at the August 1998 *Road Wild* pay-per-view event. Neither of these matches were received as an artistic success, though both provided palpable publicity for the promotion.

Perhaps the most historically significant celebrity in-ring competitor was Mr. T (Hayes, 2022). Mr. T had been Hulk Hogan’s co-star in *Rocky III*, leading to a friendship between the two and Mr. T’s role in the *Wrestlemania I* storyline involving Hogan, Cyndi Lauper, Roddy Piper and company. Mr. T wrestled in the main event at the first *Wrestlemania*, and a featured worked boxing match at the second *Wrestlemania*, winning both times. Mr. T would also make various appearances for WCW and the WWE throughout the 1990’s and 2000’s, prior to his WWE Hall of Fame induction in 2014.

A number of celebrities have appeared in battle royals in professional wrestling (Hayes, 2022; Matthews, 2014). This includes *Saturday Night Live Weekend Update* hosts Michael Che and Colin Hanks in the 2019 Andre the Giant Memorial Battle Royal at *Wrestlemania 35*. Another late-night television sketch comedy star who made an in-ring appearance was *Canada’s Worst Actor* star Will Sasso, who ran afoul of Bret “The Hitman” Hart on a 1998 edition of *Nitro* and was defeated in the Sharpshooter submission hold. Future *Price is Right* funny man Drew Carey in the 2001 Royal Rumble and was inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame in 2011. *Jackass* star Johnny Knoxville in the 2022 WWE Royal Rumble. Knoxville’s turn in the Royal Rumble would lead to a months-long storyline feud between Knoxville and wrestler Sami Zayn. This feud co-promoted Knoxville’s film *Jackass Forever* and led to a match between the two on the second night of *Wrestlemania 38*. The comedic match saw Zayn fight through a series of slapstick traps and the *Jackass* cast, to ultimately be pinned in a giant mousetrap. Elsewhere on *Wrestlemania 38*, YouTube star Logan Paul teamed with The Miz to defeat the Mysterio’s. Paul would return to defeat the Miz at *SummerSlam 2022*. Paul had previously appeared in a non-wrestling role at *Wrestlemania 37*, only to receive a Stunner from Kevin Owens. In another segment on *Wrestlemania 37*, chart-topping Latino hip-hop star Bad Bunny teamed with Damien Priest in a tag-team match against The Miz and John Morrison. The match came as the climax of a months-long storyline where Bad Bunny held the WWE 24/7 Championship, with Priest as his bodyguard. Priest and Bad Bunny would defeat the Miz and Morrison. Recording artist Marshmello had previously won the

24/7 title at the 20th Anniversary of WWE Smackdown in 2019. Another prominent celebrity to hold the 24/7 title was retired NFL legend and 4x Super Bowl champion Rob “Gronk” Gronkowski, who won the title on the first night of the 2020 edition of the event. A celebrity tag-team match from an earlier Wrestlemania involved a six-person mixed tag-team match featuring *Jersey Shore* starlet Nicole “Snooki” Polizzi teaming with Trish Stratus and John Morrison to defeat Dolphin Ziggler, Layla and Michelle McCool. Other members of the cast of *Jersey Shore* have appeared on TNA/Impact and AEW programming in both matches and altercations. Another notable tag team match featuring celebrities included the star of the popular DC comics television series Arrow Steve Amell. Amell engaged in a memorable feud with Cody “Stardust” Rhodes leading to a tag-team match at SummerSlam 2015 where Amell and Adrian Neville defeated Stardust and King Barrett. Amell would go on to star in the professional wrestling-theme drama series *Heels*.

A number of celebrities entered into some physical altercations with professional wrestling personalities (Hayes, 2022; MSN, 2019; Roberts, 2020; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Matthews, 2014). These sometimes involved interfering in a match, attacking a wrestler, or being attacked by a wrestler. These alterations typically begin as friendly verbal jousting and escalate into some manner of fisticuffs between the wrestlers and the visiting celebrities. Celebrities who have been involved in physical altercations with professional wrestling performers include Jon Stewart, Joe Manganiello, Hugh Jackman, Meatloaf, Cyndi Lauper, Mickey Rourke, Machine Gun Kelly, Ben Stiller, Will Forte, Kristen Wig, Master P, Kiss, RoboCop, Beetlejuice, Toby Keith, Morton Downey Jr, William Shatner, Jean Claude Van Damme, and Chuck Norris.

Many other celebrities who appear prefer to do so without risking life and limb in a physical altercation with wrestling personalities (Hayes, 2022; Matthews, 2014). These appearances typically fall into one of three categories: guest announcing, interviewing, or appearance. These non-physical roles are usually used to garner mainstream publicity for the wrestling promotion, and to promote an upcoming or ongoing endeavor of the celebrity. Examples of this category of appearance by pop culture figures in professional wrestling include Burt Reynolds, Michael Buffer, Kim Kardashian, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Betty White, Rev. Al Sharpton, Elvira, Stallone, Snoop Dogg, Peewee Herman, Pamela Anderson, Regis Philbin, the Muppets, Alex Trebek, Vanna White, Robert Gule, Kevin Hart, Russel Crowe Courtney

Coxx, Andy Warhol, Macaulay Culkin, LL Cool J, Chris Klein, Rebecca Romaine, Mary Tyler Moore, Robert Wuhl, Terry Crews, James Brown, Chris Rock, Alice Cooper, Adam Sandler, Paul Walker, and many more.

Musical guests are also a major part of professional wrestling (Hayes, 2022; Matthews, 2014). These guests typically arrive in major events. Most musicians also provide live performances during their professional wrestling appearances. Three musical acts, Ozzy Osborne, Snoop Dogg, and Kid Rock are members of the WWE Hall of Fame (WWE Hall of Fame, 2022). The legendary rock and roll band KISS entered into a partnership with WCW, performing a live on Nitro in 1999 while co-promoting their comeback tour, and licensing a professional wrestling character named “The Demon” who was portrayed on WCW television by professional wrestler and future World Series champion coach Dale Torborg (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). WCW also promoted the musical group the Insane Clown Posse (ICP) as an on-air tag-team, which was generally panned by critics and fans. ICP had previously appeared on WWF programming as a musical act and in altercations with wrestlers (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Following their run in WCW, ICP would open their own promotion, Juggalo Championship Wrestling, which would showcase hardcore and deathmatch style wrestling primarily at the ICP’s annual festival, The Gathering of the Juggalos (Thompson & Foley, 2022). Other musical acts who have made appearances and performances in professional wrestling include Diddy, Flo Rida, Motörhead, Joan Jett and the Blackhearts, Gladys Knight, Aretha Franklin, Bebe Rexha, Megadeth, and The Misfits among others (Hayes, 2022; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Roberts, 2020; Matthews, 2017). Both WCW and the WWF would co-promote events on MTV (Thompson & Prichard, 2016; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). MTV served as a launching platform for the first Wrestlemania, and hosted WWF programming with the first two seasons of *Tough Enough* (Hornbaker 2015; Thompson & Ross, 2019). WCW promoted their event *Beach Blast* on the network in 1999 (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The network would also host numerous crossovers with professional wrestling companies during their *Spring Break* events in the late-1990’s and early 2000’s (Thompson & Prichard, 2016; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). From 2006-2007, MTV also produced its own professional wrestling promotion, *Wrestling Society X*, which produced one ten-episode season of the same name (Oster, 2017).

## 3.2 Professional Wrestling and American Politics

During his interview, Dr. Carlson repeatedly referenced that political speeches fell under the umbrella of performance theory (Carlson, 2022). Therefore, it should not be surprising that many professional wrestlers enter the realm of politics. Though the intersection of greased, muscular, performance artists and legitimate political discourse would be intuitively limited, the mutually beneficial performance skills have led many professional wrestling personnel into the political realm. Professional wrestling promos are designed to manipulate the emotions of a crowd, cast support behind one and against another, and convince them to alter their behavior as a result of it. While politics encourages the audience to vote, professional wrestlers convince them to vote with their dollar. This section will examine some famous and infamous cases of forays into politics by multiple wrestling personalities at the local, state and national level. There is also an unignorable trend that these candidates and public officials tend to represent the American Republican Party.

There have been a number of professional wrestlers and professional wrestling personalities have unsuccessfully sought elected political office over the past several decades. Wrestling legend Jerry “The King” Lawler was well known as “the King of Memphis” in his heyday, and sought the mayorship of the Music City twice, losing out in both 1999 and 2009 (Banas, 2022). Former ECW and NWA world heavyweight champion Terrence “Rhyno” Gerin won the Republican nomination to become a candidate for the 15th District in Michigan State House of Representatives but would fall in the general election to Democrat Abdullah Hammoud (Banas, 2022). Josip “Nikolai Volkoff” Peruzovic was a Croatian-American professional wrestler who famously played a Soviet Russian character in the WWF (Banas, 2022). Volkoff would unsuccessfully run for the Republican nomination to run for Delegate of the 7th District in the Maryland State House of Delegates (Banas, 2022). Former long-time WWF champion Bob Backlund would unsuccessfully campaign as a Republican for the US House of Representatives in 2000 in the state of Connecticut (Banas, 2022).

Linda McMahon, the former WWE CEO and the wife of mogul Vince McMahon, would twice run for a US Senate seat in Connecticut (Ballotpedia, 2022). Linda’s political career began with her appointment to the Connecticut state Board of Education in 2009 by Republican then-governor Jodi Bell. After being confirmed by both houses of the

Connecticut state legislature, Linda would have a brief 15-month tenure, before resigning due to improperly soliciting political campaign contributions. Linda would twice campaign for Senate in 2010 and 2012, both times gaining the Republican nomination. Both campaigns would see her come under political fire for controversial WWF/WWE content. McMahon would lose the campaigns to Democratic Senators Richard Blumenthal and Chris Murphy, respectively.

However, not all forays by professional wrestlers into politics are unsuccessful. Indeed, many professional wrestling personalities have won local elected office. Hall of Famer Robert “Rick Steiner” Rechsteiner was elected to the School Board of the Cherokee County School District in Georgia as a write-in candidate in 2006 and has served up to this writing in 2022 (Randle, 2016). Former tag-team star Brian Blair would win election to the Commission of Hillsborough County in Florida in 2004 and serve in that role until 2008, after a 2002 electoral defeat (Omaku, 2020). Former multi-time WWE world champion Glenn “Kane” Jacobs, a Libertarian, was nominated as a Republican to run for the Mayorship of Knox County in Tennessee, where he would be successfully elected in 2018 and re-elected in 2022. Territory Era star Tom Drake would win and hold a state House or Representatives seat in Alabama for 32 years (Oliver, 2017) Former TNA/Impact and WWE star Matt Morgan would successfully run as a Republican for a City Council seat in Longwood, Florida in 2017 and serve as Deputy Mayor from 2018 (Scott, 2020). Morgan was promoted to Mayor of Longwood in May 2019 thanks to a unanimous vote from the City Commission and has served as Mayor until the time of this writing (Scott, 2020).

There have also been professional wrestlers being elected to political office internationally. Former WWE tag-team star and French-language commentator Raymond Rougeau was elected to the City Council for Rawson, Quebec in 2002, being re-elected thrice to that role (Banas, 2022). In 2017, Rougeau was elected Mayor of Rawson (Banas, 2022). Tony “Ludwig Borgia” Halme was a former WWE performer who was elected to Finnish Parliament under the right-wing extremist True Finns Party (Jonjak, 2022). Halme adopted a number of bigoted political positions, reflective of the views he shared in his autobiography and throughout the media (Jonjak, 2022). Borga’s term would be tumultuous, as his drug-fueled bender on 3-4 July 2003 saw him arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol and amphetamines, firing a pistol in his home, and causing a traffic collision (Jonjak, 2022).

After being convicted on driving charges in 2006, Halme would be involuntarily committed to a mental hospital and spend most of the remainder of his term on leave from Finnish parliament (Jonjak, 2022). Halme was not removed from office, despite convictions for several crimes, and technically served until 2007 (Jonjak, 2022). Halme would ultimately die of a self-inflicted gunshot wound in 2010 (Jonjak, 2022). Japanese professional wrestling icon Antonio Inoki also had a successful political career (Matthews, 2022). Inoki's father Sajiro had been a politician, prior to passing away in Inoki's early childhood (Matthews, 2022). Following his success as Japan's top professional wrestler throughout the 1970's and 1980's, Inoki would run for the Japanese national House of Councilors in 1989 (Matthews, 2022). The House of Councilors is the upper house of the Japanese parliament. Inoki ran under his own Sports and Peace Party ticket, when he was elected. Inoki continued to wrestle a limited schedule during his time in parliament (Matthews, 2022). Inoki has several controversial foreign policy objectives, including successfully meeting with Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein to free Japanese hostages prior to the 1990 Gulf War, and meeting with top North Korean diplomats to ease tensions between the East Asian nations in his second term in the 2010's (Randle, 2016). A number of scandals emerged in 1994, including alleged connections between Inoki and the Yakuza criminal organization, which saw Inoki decline to run for re-election (Matthews, 2022). Inoki would return to his professional wrestling and combat sports business endeavors for most of the next two decades until 2013, when Inoki would again seek election to the House of Councilors (Matthews, 2022). Inoki's party allegiance would shift several times during his second term and serve until he retired at the end of his term in 2019 (Matthews, 2022). Japanese professional wrestling star Hiroshi Hase has posted a stellar political career as a member of the Liberal Democratic Party and prominent LGBTQ+ advocate (Tomizawa, 2015). The retired Olympic Greco-Roman Wrestler and Japanese professional wrestling champion would win election to the Japanese Houses of Councilors and Representatives in 1995 and 2000, respectively (Tomizawa, 2015). He was named Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology by then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (Tomizawa, 2015). Hase would win election as the governor of Ishikawa Prefecture in 2022 (The Japan Times, 2022). Former FMW primo uomo Atsushi Onita was elected to the Japanese House of Councilors in 2001 (Kohler, 2007). Masanori "The Great Sasuke" Murakawa was the first wrestler to unify the eight world cruiserweight titles in the J-Crown and would later be elected to the Iwate Prefecture Assembly in 2003 and



serving until a failed Iwate governor's bid in 2007, famously wearing his mask in the legislature (Kapur, 2021).

The most famous example of a professional wrestler becoming a political figure in the United States was the election of Jesse "The Body" Ventura to the Governorship of Minnesota in 1998 (Rogan & Ventura, 2016). Ventura's life journey could surely justify its own dissertation, or at least a biopic. Ventura had served in the US military in the elite Navy SEALs. He would then become the Sergeant-at-Arms for the South Bay branch of the Mongols Motorcycle Club. After a stint as a bodyguard for The Rolling Stones rock band, Ventura would break into professional wrestling, becoming a top star in many territories. Ventura's peak in professional wrestling would come as a commentator alongside Gorilla Monsoon during the Rock n' Wrestling boom. Ventura would continue on as a commentator and on-screen character into the 1990's. Ventura also had a career as a film actor, notably appearing alongside Arnold Schwarzenegger in the 1987 action classics *Predator* and *The Running Man*, in addition to acting in other number 1 box office features *Demolition Man*, *Batman & Robin*, and *Major League II*. Ventura would also build a political career alongside his varied endeavors. He was elected as an Independent to the Mayorship of Brooklyn Park in Minnesota and served in that role from 1991-1995. A longtime opponent of the American Political duopoly, Ventura would never serve under either major American party. In 1998, Ventura would run for the Governorship of Minnesota under the Reform Party. Despite being without major party money or affiliation, Ventura would ride a movement of grass-roots popularity to defeat the Democratic state Attorney General and the Republican mayor of St. Paul in the general election. Ventura would serve as Governor from 1999-2003. After not seeking a second term, Ventura would become a commentator, television host and podcast personality. Ventura would tease running for the Presidency of the United State several times, but never commit to campaigning for the office. Ventura was inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame in 2004, where he famously teased his potential run for President. Notably, Ventura teased a run for the presidency in a Wrestlemania XX interview in 2004, when he would ask special guest Donald Trump, "In 2008, why don't we try to put a wrestler in the White House?"

It would also be improper to ignore the importance of professional wrestling in the history of the American presidency, particularly relating to the rise of Donald Trump. Trump benefited

from the overlap of the working class Republican base and the audience of professional wrestling (Margolin et al., 2017). There is an undeniable pattern explained above that most professional wrestlers-turned-politicians lean to the American political right and the Republican Party. Trump would have a long and successful business relationship with Vince McMahon's WWF/WWE and appear at 5 Wrestlemania events. History would demonstrate Wrestlemania IV would prove to be another cultural nexus important event. It would be the first collaboration between McMahon and the then estate mogul Donald Trump. Trump would play host to Wrestlemania IV and V as a co-promotion with his Trump Plaza Hotel and Casino. Nearby the arena. He would then appear at Wrestlemania 20 in the aforementioned interview with former Minnesota Governor and fellow WWF personality-turned politician Jesse "The Body" Ventura. Trump would then enter into his most significant intervention into the WWE by entering into a months-long televised feud with Vince McMahon. This led to a "Battle of the Billionaires: Hair vs Hair" match at Wrestlemania 23. This bout saw McMahon and Trump both choose a representative wrestler, and whichever wrestler lost the match would have his head forcibly shaved on live worldwide television. McMahon chose then-Intercontinental Champion Edward "Umaga" Fatu, and Trump chose then-ECW Champion Bobby Lashley. "Stone Cold" Steve Austin was tapped to be the guest referee. The headlining bout saw Lashley emerge victorious. During the match, Trump would print around the ring, tackle Vince McMahon, and attack with a flurry of punches. Austin, Lashley, and Trump would forcibly shave McMahon bald in front of the capacity crowd. After the match, Austin would apparently offer to share a beer with Trump, though it was simply a ruse and Austin then hit Trump with a Stone Cold Stunner. Trump would go on to be selected for the Celebrity Wing of the WWE in 2013 and honored at the Wrestlemania 29 event in New York & New Jersey.

During his portrayal in the "Battle of the Billionaires" storyline, Trump was a babyface character (Margolin et al., 2017). This positive portrayal during multiple appearances on national television to the roughly three million viewers per program was significant good public relations. The majority of American voters rejected Trump in 2016, but he was able to secure a razor-thin margin of popular votes in strategic states to claim the electoral vote in 2016, it is doubtful that without his association with the WWE he could have done so. Linda McMahon would contribute heavily to pro-Trump Super Political Action Committees in 2016 and 2020. After Trump's shocking election to the American presidency in 2016, he named

Linda McMahon as the Administrator of the Small Business Association, a cabinet-level post. Linda McMahon would be confirmed by the United States Senate on Valentine's Day 2017 by a vote of 81-19. McMahon left this post to chair to pro-Trump Super PAC America First Action in 2019 (Restuccia et al., 2019).

Trump's scandal-plagued administration was defeated in the free, fair and valid 2020 US Presidential election by Joe Biden (Edelman, 2020). During the 2022 investigation of unreported payments made by Vince McMahon, it was revealed that McMahon personally had given \$5 million of his own money to Trump's charity (Kasabian, 2022). The charity was later shuttered by a New York court for misuse of funds. According to reports, McMahon had made this personal contribution as a part of the deal for Trump's appearance at Wrestlemania 23, which under SEC regulations was required to be reported as a WWE expense. This revelation contributed to McMahon's ultimate resignation from day-to-day leadership of WWE.

Professional wrestling has a considerable impact on the culture of the United States. Despite the perception of professional wrestling as a niche attraction, the effect on American politics is extremely profound. The demographic overlap between the Republican Working Class base, and their willingness to elect representatives based on celebrity, rather than experience, training or qualification, is a speculative corollary. It is therefore unsurprising that professional wrestlers and personalities would be inclined to seek public office. Famous personalities from the world of professional wrestling have demonstrated that the overlap in performance between professional wrestling and politics is neither passing, nor superficial. The administrations of cities, counties, states, legislatures, and indeed nations, is far more normalized than the caricatures of professional wrestler politicians like President Camacho in the film *Idiocracy* would lead one to believe.

### 3.3 Putting the Sports in Sports Entertainment - Sports Culture

#### Crossovers

The cultural footprint of professional wrestling is most clear in the sports culture of the United States. A number of factors contribute to this. The biggest likely contributors to this are the number of athletes from legitimate sports who become wrestlers, the commonalities

between professional wrestling and sports programming, the history of professional wrestling being erroneously categorized as a sport during the Kayfabe Conspiracy Era, the obvious athleticism required to perform in professional wrestling, branding as sports entertainment, and the fact that the art for is simulated narrative sport. These combined factors allow professional wrestling to occupy its happy niche in the cultural hinterlands between sports and narrative entertainment. Indeed Prof. Eero Laine contends that professional wrestling seeks to create a match that reflects the perfect sporting event: exciting, unpredictable, evenly matched, back and forth, building drama, exciting comeback and nail-biting conclusion (Chow et al., 2017). This allows professional wrestling coverage to be carried on to American sports networks like ESPN and Fox Sports (Duggan, 2020). It also provides palpable cultural context for the overlap of sports and professional wrestling. The following sections will examine the prominent overlapping histories that boxing, mixed martial arts, and gridiron football share with professional wrestling. Because of the obvious and intuitive overlap of professional and competitive wrestling, those grappling sports will be omitted from this section. Suffice it to say, the skills from the sport of competitive wrestling are necessary tools in the performance of melodramatic catch-as-catch-can wrestling. This section will also provide an examination of crossovers between professional wrestling and other sports.

### 3.3.a Boxing and Professional Wrestling

At the turn of the 20th century, with the commercial appeal of legitimate professional boxing, still-legitimate professional wrestling, and an emerging fascination with eastern martial arts; the world was ripe for a series of challenge matches between competing styles of combat sports. Throughout the United States and much of the then-colonial world, boxing was the dominant striking discipline of the day. Professional wrestling and boxing have often occupied the same spaces due to their presentational and aesthetic similarities. Their modern histories have also run concurrently, often intersecting to boost the public interest and box office appeal of both.

In 1867, while Farmer Burns was still a child living in a log cabin in rural Iowa, Welsh sportsman and UK sports lawgiver John Chambers codified the rules of modern boxing at the behest of the Marquess of Queensbury (Writer, 2022; Gee, 2022). Queensbury was seen as a more gentlemanly alternative to the gritty London Prize Ring rules, which allowed for throws, grapples, 30-second knockdown counts, and codified rules for bouts interrupted by

police or riot (Gee, 2022). These rules divorced boxing from bare knuckles, extended grappling, and wildly inconsistent bout format. While various ungloved boxing attractions would exist on the periphery of British sport from then until now. Chamber's rules would become the dominant rule set in Europe during the peak of the Imperial Age, which meant that those rules would be exported all over the world. It was American boxer John L. Sullivan who claimed the first gloved world heavyweight boxing title under Queensbury rules in 1885 with a 7th round victory on points against Dominic McCaffery in Cincinnati, Ohio (BoxRec, 2022). "The Boston Strong Boy" would also claim the world heavyweight title under London Prize Ring Rules in 1889 in a spectacular underground bout against Jake Kilrain (Roberts & Alexander, 1999). Sullivan and Kilrain had the bout in the late evening in rural Mississippi where state authorities, who were rapidly outlawing either or both forms of boxing, where the men fought 75 full rounds, before Kilrain's corner stopped the bout in the 76th (Roberts & Alexander, 1999). Sullivan would not box again until 1892, in the lone losing effort of his career against "Gentleman" James Corbett who is widely recognized as the first world heavyweight champion of modern boxing (Roberts & Alexander, 1999). From that point until now, Queensbury boxing has been the world's most visible and profitable striking art (Gee, 2022). Since the inception of the heavyweight title, the moments of intersection between the world's top boxer and professional wrestling have been sought by promoters as guaranteed box office hits and have tended to create particularly influential moments in professional wrestling history.

During the reign of the Gold Dust Trio, promoter Billy Sandow would spend years trying to put together a mixed rules bout between Lewis and long-time heavyweight boxing champion Jack Dempsey (Mucken, 1970). Sandow placed a bet of \$10,000 on Lewis to defeat Dempsey in the ring. Both Lewis and Dempsey touted their skills and the likelihood of their victory in the press. Sandow and Dempsey's manager Jack Kearns reportedly met and hammered out a contract in Los Angeles in December 1922, but a prospective fight never materialized. In 1970, Lynn Mucken speculated in *Sports Illustrated* that this was simply a co-promotional gambit between the management for both athletes.

Over the years a number of high profile boxers have been involved in professional wrestling matches and angles. Former heavyweight champion Primo Carnera became a professional wrestler after retiring from boxing, eventually inspiring the Oscar-winning film *Requiem for*

a heavyweight (Merolla, 2003). Undefeated five-weight champion Floyd Mayweather engaged in a month-long program that climaxed with a worked mixed rules boxing-wrestling bout at Wrestlemania 24 where he defeated the 215cm/200kg professional wrestler The Big Show (Kelly, 2022). In 1990, then-world heavyweight champion Buster Douglas refereed the title match between Hulk Hogan and “Macho Man” Randy Savage at WWF Main Event III, eventually knocking out Savage after being provoked with a slap (Thompson & Pichard, 2016). Other world professional boxing like Evander Holyfield, Leon Spinks, and Ricky Hatton have made appearances in professional wrestling events (Oliver, 2021; Felsted, 2019). YouTube personalities-turned-aspiring boxers Logan and Jake Paul have emerged as part-time WWE stars, with Logan wrestling to some acclaim at Wrestlemania 38, SummerSlam 2022, and a main event bout at Crown Jewel against Roman Reigns where he would be joined by his brother (Chiari, 2022).

The venerable Muhammad Ali performed in numerous professional wrestling angles throughout his career (Blattburg, 2021). In 1976, in addition to his famed bout with Japanese professional wrestling champion Antonio Inoki, Ali was involved in a confrontation with gigantic professional wrestler Robert “Gorilla Monsoon” Marella. On this occasion, Ali was given the dreaded “airplane spin” at Madison Square Garden. Ali had evidently made this particular angle a common local media attention grabber in various wrestling territories across the United States. Ali would also referee the main event at Wrestlemania 1, a tag-team attraction which pitted villainous “Rowdy” Roddy Piper (himself a Gene LeBell judo black belt) and his partner “Mr. Wonderful” Paul Orndorf against an alliance of film & TV star Mr. T and rising professional wrestling icon Hulk Hogan. The match is considered a watershed in professional wrestling history and an iconic moment of the Rock N’ Wrestling Era. Ali would make subsequent appearances in the WWF and WCW throughout the early 1990’s. In 1995, Ali would be the guest of honor at the “Pyongyang International Sports and Culture Festival for Peace,” a co-promotional professional wrestling event between Turner Broadcasting’s WCW and Inoki’s New Japan Professional Wrestling (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The event was broadcast in the United States as a pay-per-view called, “Collision in Korea.” The surreal North Korean event boasts of the largest live crowd to ever witness a professional wrestling event in history with the first night garnering 165,000 spectators and the second evening drawing 190,000 spectators to Rungrado 1st of May Stadium for a combined attendance of 355,000 (Michie, 2020). In the lead up to Wrestlemania 40 in 2024, Ali was

posthumously inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame (Brotherton, 2024). Ali's widow Lonnie presented Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson with a custom, commemorative title belt for the title of "The People's Champion," an Ali nickname which he had granted Johnson permission to use in 1998 (Brotherton, 2024).

Mr. T was a former semi-professional boxing champion and a key mainstream figure in early WWF success. Following his role as a victim of an assault by Roddy Piper and Co. in *The War to Settle the Score* and as a tag-team partner for Hulk Hogan at *Wrestlemania I*, T would continue his involvement in the industry (Djeljosevic, 2021). The feud between Roddy Piper and Mr. T would continue for another year, climaxing in a worked boxing match at *Wrestlemania 2*. *Wrestlemania 2* emanated from three arenas in the US, and Mr. T vs Piper was promoted as the Main Event at the Nassau Coliseum (just outside of Queens, New York). Mr. T had risen to fame by winning consecutive nationally televised tournaments in Toughman boxing, a come-as-you-are sub-genre of amateur boxing where neither training, nor skill, nor experience is required. Piper, himself a Golden Gloves boxing champion in Canada, was a budding film star seeking to transition into the Hollywood mainstream. Piper and T boxed and mugged to the crowd for three rounds, with T generally having the upper hand. Piper was disqualified for body slamming T in the 4th round. T would later appear in non-wrestling roles in WWE, WCCW and WCW. He was inducted into the WWE Hall of fame in 2014.

In late 1997, blue collar boxing star Butterbean came to the WWF (Garcia, 2022). Nicknamed for the diet he ate to make the 400lb limit for his first toughman contest, Eric Esch, a factory worker who had risen to fame as a toughman boxing juggernaut, was a late-90's success story and cable star. A frequent feature on ESPN bouts, the portly, bald, American-flag clad Alabamian would knock out opponents with crowd-pleasing disregard. The Everyman boxer was a featured attraction in a worked boxing match against professional wrestler Marc Mero at the D-Generation X pay-per-view event in December 1997 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Mero, a former three time New York state Golden Gloves boxing champion, lost the match when he struck Esch over the head with a ring stool (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Butterbean would return to the WWF in 1999 for *Wrestlemania 15* (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Butterbean would go on to have a career in independent professional wrestling after he retired from professional boxing, kickboxing, and

mixed martial arts with a combined professional record of 97-24-5 with 68 KOs atop a semi-pro Toughman boxing record of 56-5 with 36 KO's (Garcia, 2022; Smithers, 2022). He performed on the reality series *Hulk Hogan's Celebrity Championship Wrestling* in 2008, and at the time of this writing is set to appear on a reality series about health and wellness rehabilitation with WWE Hall of Famer "Diamond" Dallas Page.

Butterbean would win the lone sanctioned shoot fight in WWE history when he took on Bart Gunn at *Wrestlemania XV* in 1999 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016), the WWF had hosted a series of mixed rules boxing and wrestling matches called the "Brawl for All" tournament (Kontek, 2017). The idea is widely regarded as one of the worst in the history of professional wrestling, leading to a number of injuries and ostensibly no box office draw (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The tournament amounted to an unsanctioned legitimate weeks-long televised toughman boxing event that allowed takedown among the lower tier of WWF wrestlers with a purse of \$100,000 for the finalists. The winner of the tournament was Michael "Bart Gunn" Polchlopek, who defeated four opponents to win his \$75,000 share of the purse and a pair of comically oversized golden boxing gloves. Bart Bunn would defend his Brawl for All title in a legitimate bout against Butterbean at *Wrestlemania 15* with former 2-weight world champion Vinny Pazienza as guest referee. Butterbean would score a devastating knockout victory in 35 seconds.

Heavyweight legend Mike Tyson performed in a months-long program in the lead up to *Wrestlemania 14* where he named the special guest "enforcer" (read: secondary referee) for the main event title match between long-time champion Shawn Michaels and rising star Steve Austin (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This program is notable for a number of reasons. At the time, Tyson was suspended from boxing for biting off part of opponent Evander Holyfield's ear, and his involvement was a multi-million dollar way of staying in the public eye. The program saw a televised confrontation between Austin and Tyson in the ring that lead to an infamous shoving match between the two, Tyson becoming an honorary member of the immensely popular "D-Generation X" stable in opposition to Austin to cement his public villain status, finally Tyson betrayed his stablemates in the *Wrestlemania* main event title match when he counted the pin for Austin, and when confronted by Shawn Michaels after the bout, Tyson knocked the former champion out with one punch. The Tyson feud is considered by many to be the turning point in the "Monday Night War" promotional rivalry



between WCW and WWF in the late-1990's, with top executives on both sides citing it as the moment where the WWF seized momentum that it never relinquished until purchasing WCW in 2001.

At the time of this writing, current lineal heavyweight boxing champion “The Gypsy King” Tyson Fury (whose namesake is Mike Tyson), engaged in a feud with future WWE Champion Braun Strowman (Felstead, 2019). Fury appeared on the Fox network debut of WWE Friday Night Smackdown as a fan in the front row, only to have future WWE Champion Braun Strowman insult him with an in-ring promo, leading to Fury jumping the rail and trying to attack Strowman while being restrained by security. This led to a feud between them which included in-ring promos, mainstream media jockeying, and climaxed with a bout at the WWE pay-per-view event Crown Jewel from Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Fury would come out to the ring dressed in traditional Saudi garb and eventually win the bout by count out; afterwards, an enraged Strowman hit his “running power slam” finishing move on Fury (Osborne, 2019). Fury would return to ringside in WWE at the 2022 premium live event *Clash at the Castle* in Cardiff, Wales (Taylor, 2022). There, Fury would knock out Austin Theory, shake hands with Roman Reigns, and close the show with a stadium wide singalong alongside Drew McIntyre (Taylor, 2022). The silver-tongued, 2m, 130kg, heavyweight boxing great's future as a WWE superstar seems a sure thing to most observers and industry professionals at the time of this writing.

Many famed performers in professional wrestling notable professional and semi-professional boxing careers include toughman boxer Elijah Burke, who purportedly fought between 99 and 105 bouts in Florida night clubs with a single known defeat (Ross, 2016). Wade Barrett had been a Liverpool-based bare knuckle boxing champion (Butterworth, 2022). Former WWF performer Tony Hamle would win the heavyweight boxing title in his native Finland after his wrestling career, prior to being elected to the Finnish parliament an avowed-racist and right wing extremist before ultimately committing suicide in 2010 (Jonjak, 2022).

Amateur boxers have also had considerable success in professional wrestling. At the time of this writing, Commonwealth Games silver medalist and Olympic boxing bronze medalist Anthony Agogo is a mainstay and full-time wrestler for AEW (Jay, 2021). In the United States, there is a prominent network of prestigious amateur boxing tournaments called the

“Golden Gloves.” These tournaments crown city, regional, state, interstate and national amateur boxing champions. Professional wrestling folk hero Danny Hodge was a Chicago Golden Gloves boxing champion (Chapman, 2009). There are also a number of regional Golden Gloves champions in professional wrestling, including the aforementioned Roddy Piper, Marc Mero, along with current WWE performer Thomas Pestock (Baron Corbin), who was thrice the super-heavyweight champion of the Kansas-Missouri region (Perez, 2021).

Taken together the links between professional boxing and professional wrestling are long standing. Beyond the obvious aesthetics of the ring, both have seen generations of upstart athletes and a seemingly endless wave of sleazy promoters. Indeed, in the early days of both parallel sports, arenas and events would sometimes book mixed cards featuring both sports, while some promoters would promote both sports. Both rely on the selling of characters and storylines to the audience. Boxers and their management teams understand that the audience of professional wrestling is always happy to welcome a guest from combat sports, pay good money to see them test their medal in the performance ring, and will be happy to show their support for that boxer in their future pugilistic endeavors.

### 3.3.b Professional Wrestling and Mixed Martial Arts

This section will examine the relationship between the art of professional wrestling and the sport of modern mixed martial arts. The relationship between these two topics is so heavily interlocked that it is almost impossible to accurately tell the story of one without the other. From the early 20th century, most mixed rules combat sport events have been linked to professional wrestling. Most of modern wrestling and grappling is either influenced by or directly rooted in catch-as-catch-can wrestling, and thus shares a common ancestor with professional wrestling. This study will later examine how modern freestyle wrestling is an offshoot of catch wrestling.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, many influential members of the grappling arts and pioneers of mixed martial arts were and are also professional wrestlers. Likewise, many top mixed martial artists have been or become successful professional wrestlers. This section will examine how professional wrestling played an integral role in the creation of modern mixed martial arts in both its Japanese and Brazilian origins. This section will also examine how the

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<sup>34</sup> Covered in Chapter 4.0: A Subcultural History of American Professional Wrestling.

intersection of professional wrestling and other commercial martial arts (notably boxing) affected this development as well.

Modern mixed martial arts (MMA) has emerged over the past four decades as a new evolution of combat sports. The competition was conceived as both a method to test the efficacy of various martial arts against one another, and a commercial combat sports attraction. Generally speaking, modern mixed martial arts demonstrates both striking and grappling skills. Some martial arts which include both of these are centuries or even millennia old, like Chinese Sanda, Senegalese Laamb, or Greek Pankration<sup>35</sup>. The amount of grappling and striking allowed in MMA varies based on the promotion, sanctioning body, and geographic area where the bouts are taking place. Virtually all modern MMA bouts are legitimate contests between competitive athletes trying their best to win. When early mixed martial arts emerged in the United States in the 1990's, it perplexed a large portion of their target demographic who had only seen grappling and striking mixed previously in professional wrestling. This is also part of the Post-Kayfabe Era, so those fans were acutely aware that professional wrestling was a performance. Seeking to differentiate their sport from the related performance, modern MMA promotions heavily advertised their events as being real. This, combined with rabid fans filling internet forums, led to a budding resentment between fans of mixed martial arts towards professional wrestling, as they would accuse MMA of being the sport that professional wrestling pretends to be. This matter is complicated by the fact that modern MMA was created by professional wrestlers.

As professional wrestling has evolved, the rules have evolved from the pure catch-as-catch-can base upon which the performance sport was created. Beginning with Toots Mondt's "Slam Bang Western Style Wrestling" in the 1920's, evolving with the NWA rules in the 1940's, until the WWF rules from the 1980's onward; each successive generation of professional wrestling style has become wider open in terms of martial arts, combat sports and fighting techniques allowed. In most American professional wrestling today, all manner of striking is permitted, except to certain dangerous or tender parts of the body. This is antithetical to the rules of catch wrestling. Some current promotions (at the time of this writing) use rule sets similar to the NWA regulations from the 1940's as an appeal to

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<sup>35</sup> A notable and popular sport at the ancient Olympic games.

tradition, despite these rules also including a number of strikes that are illegal in catch wrestling (Tanabe et al., 2022). The current rules of professional wrestling apply to the performance sport of worked bouts conducted under a complex hybrid of early mixed martial arts and catch wrestling rules.

Modern organized mixed martial arts did not emerge until the 1980's. However, prior to that, legitimate mixed-rules bouts had happened a number of times. Boxing was generally accepted as the commercially dominant striking art. Its position as the most effective striking art would not come into serious question until the emergence of American kickboxing in the late 20th century. The striking and grappling arts would seldom be contested against one another, due to their antithetical differences in approach and goals.

### 3.3.b.i Catch Judo and the Birth of Modern Grappling

Superiority among the grappling arts as catch wrestlers vied against Greco-Roman wrestlers, and the emerging Japanese exports of Judo and its precursor Jujitsu. Despite the geographic denotation and the ancient connotation of Greco-Roman wrestling, the style actually emerged from France in the early 1800's (Niall, 2021). The rivalries between Greco-Roman and catch wrestling have already been discussed at some length in this study. The rivalries between these emerging sports and Judo/Jujitsu is also well documented. In 1882, 21-year-old scholar and martial artist Kano Jigoro founded the Kodokan, later the Kodokan Judo Institute, where he would teach his hybridized style of the Jujitsu, a Japanese martial art founded in the 9th century CE (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2022). Kano sought efficiency in his style, which took what the young scholar believed were the simplest and most effective techniques from various sects of jujitsu (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2022). Significantly, despite the relatively limited number of attacks allowed in modern sport judo, judo is a mixed martial art with takedowns (nage-waza), complex ground fighting (ne-waza and katame-waza) and strikes (atemi-waza and ude-ate-waza) to create a holistic art (Rego, 2019). Kano exported his style to the world, sending dan-ranked judoka<sup>36</sup> across the world to prove the efficacy of the style (Mendez, 2021). These judokas would plant the seeds which grew into today's global judo community. In these early days, public grappling contests were often conducted between judoka and wrestlers of various styles. This led to storied rivalries

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<sup>36</sup> This is a term for a judo practitioner.

between catch wrestlers and judoka. While it is not a fact that is widely acknowledged, this rivalry would eventually set the stage for the creation of modern MMA.

Adolph Ernst was born in 1887 in the German Empire and would immigrate to the US as a child (Ad Santel, 2022). Ernst would make his career as a professional wrestler under the ring name “Ad Santel.” Santel was a skilled catch wrestler and held the title of light-heavyweight world champion during the Carnival Era. A contemporary of Burns, Gotch and Hackenschmidt, Santel gave a disputed account that he was paid by the Gotch camp to injure Hackenschmidt in the lead-up to the rematch with Gotch. Santel’s most important claim to fame came when he defeated reputed World Judo Champion Tokugoro Ito, a 5th Dan under Kano. In the legitimately conducted mixed-grappling rules bout, Santel slammed his opponent to the mat so hard that Ito could not continue. Some months later, Ito and Santel would rematch, and Ito would avenge his defeat with a submission win via choke hold. This kicked off a years-long rivalry between the Kodokan and Santel that never again saw another judoka defeat the German-American grappler. Santel eventually went to Japan to pursue the best judoka that the Land of the Rising Sun had to offer. Kano barred his students from competing against Santel under threat of expulsion, however many still would step up to defend the honor of their style. The best that any could muster was a draw against the American. Santel would eventually move on from the feud with the Kodokan and serve as both a training partner and coach for many of the next generation of professional wrestlers, including Lou Thesz. This rivalry, however, had an interesting effect in Japan; both the Japanese public and grapplers were fascinated with the catch wrestling style. Many of the globe-trotting judoka had trained with catch wrestlers abroad and brought knowledge of the style home with them.

Likewise, it was during this era that we see any number of special challenge bouts which included both grappling and striking (Nash, 2015). These bouts were often referred to as “clash of styles” or “all-in” bouts. There was no standardized set of rules for these bouts, and no undisputed champions. Boxers, wrestlers and judoka would all see practitioners of their style win bouts.

One of the first codified modern mixed martial arts systems was SAMBO (Ciraiz & Morozov, 2022). SAMBO is an acronym that translates to “self-defense without weapons.”

This system was developed in the Soviet Union to improve the hand-to-hand skills of the Soviet army. The two primary contributors to this system were Vasili Oshchepkov and Victor Spiridonov. The two worked independently of one another and are documented to have a long-standing bitter rivalry. Their work was later amalgamated by the Soviet government. Oshchepkov was from far eastern Russia and studied judo at the Kodokan directly under Kano. Once back in Russia, Oshchepkov founded a new judo gym and collaborated with Englishman Ernest John Harrison. Harrison was the first foreigner to earn a Kodokan judo black belt and the author of a catch-as-catch-can wrestling manual. Oshchepkov demonstrated a military system of jujitsu in competitions in Moscow in the 1930's to considerable success. During this time, he produced instructional videos of his techniques which still exist. In 1938, Oshchepkov was a victim of Stalin's Great Purge and died in prison. That same year, Oshchepkov's student, Anatoly Kharlampiyev codified a unified system of Oshchepkov's and Spiridonov's individual works and presented it to the USSR All-Union Sports Committee, which granted it the status of official sport (Kennedy, 2022). Kharlampiyev created two sport-system sub-sports of SAMBO. The anglicized names of these systems are Sport SAMBO and Combat SAMBO (Kennedy, 2022). There are also subsequent styles which are used for military applications, non-sport self-defense, and regional variations (Rousseau, 2018). Along with Freestyle, Greco-Roman and Judo, SAMBO was governed internationally by FILA until the formation of the SAMBO-exclusive governing body Federation International of Amateur SAMBO (FIAS) in 1985 (Kennedy, 2022). Sport SAMBO is a grappling art which includes a jacket similar to, but distinct from a judogi, along with tight-fitting shorts and wrestling shoes (Evolve MMA, 2022). Ostensibly all takedowns are legal, matches can be won via amateur wrestling-style pin or submission, however chokes are not allowed. Combat SAMBO is a mixed martial art which allows full contact striking along with sport SAMBO grappling. SAMBO would become the official martial art of the Soviet Union, and its practice would be widely popularized throughout the Soviet sphere of influence, boosted by the requirements of Soviet men being trained in it as part of their conscripted military service. Many practitioners of this system have become MMA champions notably Fedor Emelienanko, Oleg Taktarov, Khabib Nurgomedov, Islam Makhachev, Valentine Moldavsky, Vladim Nemkov, Alexey Oleynik, Blagoy Ivanov and many more.

While all of the early 20th Century history of professional wrestling and boxing unfolded, one touring judo act would lay the foundation for another known lineage for the creation of mixed martial arts. Tsunejiro Tomita was a first generation student of Kano at the Kodokan and would tour the United States giving demonstrations with his students Soshihiro Satake and Mitsuyo Maeda (Mendez, 2021). Maeda and Satake would be sparring partners and traveling companions most of their lives, they would engage in many bouts against boxers and catch wrestlers, adapting many techniques to negate the other styles and adopting the techniques that served them. It is documented that Satake and Maeda competed against one another for the world jujutsu championship in Mexico City in 1909, with Satake winning the first bout, and Maeda taking the rematch four days later; whether these results were evidence of an evenly skilled pairing or an early worked martial arts bout is unknown (East, 2020). Both would eventually move to Brazil. Satake founded the first Brazilian judo academy (Simon BJJ, 2022). Maeda would come under the patronage of wealthy Brazilian plantation owner Gastao Gracie (Meehan, 2020). Gracie paid Maeda to teach his young son Carlos (Meehan, 2020). Maeda taught Gracie a hybridized style of Kosen judo and catch wrestling that he had developed during his years of travel and competition. Maeda gave the majority of this instruction at his academy in Belem, Brazil. After Maeda's departure, instruction was overseen by senior student Jacynto Ferro (Ferro, 2023). Carlos would eventually teach this style to his brothers, George, Gastao Jr., Oswaldo, and Helio; the style would later be codified as Gracie Jiu Jitsu (Meehan, 2020). The Gracie style of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu is the most globally recognized lineage of the grappling sport. However, Maeda also founded another notable Brazilian Jiu Jitsu lineage with Satake's former student Luis Franca, who he taught in the same class as Carlos Gracie. Other Brazilian Jiu Jitsu lineages were founded by Judoka/Jujutsuka<sup>37</sup> Mario Aleixo, Takeo Iano, Geo Omori, Sadao Okura, Kazou Yoshida, and the Ono brothers Yasuichi and Naoichi in Brazil in the same era (Rolljunkie, 2023; Simon 2023). The overwhelming majority of Brazilian jiu jitsu practitioners at the time of this writing trace their lineage through the Gracie Brothers to Maeda, Tomita and finally Kano (Meehan, 2020).

Brazilian martial arts had similar stylistic rivalries with Brazilian dance fighting style of capoeira, and another sect of judo and catch wrestling titled "Luta Livre" emerging as a rival

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<sup>37</sup> This is a term for a jujitsu practitioner.

to Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (Grant, 2011). Grappling martial arts Luta Livre and Brazilian Jiu Jitsu trace their lineage back to Satake and Maeda respectively, and thus back to Tomita and Kano. It is ironic that generations of violent rivalry between the sport emerged despite their common origin as hybridized catch-as-catch-can judo with their primary progenitors being life-long friends. However, with commercial appeal on the line, for years another set of mixed rules bouts emerged in Brazil under the Portuguese term “vale tudo” meaning anything goes or no holds barred. Much like early professional wrestling, these bouts were conducted as circus sideshows. Indeed, early Brazilian vale tudo and professional wrestling co-occupied these traveling attractions with many performers and competitors dabbling in both styles.

The most notable of these was the first champion of the Gracie dynasty, “The Red Cat” George Gracie (George Gracie, 2022). While often at odds with his brothers on philosophical matters, it was George Gracie who established Brazilian Jiu Jitsu as a formidable martial art while also being one of the earliest champions of mixed martial arts and himself an occasional professional wrestler. Despite his relatively small size ranging roughly from 58-70kg (128-154lbs), George was known to take on all opponents regardless of size during his 49-bout professional combat sports career spanning from 1930-1952. Forty of those bouts were conducted under some variant of vale tudo rules. George amassed a 24-10-6 career vale tudo record and a 30-11-8 overall record including grappling matches, dwarfing the combat sports records of his brothers. George also notched a 6-2-6 career vale tudo record against the leaders of other early Brazilian Jiu Jitsu lineages in Yano, Omori, Aleixo, and the Ono brothers. George’s competitive achievements in this period was likely the initial impetus for launching the Gracie family to national fame in Brazil. In 1934, Helio and George Gracie both took on Polish-American professional and catch wrestler Wladek Zbyszko, who grappled to a draw with Helio and defeated George via armlock. George had a tumultuous relationship with other members of the clan, and broke with his brothers several times about diet, his refusal to retire from fighting, his lifestyle, his participation in professional wrestling and vale tudo (Gracie, 2014). George famously said of his brother Carlos, “My brother Carlos is nothing when it comes to fighting. Carlos does not have the authority nor the competence to speak about Jiu-Jitsu... Who created the sporting tradition of my family if not me, in all honesty, with my career?” (George Gracie, 2022).



Eager to build their brand of martial arts, the Gracie family, now a massive martial arts dynasty, issued the famous Gracie Challenge to practitioners of other martial arts styles (Grant, 2011). While there is a public perception that these challenge bouts were all taken under vale tudo rules, there is indisputable historical evidence surrounding many bouts to prove that is untrue. The challenge maintained that Gracie jiu jitsu was superior to all other martial arts, and members of the large Gracie clan had considerable success in these challenges. These challenges were often completed with considerable controversy. The Gracie's lost many public bouts, many private bouts cannot be confirmed for public records, and there are several instances of gang violence committed by the Gracie's to opponents. The infamous gang assault was catch wrestler Rufino Dos Santos, for which Carlos, Helio and George Gracie were sentenced to 30 months in prison before being pardoned by the President of Brazil (WSWF Admin, 2018). The Gracie's and their students would feud with a number of professional wrestlers from Japan, including Masahiko Kimura and Masakatsu Funaki (Grant, 2011).

Despite the successes of the Gracie family in Brazil, the South American martial art failed to gain much traction internationally. Brazilian Jiu Jitsu lingered on the outer edges of the martial arts zeitgeist outside of Brazil. Vale tudo operated as a fringe attraction with wildly inconsistent rules. The mixed fighting style finally made it to Brazilian television in 1959-1960, but when Joao Barreto broke the arm of an opponent refusing to tap out, the network swiftly replaced the vale tudo program with professional wrestling (Grant, 2011). It would not be until Brazilian martial arts met with Japanese professional wrestling on the America stage that Mixed Martial Arts and Brazilian Jiu Jitsu would explode into global prominence.

### 3.3.b.ii Inoki, Ali and the Man in the Pink Gi: America's First Glimpses at MMA

The first televised mixed martial arts bout in American history took place in 1963 between professional wrestler "Judo" Gene LeBell and boxer Milo Savage (Gene LeBell, 2022). LeBell is a towering figure in both professional wrestling and mixed martial arts. Ivan Gene LeBell is a judo black belt trained in catch wrestling by Ed "The Strangler" Lewis, Lou Thesz and Karl Gotch. By 1955, LeBell had won four gold medals in two years at the AAU US National Judo championships, taking two apiece in the heavyweight and open weight divisions. LeBell was also famous for his time as a professional wrestler.

When LeBell saw a challenge in the press by boxer Jim Beck, he flew out to Salt Lake City to answer it (Black Belt Magazine, 2014). Beck would swiftly be replaced by veteran boxer George Ware, who fought under the ring name of “Milo Savage.” Savage was the 5th ranked light heavyweight boxing contender in the world. Both competitors work judogi during the bout. LeBell contends that Savage had some manner of grappling background and training, along with accusation of Savage using the wrong variety of gi and having illegally oiled that gi to prevent LeBell’s grip. These accusations are unconfirmed. Nevertheless, the bout was set for five three-minute rounds. LeBell would score a decisive takedown in the 4th round, lock in a choke hold and choke Savage unconscious. This is reported to have caused a near riot among the local fans. Savage would survive and continue boxing. Savage finished his career with a winning record after 105 documented boxing matches and was inducted into the New Jersey Boxing Hall of Fame in 1991 (Milo Savage Boxer, 2022; New Jersey Boxing Hall of Fame, 2022).

LeBell would go on to fame in Hollywood as a stuntman and actor (Gene Lebell, 2022). LeBell’s confrontations with Hollywood action stars have become folklore among the martial arts community. The most famous incident was LeBell’s confrontation with legendary martial artist Bruce Lee where he manhandled the helplessly overmatched actor, carrying the smaller man around brazenly, during an altercation between them (BudoDragon, 2022).

Lee and LeBell would become friends afterwards and collaborative martial artists, Lee displayed much of the grappling he trained with LeBell in some of his most famous films. LeBell would also go on to be a trainer to a variety of champion martial artists, actor and professional wrestlers including Chuck Norris, “Rowdy” Roddy Piper, Gokor Chivichyan, and even cornering the first UFC Women’s champion and future WWE Champion Ronda Rousey (Gene LeBell, 2022). LeBell would also publish catch wrestling instructional videos and several manuals. LeBell’s monikers include “The Godfather of Grappling,” “The Grandfather of Mixed Martial Arts,” and “The Toughest Man Alive.” In both professional wrestling and grappling competition, LeBell would always wear a pink gi (Jacobs, 1995). A laundry mix-up led to LeBell’s white judogi being stained pink prior to a tournament in Japan (Jacobs, 1995). Relishing the anger of the Japanese crowd at his defiance of judo norms en route to his championship win, LeBell’s iconic gear was born (Jacobs, 1995).

When mixed martial arts first came to pay-per-view in the United States it would again feature a professional wrestler against a boxer. This time, it would be the reigning heavyweight champion of the boxing world and the top professional wrestling star in Japan (Bull). In 1976, Muhammad Ali would compete in a proto-mixed martial arts bout against Japanese professional wrestling icon Antonio Inoki (Gross, 2016). The fight would be the first of several New Japan cards dubbed “Real World Martial Arts Championship,” surrounding Inoki’s professional wrestling title by that name (NJPW Budokan Hall, 2023). The bout was organized and promoted by future professional wrestling mogul Vincent K. McMahon in a co-promotional effort with Top Rank boxing promoter Bob Arum (Gross, 2016, p. 4). McMahon and Arum had previously co-promoted another failed fringe sporting endeavor with Evel Knievel’s ill-fated attempt to jump Snake River Canyon (Gross, 2016, p. 272). McMahon organized a co-promotion of the bout that would be broadcast live across Japan, the United States and the world, particularly across closed circuit pay-per-view television theaters in the US (Gross, 2016, p.4). McMahon would use the live closed-circuit broadcast of Inoki vs Ali as the main event of the 1976 Showdown at Shea event from Shea Stadium in Queens, NY (Gross, 2016, p.8). There would be a trio of standard WWWF professional wrestling matches prior to the featured contests of the evening (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). In case that American audiences were somewhat lacking interest in a bout featuring a Japanese professional wrestler, McMahon booked two featured bouts with international flavor for the event. He had his behemoth-in-residence against a recent Ali opponent on the undercard: a worked boxer vs wrestler bout pitted former Ali opponent and the inspiration for Rocky, Chuck Wepner against “The 8th Wonder of the World” Andre the Giant (Gross, 2016, p. 9). The event drew nearly 33,000 fans to Shea Stadium in New York (Gross, 2016, p.8). Wepner won via disqualification following a body slam out of the ring from the mammoth Frenchman, leading to what Wepner claims was an actual brawl between Wepner’s corner, Andre and Andre’s then-manager “Robert “Gorilla Monsoon” Marella (Gross, 2016, pp. 14; 174-177). He had Italian-born then-WWWF champion Bruno Sammartino return from a legitimately broken neck to bloody and defeat his arch-rival Stan Hansen by count-out in 10 minutes in the headline bout at Shea (Gross, 2016, p.177).

Ali was in the middle of his second reign as world heavyweight champion (“Muhammad Ali”). Inoki was a skilled catch wrestler trained by Karl Gotch and Rikidozan and is perhaps the greatest single icon of Japanese professional wrestling (Gross, 2016, p.89-90). At the time

of the bout, Inoki was the National Wrestling Federation (of Japan) Heavyweight champion (Tanabe et al., 2022). The champion versus champion bout would be refereed by the judo champion, professional wrestler, mixed martial arts pioneer, and Hollywood stunt legend “Judo” Gene LeBell (Gross, 14). On the eve of the fight, Ali’s camp became worried that Inoki might attack, humiliate and/or injure Ali with wrestling attacks, and demanded that Inoki agree to a number of restrictive rules, including no takedowns below the waist, no closed fists from the bare-handed Inoki, no strikes to a downed opponent, and no kicks to the head or body (Gross, 2016, p. 126-129).

The bout played out awkwardly, where Inoki contented himself to sit in a jiu jitsu guard position on the ground and kick Ali’s legs (Gross, 2016, p. 184-214). Due to Inoki’s strategy, the bout played out as an awkward display of defensive point fighting by both combatants under the rules. Inoki forwent attempts at Greco-Roman wrestling-style upper body takedowns (much to the chagrin of his trainer/cornerman Karl Gotch) to avoid the boxing great’s punching power. A frustrated Ali refused to engage Inoki on the ground for fear that he may be caught in a submission hold and unable to escape via rope break. Inoki would be deducted points by LeBell on two occasions: an illegal standing elbow to Ali’s head and a groin kick, respectively. The fight saw Ali land only 4 punches in his 53-strike tally, with the rest being kicks to a downed Inoki while Inoki landed 107 kicks and an illegal elbow to the boxer: MMA statistics site FightMetric credits Inoki with an advantage in significant strikes with 78 with Ali’s 9 (Gross, 2016, p. 214). After 15 rounds, the bout was declared a split draw (Gross, 2016, p. 218).

The bout was a critical failure both among sports journalists, the live audience, and viewers around the world. Historical records differ sharply on the financial success of this bout. It is not in dispute that the tandem sold over 46,000 total live tickets to fill the capacity of Tokyo’s Nippon Budokan Arena and New York’s Shea Stadium with potential global viewership of 1.4 billion (Gross, 2016, p.4-9; Bull, 2009). Ali biographer John Stravinsky claims the fight generated over 2,000,000 closed-circuit pay-per-view buys in the United States for a gross of over \$20,000,000 (Stravinsky, 1998, p.133). Others claim it was a financial disaster, with Arum claiming to Dave Anderson of the New York Times that only \$3 million of Ali’s promised \$6.1 million had materialized, though Ali would seemingly imply that his purse was paid in an interview with another New York Times reporter, Andrew Malcolm

(Stravinsky, 1998, pp.219-223; 228). Following the bout, Inoki suffered blood clots in his legs, but would recover to defeat Ken Norton in their trilogy bout three months later (Stravinsky, 1998, p.160). Inoki would make claim to the title of “Real World Martial Arts Champion” by defeating Chuck Wepner in a professional wrestling bout in Budokan Hall in 1977 (NJPW Budokan Hall, 2023). The McMahon’s would later sanction Inoki’s position, naming him “WWF World Heavyweight Martial Arts Champion,” in 1978 (Tanabe, et al., 2022). Inoki would defend that title in (attempted) hyper-realistic pre-determined matches until 1989 and continued to engage with legitimate martial artists in worked matches until his retirement bout against two-time UFC Champion Don Frye in 1998 (Gross, 2016, pp. 256-262; 279).

The bout also served as a catalyst for massive shifts in both professional wrestling, and the growing cultural fascination with full-contact mixed rules fighting. The younger McMahon’s adoption of boxing’s live world-wide closed-circuit broadcast model demonstrated the viability of new broadcast technology in national and worldwide broadcast conglomeration, with no regard for the traditional local television broadcast rights exclusivity in territory era professional wrestling (Gross, 2016, pp. 160-163). Hideki Yamamoto, a top executive at now-defunct Japanese combat sports promotion Pride Fighting Championship said of the event, “I think the Ali-Inoki show was a successful event, except the fight itself was a failure (qtd. in Gross, 2016, p. 256).” Inoki’s foray into legitimate combat sport also led to a renaissance of hard-hitting, realistic professional wrestling in Japan, as well as the first formalized amateur and professional mixed martial arts promotions (qtd. in Gross, 2016, pp. 257-264). It also had a global impact on mixed martial arts competition. Inspired by the bout, Pittsburgh-area kickboxing promoter William Viola Sr. founded the Super Fighters League, the first organized mixed martial arts league in American history in 1980 (Nash, 2012). The ahead-of-its-time promotion was shut down by the Pennsylvania legislature with the “Tough Guy Law in 1983, kicking off a decades-long battle of MMA legalization in the US (Gross, 2016, pp. 251-255; Nash, 2012). Original UFC co-promoter Art Davie used the event as a basis of what to avoid in promising entertainment value in his mixed martial arts promotion in 1993 (Gross, 2016, pp. 245-251). As a means of honoring the importance of the Inoki-Ali bout, Davie wanted LeBell as the referee for UFC 1, but that idea was nixed by Davie’s promotional partner Rorion Gracie (Gross, 2016, p.249).

### 3.3.b.iii From Strong to Shoot: Japanese Professional Wrestling and MMA

It is impossible to tell the story of mixed martial arts without acknowledging the role that Japanese professional wrestling played in its development. Japan's hard-hitting, realistic approach to the performance art of professional wrestling is popular with many American fans and critics due to its sport-like feel. This affectation of legitimate competition is refreshing to those who find themselves unsatisfied by the showmanship of modern professional wrestling in the United States. However, for many of the competitors in Japanese professional wrestling, the affectation of a combat sport that included both striking and grappling was not enough. Out of Japanese professional wrestling, the first regulated and legal amateur and professional mixed martial arts leagues emerged. Understanding their emergence requires once again stepping back to the origins of professional wrestling and seeing how generations of catch and professional wrestlers merged martial and performance art to make the martial arts so commercially viable that its appeal was no longer dictated by worked storylines.

The appeal of catch wrestling in Japan had been established during Ad Santel's infamous feud with the Kodokan in the 1910's and 1920's (Ad Santel, 2022). By the 1950's, generations of Judoka had been spreading Japanese sports culture and martial arts across the world. Likewise, many top Japanese martial artists had chosen to enter professional wrestling as a means to make an income, much the way that amateur wrestlers had throughout much of the history of American professional wrestling. While the story of professional wrestling and mixed martial arts in Japan is worthy of several dissertations entirely focused there, this section will give an overview of key moments in the history of Japanese professional relating to creation of modern mixed martial arts.

Once Rikidozan<sup>38</sup> innovated the puroseu style<sup>39</sup> his dedication to the hard-hitting, sport-like approach to the performance art was passed on to his acolytes, most significantly Antonio Inoki<sup>40</sup> and Giant Baba<sup>41</sup> (Ojst, 2021). As their trainer and mentor, Rikidozan occupied a role of *senpai*, a term loosely contextually translates to “venerated teacher” and *kohai* which

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<sup>38</sup> The life, legacy, and times of Rikidozan may well warrant its own dissertation.

<sup>39</sup> Discussed in Subsection 2.7.b.i.

<sup>40</sup> The unbelievable life of Antonio Inoki may well warrant several volumes of study.

<sup>41</sup> The life and exploits of Giant Baba may well warrant another dissertation.

loosely contextually translates to “humble student.” Inoki and Baba would go on to break away from the Japan Wrestling Association<sup>42</sup> and founded New Japan Professional Wrestling and All Japan Professional Wrestling respectively.<sup>43</sup> Though these promotions would compete for years as the two top promotions in Japan, both would carry on Rikidozan’s high impact style and similar approach to professional wrestling ring psychology. Inoki would be influenced heavily by Rikidozan’s former rival and real-life friend Lou Thesz and Belgian wrestler Karl Gotch (Grant, 2011). Karl Gotch would be perhaps the most important figures to emerge in the history of Japanese professional wrestling and would nudge the participants in that industry towards the creation of modern mixed martial arts.

Born Karl Istaz<sup>44</sup> in Belgium in 1924, Gotch was a prodigious wrestler from his young years (Slagle, 2021). He represented Belgium in both Greco-Roman and Freestyle wrestling at the 1948 Olympic Games in London. Gotch would also go on to train at Billy Riley’s Snake Pit where he learned the style of catch wrestling that would become his trademark. Gotch would also study Pehlwani wrestling, adopting the calisthenics training routine of deep bodyweight squats, arching push-ups, and extended neck bridges. Gotch would turn these three exercises into the prototypical professional wrestling strength and conditioning workout, dubbing the maneuvers “Hindu squats,” “Hindu push-ups” and bridge. Gotch was purported to perform hundreds or even thousands of these maneuvers each day, often using a deck of cards to determine which he would do for an appropriate number of reps. This workout is considered a staple of professional wrestling training and is used as part of a psychological testing and weeding out process in early training. When Istaz came to the United States in the 1950’s, his unexciting technical style widely fell flat with American audiences. However, he was dubbed “Karl Gotch” after the legendary American champion and was widely billed as a German to capitalize on palpable anti-German sentiment shortly after the end of the Second World War. Gotch is also credited with popularizing a bridging belly-to-back overhead suplex which is called the “German suplex” after him. Gotch would eventually get over with American fans and strike up a friendship with fellow catch wrestling aficionado Lou Thesz. Gotch and Thesz would engage in an in-ring rivalry that highlighted both men’s technical mastery of the grappling arts.

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<sup>42</sup> The cultural import and legacy of the Japan Wrestling Association may well warrant its own dissertation.

<sup>43</sup> The rivalry of NJPW and AJPW may well warrant its own dissertation.

<sup>44</sup> The life, legend, legacy, and exploits of Karl Gotch may well warrant its own dissertation.

Gotch would come to Japan in the early 1960's (Grant, 2011). In an environment where showmanship was secondary, Japanese wrestlers, fans and media, became enamored with his technical acumen. Gotch would become the head coach at the New Japan Professional Wrestling Dojo, which would become arguably the most respected professional wrestling training schools in the world under Gotch's leadership. All of the wrestlers to graduate from the New Japan Dojo would have to develop outstanding cardiovascular and physical conditioning and become highly skilled catch wrestlers in the process. This tradition was carried on by fellow Snake Pit alum Billy Robinson, a British professional wrestler famed for his catch wrestling expertise and legitimate competitive accomplishments. Graduates from this program would include Satoru Sayama, Yoshiaki Fujiwara, and Inoki himself. Indeed, it was Inoki's training under Gotch that tipped Ali's representatives to disallow most grappling in their bout to save the boxing champion from near-certain defeat.

A professional wrestling organization founded on the notion of extremely realistic matches which resembled current mixed martial arts first emerged in 1984 with the Universal Wrestling Federation (Puroseu Central, 2022). Founded by Nobuhiko Takada and a cadre of graduates from the New Japan Dojo with Hisashi Shinma as president. The organization attempted to innovate a modern "worked-shoot" style where bouts played out like a mixed martial arts bout but had a predetermined winner; this harkened back to the style of wrestling championed by Stecher in the 1920's and wrestlers from the Carnival Era before that (Gross, 2016, pp. 39-40). The concept would attract many top Japanese wrestling stars interested in pursuing this hyper-realistic vision of professional wrestling, as well as foreign "gaijin" wrestlers who enjoyed working in the style. The promotion would often struggle financially and die and rise again in several iterations between 1984 and 1996 (Puroseu Central, 2022). The style propagated by the UWF is still used in several niche promotions as it is the easiest style of the professional wrestling performance art for which to suspend one's disbelief.

The first modern mixed martial arts promotion was founded in 1985 by revolutionary professional wrestler Satoru Sayama (Grant, 2011). Sayama was a graduate of the New Japan Dojo and a veteran of UWF Japan. After his universally acclaimed run as Tiger Mask,<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> This influential run is discussed in Subsection 2.7.b.ii.



Sayama left the professional wrestling industry to pursue his passion of martial arts. Sayama believed that a promotion where legitimate bouts were conducted allowing kickboxing, takedowns and submissions would be a box office draw. Believing that worked matches were no longer necessary, Sayama founded Shooto, the first amateur mixed martial arts organization. The name is based on the professional wrestler term “shoot,” meaning a legitimate fight. Shooto would establish itself as both a promotion and a martial arts style that is still practiced today. Sayama codified a multi-tiered mixed martial arts system which included striking, takedowns, and ground fighting. Shooto would promote its first event at the historic Kokugikan Hall on 18 May 1989. It was the first sanctioned modern mixed martial arts event in the world, with a set defined universal rules for bouts. Shooto has operated continuously since then and has produced nearly 600 mixed martial arts events.

The Genesis of modern mixed martial arts is usually traced to the year 1993 (Grant, 2011). Though Shooto had been promoting mixed martial arts for years, and vale tudo had been practiced for decades in Brazil, the simultaneous evolution of proto-mixed martial arts into an iteration of the current sport was first expressed clearly in 1993. Professional wrestling, or perhaps more accurately professional wrestlers who retained the tradition of studying the martial skills of catch wrestling, had played an indirect role in the development of Brazilian martial arts, and a direct role in shaping the Japanese vision for martial arts. In 1993 these two lines would intersect and overlap as the sport was created.

In September 1993, the Japanese promotion Pancrase Hybrid Wrestling was founded by Masaharu Funaki and Minoru Suzuki (Grant, 2011). Funaki and Suzuki were classmates at the New Japan Dojo alongside an impressive array of venerable talents of Japanese professional wrestling. Suzuki and Fujiwara had previously collaborated on a professional wrestling promotion dedicated to hyper-realistic bouts with predetermined outcomes called Pro Wrestling Fujiwara Gumi. When that company failed, Pancrase was founded and took its name from the Ancient Greek mixed martial art of *pankration*. The promotion was composed of mostly Japanese professional wrestlers, along with foreign professional wrestlers and legitimate martial artists. The rules were based on Territory Era Japanese professional wrestling rules, where strikes with the closed fist, elbow and ground strikes, but offered a limited number of rope breaks to escape submissions or poor positions. Pancrase featured both worked and shoot bouts. The balance of which were worked, and which were legitimate

is a matter of ongoing debate. Some bouts were very clearly worked, and many bouts seemed very much legitimate. The first event “Pancrase: Yes We Are Hybrid Wrestlers” was held on 21 September 1993 in Tokyo. The card would feature future UFC champions who were students of Funaki, Bas Rutten and Ken Shamrock. The latter would defeat Funaki in the main event. Shamrock would win bouts on subsequent Pancrase cards on 14 October 1993 and 8 November 1993. Shamrock had won all three bouts by submission.

Japanese MMA<sup>46</sup> has never deviated far from its roots in professional wrestling. Japanese professional wrestlers have been and continue to be relevant drawing forces for every major MMA promotion in the country’s history. This list of promotions includes (but not limited to) Pride Fighting Championships, DREAM, Rizin Fighting Federation, DEEP, K-1 Kickboxing (which often featured professional wrestlers as overmatched participants in kickboxing bouts) and their MMA offshoot K-1 Heroes.

Early iterations of mixed rules fighting had been tried in the United States. Cinematic martial arts epics played their role in creating the cultural framework for the emergence of mixed rules fighting. This concept was popularized in the United States by the philosophies Bruce Lee espoused in the Tao of Jeet Kun Do and the hit feature film Bloodsport starring Belgian kickboxer and karateka Jean-Claude Van Damme (Viola & Adams, 2017, pp. 309-313). In 1980, an unsanctioned mixed rules fighting organization event titled “The Battle of the Tough Guys” was held on 20 March 1980 in Pittsburgh by promoters Bill Viola Sr. and Frank Caliguri (Viola & Adams, 2017, pp. 309). This would be the first of four proto-mixed martial arts events which took place in Pennsylvania under the banner of CV Promotions (Nash, 2012). Fighters were billed with professional wrestling style gimmicks from hard-nosed blue-collar occupations (Nash, 2012). Unlike early UFC’s, fighters were required to wear headgear, arranged into weight classes (175 lbs. and under for Lightweight and Heavyweight anything above that), and would compete in three 2-minute rounds with judges scoring in the 10-point must per round scoring system used in boxing (Viola & Adams, 2017, pp. 147-149). Fights could be won by knockout, decision, or submission (Viola & Adams, 2017, pp.147-148). The organization went through several iterations of its branding before landing on

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<sup>46</sup> The colorful world of Japanese mixed martial arts and its symbiotic relationship with Japanese professional wrestling could well warrant multiple volumes of study.

“Super Fighters League” due to a dispute with “Toughman” boxing promoters (Viola & Adams, 2017, pp.130-140). Viola and Caliguri also founded the first regulatory body for mixed martial arts in the United States, the World Martial Arts Fighting Association. Ironically, it was the failures of the Toughman boxing promoter Art Dore that sank the fledgling promotion when a woefully overmatched 77kg (170lbs) Toughman boxer was killed in the ring by a 113kg (250lbs) opponent (Viola & Adams, 2017, pp.276-279). The organization promoted over 130 mixed rules bouts across the four events prior to a 1981 cease and desist order from the Pennsylvania state government, which outlawed both Toughman boxing and the style of mixed martial arts SFL had been promoting in 1983 (Viola & Adams, 2017, pp.439). Vince McMahon would recycle the name of “Battle of the Tough Guys” in the 1989 Hulk Hogan film *No Holds Barred* (Viola & Adams, 2017, pp.310-311).

The history of modern mixed martial arts is traced to 12 November 1993, when Rorion Gracie and promoter Art Davie staged the first Ultimate Fighting Championship event (Grant, 2011). Rorion saw the bare knuckle, no holds barred, fighting event as an opportunity to sell his family’s martial arts to the United States. Rorion declined to enter the family’s undisputed champion Rickson Gracie in the tournament. There is considerable historical speculation and competing theories as to why Rorion instead chose his brother Royce, a capable, but smaller and less accomplished jiu jitsu player to represent the family in the tournament. It would be a one-night 8-man tournament wherein the winner would have to defeat three opponents in quick succession. The tournament featured representatives from several martial arts, including Ken Shamrock representing “shoot fighting” from his time in Pancrase. Royce and Shamrock were the only submission grapplers on the card. They met in the semifinals where Royce won via guillotine choke en route to a tournament victory. The attraction proved to be a pay-per-view hit. Subsequent tournaments were scheduled and held, though the American athletic commission would struggle with legalizing and regulating the sport over the next 23 years.

In Japan in 1994, Sayama and Shooto hosted Vale Tudo Japan (Ryan, 2014). This tournament featured Rickson Gracie, the champion of the Gracie family (BJJ Eastern Europe, 2020). Rickson is widely regarded as the best practitioner of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu in history, and during his 20+ year career has only one known defeat, a loss in 47 seconds to American SAMBO and Judo world champion Ron Tripp in a SAMBO match at the 1993 US Sambo

championships (BJJ Eastern Europe, 2020). It has been speculated that Rickson's preference for the Japanese promotion was due to tension with his brother Rorion and the bigger payoffs available in Japan. The tournament would feature Japanese professional wrestlers-turned-fighters against Gracie and other martial artists (Ryan, 2014). Gracie would win the 8-man, one-night tournament with three submissions, much as Royce had the year prior. Rickson's run in the tournament was recorded in the 1995 documentary *Choke*. Rickson's win propelled the Gracie family into conflict with the entire Japanese professional and catch wrestling communities. Rickson would go on to defeat two professional wrestlers and Shooto practitioner Yuki Nakai in Vale Tudo Japan 1995.

Gracie would go on to claim tournament titles at UFC 2 and 4 in March and December 1994 respectively (Grant, 2011). In December 1994, Shamrock would win the inaugural King of Pancrase Openweight championship in December of 1994. At UFC 5 in 1995, Shamrock and Royce rematched for the inaugural "UFC Superfight Championship." Shamrock debuted the controversial "ground and pound" strategy, where a fighter will take an opponent to the ground and beat them unmercifully until the opponent quits or is unconscious. This strategy is a hallmark of shoot wrestlers in MMA to this day. Shamrock dominated the bout, but because of a lack of judges, it was ruled a draw. Shamrock would go on to win that title against fellow future WWF wrestler and MMA pioneer Dan Severn. Shamrock would defend the title twice before losing it back to Severn in a rematch.

The Japanese professional wrestling community found its champion in Kazushi Sakuraba (Grant, 2011). Sakuraba had been trained under UWF veteran Yoji Anjo and legendary Snake Pit catch wrestling coach Billy Robinson. Sakuraba was a late replacement for UFC Japan in December of 1997, but he won the tournament that night. Sakuraba defeated Royce Gracie by corner stoppage in a brutal 90-minute bout in 2000. Sakuraba would go on to defeat three other members of the Gracie clan, earning him the nickname "The Gracie Hunter." Reciting personal reasons, Rickson would turn down a blockbuster offer to fight Sakuraba. Royce would rematch Sakuraba in 2007, winning by unanimous decision, however he would test positive for anabolic steroids after the match.

The UFC experiment served to popularize Brazilian Jiu Jitsu across the United States and the world (Grant, 2017). Rorion Gracie and David would eventually sell the company to the

Fertitta Brothers and Dana White in 2001 (Nash, 2016). The trio would build the UFC into a major sports brand that was sold to Hollywood entertainment agency William Morris Endeavor, financially backed by several partial state-owned Chinese corporations, for over \$4 billion in 2016 (Nash, 2016). In the space of 15 years White would be the architect of the UFC's explosion in value from \$2,000,000, to over \$4,000,000,000, and has been widely observed in the media to have been following McMahon's promotional playbook (Reilly, 2018). The UFC is now the brand name synonymous with mixed martial arts in the United States.

The Unified Rules of Mixed Martial Arts were created in 2000 and state-by-state legalization continued until the final state, New York, legalized the sport in 2016 (Connolly, 2016). These rules established requirements for gloves, weight classes, rounds of five minutes, scoring criteria and fouls. Many international organizations have variations on the gloves and fouls, but the Unified Rules have become the generally accepted global baseline for the sport.

Following his bout with Ali, Inoki would engage in a number of worked matches against decorated fighters and martial artists (Podgorski, 2022). These performances pitted style versus style in the classical promotional tactic, but their popularity helped to drive interest in mixed martial arts as a viable commercial enterprise in Japan. Inoki would be a top attraction for Japanese professional wrestling until his retirement in 1998. His final match was against UFC champion and professional wrestler Don Frye. Inoki would eventually sell his controlling share of New Japan Professional Wrestling, though the league continues to be the largest non-American promotion in the world and is globally second only to the WWE in influence and appeal. Inoki later founded the Inoki Genome Federation, which promoted mixed martial arts and work-shoot professional wrestling with the organization's world title apparently fluctuating wildly between the sport and performance art genres. In 2002, Inoki would start the tradition of mixed cards featuring both MMA and professional wrestling bouts on New Years Eve. This event was originally called Inoki-Bom-Ba-Ye. These spectacles featured professional wrestling bouts, mixed martial arts bouts, professional wrestlers in mixed martial arts bouts and mixed martial arts fighters in professional wrestling matches. The hodgepodge amalgamation proved to be a massive hit with the audience, dominating the television ratings in Japan. This tradition of blended MMA and professional

wrestling cards on New Years Eve continues in Japan to this day, with Rizin Fighting Federation currently carrying the banner.

### 3.3.b.iv The Oddly Harmonious Crossover of American Workers and Shooters

As mixed martial arts is ostensibly the sport that modern professional demonstrates as performance art, there is heavy crossover of participants between the two sports. Indeed, mixed martial arts is the modern shoot that professional wrestling claimed to be in the Kayfabe Era. Mixed martial arts fighters bring legitimacy to professional wrestling, professional wrestling brings broader appeal and financial opportunities to mixed martial arts fighters. These collaborations are typically well received and successful with several notable exceptions. This subsection will focus on the overlap of professional wrestlers and mixed martial arts in the United States, or international overlap featuring American fighter—performers.

The top promotions for professional wrestling and mixed martial arts in both the United States and the world are World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) and the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) (Licata, 2019). Brock Lesnar won the NCAA national heavyweight wrestling championship in 2000, his first the WWE heavyweight title in 2002, the IWGP (New Japan) heavyweight title in 2005 and the UFC heavyweight title in 2008, becoming the only person to win all four. WWE performer Bobby Lashley, himself a former collegiate wrestling national champion, would win several world titles in professional wrestling while maintaining a successful MMA career, winning 15 of his 17 professional fights and becoming a contender in Bellator MMA. Former WWE champion Phil “CM Punk” Brooks would quit the WWE to sign with the UFC. Unlike his predecessors Lesnar and Lashley, Brooks had no background in legitimate martial arts or amateur wrestling. He would suffer two decisive defeats before returning to AEW as a professional wrestler.

UFC fighters who became successful professional wrestlers are a growing trend. Ronda Rousey was the first women’s bantamweight champion of the UFC and later the WWE women’s world champion (Licata, 2019). Other UFC champions have claimed world professional wrestling championships in other organizations. Ken Shamrock and Dan Severn were both UFC Superfight champions and NWA World Heavyweight champions. Severn

would carry the NWA title in the then-WWF in 1997. Shamrock would prove to be a more popular and charismatic performer, winning several secondary titles in the WWF.

Former UFC heavyweight champions Junior Dos Santos and Andrei Arlovski competed as a part of a tag team for AEW in 2022 (Navaro, 2020). Former UFC contender Matt Riddle is (at the time of this writing) a reigning WWE tag team champion and is viewed by many as one of the next top stars for the organization. Former UFC bantamweight contender Shayna Baszler became the NXT women's world champion in the WWE. Former UFC strawweight contender Paige Van Zandt has joined the roster of AEW. UFC pioneer Tank Abbot would perform in WCW from 1999-2000 (Djeljosevic, 2022).

Akebono Taro, born Chadwick Rowan, is a Hawaii-born sumo legend and former Yokozuna with a career record of 654-232 on the dohyo (Amponton, 2008). He made his professional wrestling debut by defeating Paul "Big Show/The Giant/Captain Insano" Wight in a worked sumo match at Wrestlemania 21. His fame as a legitimate Yokozuna in the 1990's made him a household name in Japan. Akebono would parley his sumo fame to a second career as a kickboxer, mixed martial arts fighter and professional wrestler. As a professional wrestler, Akebono has consistently been a top draw of Japanese promotions throughout the 2000's and 2010's. His combined combat sports record stands at a paltry 1-13 (Topology, 2022). he managed to claim the All-Japan Pro Wrestling Triple Crown title, as well as many other highly regarded titles in Japan (Tanabe et al, 2022). Despite his awkwardly gigantic build, or perhaps because of it, Akebono has been one of the most successful martial arts-to-professional wrestling crossover athletes.

Professional wrestling that is presented in the style of mixed martial arts has also become a pay-per-view presence in the United States. Josh Barnett is a performer who exists at the nexus of much of the content discussed in this section (Josh Barnett, 2022). Barnett is currently generally regarded as the most prominent catch wrestler in the world, having trained extensively with Billy Robinson, Karl Gotch, Matt Hume, and former Shooto Light Heavyweight champion Erik Paulson. Barnett is a former UFC heavyweight champion, a world Brazilian jiu jitsu champion, the Metamoris world heavyweight submission grappling (read: all grappling styles) champion, heavyweight and super-heavyweight world catch wrestling champion respectively at UK-based catch promotions Legit Pro Wrestling and

Snake Pit Wigan, and a longtime performer for New Japan Professional Wrestling, the Inoki Genome Federation and TNA Wrestling. Barnett is the promoter of *Bloodsport*, an innovative American professional wrestling organization which uses no ring and a hyper-realistic strong style. The events are currently available on streaming pay-per-view.

### 3.3.b.v Endeavor & Lesnar: Analysis of the Intertwined History of Professional Wrestling, Sport Grappling, and Mixed Martial Arts

Professional wrestling and mixed martial arts exist as attractions which share far more than most fans, performers, practitioners, and executives care to admit. Professional wrestling is a performance sport, and the sport in that art today is expressed most closely by mixed martial arts. And while mixed martial arts and professional wrestling have both become mainstream American attractions since their inception, there is generally little scholarship about their shared history. At the time of this writing, catch wrestling exists as a fringe grappling style, that despite the efforts of several organizations and individuals, has struggled to find a mainstream foothold among grapplers. However, the convergent family of hybrid grappling styles which hybridized Catch Wrestling and Judo have produced most of the dominant modern forms of grappling today. Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, SAMBO, and Luta Livre all emerged from a version of a Catch Judo system. And most Catch Judo systems have been at least partially contributed to by professional wrestlers. Likewise mixed rules bouts, whether worked or shoot, by professional wrestlers who were required to become catch-as-catch-can practitioners as part of their training would become the first generation of Japanese mixed martial artists. For over a century, mixed style fights between professional wrestlers, boxers and martial artists have captured the public's imagination. This has been a proven draw as both a legitimate fight, and a performance demonstration with a predetermined outcome. Whether vale tudo, a secretly worked fight that appears legitimate, an outright performance, or a modern martial arts battle, the lure is the same. We must answer the very human question of, "Who is the best fighter?" And while mixed martial arts and professional wrestling appeal to the same question, they answer it in profoundly different ways. While professional wrestling is a platform for morality tales of characters and performers prove themselves by weaving athletic and riveting stories, mixed martial arts is a grueling exercise in proving oneself through violent determination which tells a riveting story all its own.



Singular harmony between the intertwined histories of modern mixed martial arts and professional wrestling was achieved on 3 April 2023, when the parent-company of the UFC purchased controlling interest in the WWE (Welch, 2023). Endeavor Group Holdings, Inc. emerged in the late 2000's as a Hollywood talent conglomerate, and began diversifying heavily with sports-based investments in the 2010's. On 11 July 2016, Endeavor (then WME-IMG) purchased Zuffa, LLC, the parent company of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) owned by the Fertitta Brothers and UFC President Dana White (Rovell & Okamoto, 2016). Much like the sale of the WWE, the sale of the UFC was announced the Monday after a massively successful event. Two days prior to the \$4 billion sale, the UFC had staged their *UFC 200* event. Just days before the pivotal event and the finalization of the sale, slated main eventer interim UFC Light Heavyweight Champion Jon Jones failed an US Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) drug test for performance enhancing drugs and had to be removed from the event (Okamoto, 2016). Without a major box office draw, the UFC called Brock Lesnar. Lesnar was and is the only person to ever win heavyweight titles in NCAA wrestling, the WWE, New Japan Professional Wrestling, and the UFC.<sup>47</sup> During his tenure in the UFC, he was undisputedly its biggest box office draw (Domin, 2016). White, USADA, and the Nevada Athletic Commission (NAC) granted former UFC champion Brock Lesnar to return from the WWE an exemption for prior drug-testing to allow him to participate in a featured bout on the card against K1 kickboxing world champion Mark Hunt. Lesnar initially won the bout by unanimous decision, but upon failing two doping tests, the win was overturned to a no contest and Hunt sued Lesnar, the UFC, White and NAC for racketeering (Gift, 2017). Lesnar was suspended from mixed martial arts for one year and fined \$250,000 from his reported \$2.5 million fight purse but was immediately able to resume his primary occupation in the WWE (Gift, 2017; Zucker, 2017). Lesnar's return to the WWE in 2012 came with enhanced sporting legitimacy based on his UFC tenure, and his return to the UFC in 2016 relied on his star power, which the WWE had maintained and enhanced. Following a failed IPO in 2019, Endeavor Group finally became publicly traded on 28 April 2021, and reached a value of \$10.31 billion (Wang, 2021). With the WWE-UFC merger, the combined entity now known as TKO<sup>48</sup> Group Holdings has become a purported \$21 billion *combat sports*

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<sup>47</sup> Lesnar's respective first title wins are as follows: the NCAA Heavyweight Folkstyle wrestling title in 2000, his first WWE world title in 2002, the IWGP world heavyweight title in New Japan Professional Wrestling in 2005, and the UFC heavyweight title in 2008 (Tanabe, et al., 2022).

<sup>48</sup> This name is a play on the abbreviation "TKO" in combat sports, which denotes a "technical knockout."

*entertainment juggernaut* (Welch, 2023). UFC President Dana White denies crossover with the WWE, despite most of his personal fortune being directly related to promoting former and future WWE stars like Shamrock, Lesnar, and Rousey (Russell & Tessier, 2023). His boss Ari Emanuel begs to differ and insists that the merger with WWE has created “UFC 2.0” (Holland, 2023). TKO employee Vince McMahon now finds himself haphazardly back in the business of mixed martial arts and Dana White appears begrudgingly stuck in the professional wrestling business. Meanwhile, Emanuel and Lesnar seem to be sitting contently at their interwoven nexus and counting the pile of money it promises to executives, stockholders, and the combat sports entertainers that the fans will continue to pay to see. The merger was completed on 12 September 2023, with the IPO of TKO Group Holdings (Becker, 2023).

### 3.3.c Gridiron Footballers and the Squared Circle

Beyond the combat sports of boxing and MMA, the largest amount of sports crossover in professional wrestling comes from gridiron American football. Professional wrestling history is lousy with the presence of American footballers crossing over into professional wrestling. There are a number of reasons for these crossovers. Firstly, high-level football players tend to be very large and imposing figures who often sport impressive physiques. Another important factor is that the high-impact nature of American football creates the perception (based on the reality) that gridiron footballers are extremely tough and competitive individuals. American football is the most popular sport in the United States, and this creates a rich talent pool of athletes pursuing the sport. Importantly, there are extremely limited opportunities to play American football professionally. Longtime talent executive Jim Ross also points to other aspects of the experience in legitimate athletics which makes such talents easier to manage: “Having that sporting background means that they know how to be coached. They listen to their coaches. It also means they know how to conduct themselves in a locker room. And it means they know how to be part of a team, working for a common goal.” - Jim Ross (Thompson & Ross, 2019)

There are only 1,696 players in the National Football League at any given time (Steven, 2022). This number grows out of nearly 1.1 million high school players, and just north of 71,000 collegiate players (Cesconetto, 2021). For the 6.5% of high school football players

who become college football players, there is roughly a 1.6% chance of ever playing in the NFL, making for a grand total of .00075% chance for any given high school player to ever play in the NFL (Cesconetto, 2021). Even for those who do, the average playing career in the league is about 3.3 years (Gough, 2022). This creates a situation where there are a number of highly trained athletes with eye-catching physical attributes who are looking for work. For those former players who are extroverted and inclined to pursue performance, professional wrestling has historically been a welcoming outlet. This was even more pronounced in the days before guaranteed contracts in the NFL or prior to the NFL Players Association, when many players actually made more money as professional wrestlers than football players.

From the days of the Gold Dust Trio, footballers have been favorite choices of professional wrestling trainers and bookers. Indeed, the list of professional wrestlers who had been collegiate or NFL football players is too numerous to list in its entirety. However, a brief sample listing of luminaries of this category would be helpful. Firstly, here is an extremely abridged list of top, full-time professional wrestlers who had player collegiate or professional gridiron football (Staff, 2014; Yuscavage, 2015; Falagan, 2016):

- Ron Simons of the Florida State Seminoles
- Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson of the Miami Hurricanes
- “Dr. Death” Steve Williams of the Oklahoma Sooners
- Leati “Roman Reigns Anoa’i of the Georgia Tech Yellow Jackets
- The Usos (Jonathan and Joshua Fatu) of the University of West Alabama
- Edward “Wahoo” McDaniel of the various AFL teams
- John Cena of the Springfield College Pride
- Jack “Fritz Von Erich” Adkisson of the Dallas Cowboys and Edmonton Eskimos
- Ettore “Big E” Ewen played for the Iowa Hawkeyes
- “Flyin” Brian Pillman of the Cincinnati Bengals
- Pat McAfee of the Indianapolis Colts
- Steve “Mongo” McMichael of the Chicago Bears
- Montaque “Monty” Brown of the Buffalo Bills, New England Patriots, and Ferris State Bulldogs
- “Stone Cold” Steve Austin of the North Texas Eagles
- Glenn “Kane” Jacobs of Northeast Missouri State University.

- Darren Drozdov of the Denver Broncos
- Jake “Jack Swagger” Hager of the Oklahoma Sooners
- Bronko Nagurski of the Chicago Bears
- Thaddeus “Titus O’Neil” Bullard of the Florida Gators, Jacksonville Jaguars and various Arena Football League franchises.
- Frederick “Darren Young” Rosser III of Fairleigh Dickinson University
- Leon “Vader” White of the Colorado Thundering Herd
- Dick “The Bruiser” Afflis of the Green Bay Packers
- Dean “Mojo Rawley” Muhtadi of the University of Maryland Terrapins
- Windham “Bray Wyatt” Rotunda of Troy University
- Verne Gagne of the University of Minnesota
- Joseph “Eric Rowan” Rudd of University of Minnesota Morris
- “The Big Cat” Ernie Ladd, an all-star for various American Football League Teams
- Lawrence “Lex Luger” Pfohl of various USFL teams and the Green Bay Packers
- “Cowboy” Bill Watts of the Oklahoma Sooners, and various professional teams
- Thomas “Baron Corbin” Pestock of the Northwest Missouri State Bearcats
- John “Bradshaw” Layfield of the San Antonio Riders
- Leo “The Lion” Nomellini of the San Francisco 49ers and Pro Football Hall of Fame
- Bill Goldberg of the Atlanta Falcons and various professional teams
- “Mr. Wonderful” Paul Orndorff of the Jacksonville Sharks
- Kevin Greene, a player and coach for various NFL franchises, the Auburn Tigers, and the Pro Football Hall of Fame
- And the West Texas State University football program, from which Dusty Rhodes, Terry Funk, Merced “Tito Santana” Solis, Bruiser Brody, Manny Fernandez, Ted DiBiase, “Blackjack” Mulligan, Dory Funk, and Stan Hansen, among others emerged.

Moreover, the cross promotion of professional football players in large-scale wrestling events. Multi-time NFL all-Pro Kevin Greene participated in a series of matches in WCW, often alongside Steve “Mongo” McMichael or Bill Goldberg (Yuscavagae, 2015). The WWE promoted an NFL vs WWF Battle Royal as the main event of the Chicago portion of the Wrestlemania 2 event (Taylor, 2017). Podcaster and former NFL punter Pat McAfee has

emerged as the new voice of the WWE at the time of this writing, serving as a commentator and part-time wrestler (Hickey, 2022). Future NFL Hall of Famer Rob “Gronk” Gronkowski has made multiple appearances at Wrestlemania, notably helping his friend Mojo Rawley win the Andre the Giant Memorial Battle Royal at Wrestlemania 33, and himself winning the WWE 24/7 title at Wrestlemania 36 (Carlins, 2021). College and Canadian Football Hall of Famer Doug Flutie also won the WWE 24/7 title on an ESPN stage in 2021 (Tanabe et al., 2022) Founder of TNA/Impact Wrestling Jeff Jarrett credited the media buzz from a 2002 altercation between TNA wrestlers and players from the NFL’s Tennessee Titans with saving the fledgling company by enticing big money investors (Rovere, 2021). It should also be acknowledged that most of the consensus top drawing stars of the past 25 years for the WWE were collegiate football players including (in order) Steve Austin, the Rock, John Cena, and Roman Reigns (Flanagan, 2016). The famous exception to this trend is Brock Lesnar, who quit the WWE at the peak of his powers in 2004 and won a place on the Minnesota Vikings practice squad and a player contract in the NFL Europe developmental league (Kenmare, 2019).

Perhaps most prominently, the main event of Wrestlemania XI featured famed super-heavyweight wrestler Scott “Bam Bam” Bigelow versus former NFL Most Valuable Player Laurence “L.T.” Taylor (Thompson & Prichard, 2018). The two had taken part in a scheduled ringside altercation in the lead-up to the event. Taylor would spend months training with WWF stalwart Pat Patterson, who would reprise his role from the first Wrestlemania main event and referee the match. In both instances, Patterson had been training the celebrity in the match to wrestle and was there to guide them through the performance. To add star power to the match, it was made a “Lumberjack Match” where twelve men would surround the ring, six of them NFL players, and six WWF wrestlers. The NFL players included Reggie White, Carl Banks, Steve “Mongo” McMichael, Chris Spielman, Ken Norton Jr, and Rickey Jackson. The WWF superstars would include Kama, King Kong Bundy, Nikolai Volkoff, Irwin R. Schyster, Ted DiBiase and Tatanka. Taylor and Bigelow would wrestle to what is generally considered a better-than-expected match. This marked the only time Wrestlemania had closed with a guest star held aloft after winning in the main event.

### 3.3.d The Wide World of Sport in the Wild World of Wrestling

While boxing, mixed martial arts and gridiron football have the strongest intersection with professional wrestling, stars from across the sporting world find their way into professional wrestling. There is a notably high occurrence of professional wrestling fandom by mainstream athletes. While the matter has not been studied, this could be anecdotally related to the shared experiences and personalities of athletes and actor-athletes. It is also important to point out that most professional wrestlers were amateur athletes, and thus were members of the athletic community. As a performance art centered on fictionalized sporting events, there are also crossovers from mainstream sports, other than the boxing, mixed martial arts, and gridiron football crossovers described in the previous sections.

NASCAR driver Kyle Petty served as a non-wrestling member of the nWo stable for several years (Roberts, 2020). Petty would drive an nWo-themed stock car in NASCAR as a co-promotional effort between WCW and NASCAR during this era, often featuring Goldberg, the nWo, WCW, or Sting on the cars. WCW commonly advertised on NASCAR cars during this time due to the overlap of fans in the target demographic and the popularity of NASCAR in WCW's heartland, the American Southeast. Other NASCAR drivers who have appeared on professional wrestling programming include Carl Edwards, Kyle Busch, and Joey Logano (Matthews, 2014). Busch briefly won the WWE 24/7 title at a NASCAR ceremony in 2019 (Tanabe et al., 2022).

A number of basketball stars from the NBA had appeared in the professional wrestling ring. Controversial Chicago Bulls star Dennis Rodman famously teamed up with Hulk Hogan representing the nWo against "Diamond" Dallas Page and Utah Jazz star Karl Malone in a storyline in WCW leading to a tag-team match in the main event of the *Bash at the Beach* pay-per-view in July 1998 (Roberts, 2020). Rodman would later be a ringer and win the first and only season of the *Hulk Hogan's Celebrity Championship Wrestling* series on CMT (IMDb.com, 2008). NBA legend Charles Barkley also appeared in WCW with Ric Flair (Ward, 2022). NBA star Darryl Dawkins would make appearances for the WWF in the 1980's. Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban hosted WWE Raw in 2009 (Matthews, 2014). Boston Celtics star Enes Kanter won the WWE 24/7 title from R-Truth in 2019, only to have Truth reclaim the title later that day (NBA.com Staff, 2021). NBA stars Giannis

Antetokounmpo, Bobby Portis, Trae Young, and LeBron James have all appeared at professional wrestling events (NBA.com Staff, 2021). Legendary NBA center, announcer and film actor Shaquille O'Neil would make appearances for WCW, the WWE and AEW (Fishman, 2021). Shaq would have altercations with several wrestlers cloaked to his 216cm (7ft 1in) height in the WWE. In 2021, Shaw made his in-ring debut for AEW in a tag-team match that saw Cody Rhodes knock the Hall of Famer off the ring apron and through a table.

American baseball players have also found their way into professional wrestling. MLB all-time hits leader Pete Rose appeared at Wrestlemania 14-16 and was inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame in 2004 (Chiari, 2017). Another World Series Champion who found his way into the WWE Hall of Fame in 2010 was famed announcer Bob Uecker, who made several appearances on WWE television, including a memorable segment that saw him choked by Andre the Giant (Chiari, 2017). New York Yankees hero Billy Martin won the World Series as a player and a manager for the "Bronx Bombers," and also appeared at Wrestlemania from Madison Square Garden (Hornbaker, 2015). Outfielder Johnny Damon won the World Series with both the Yankees and the Boston Red Sox, and hosted WWE Raw in 2009 (Matthews, 2014). American League umpire Larry Young refereed the match between the Undertaker and King Kong Bundy at Wrestlemania XI (Stahle, 2009).

Notably popular athletes from various other sports have appeared in professional wrestling. On the 25 January 1999 episode of WCW Nitro a kaleidoscopic sports and entertainment fever dream played out live as Stanley Cup champion Bret Hull, NFL star Herschel Walker, and a pair of karate champions-turned-actions stars in Chuck Norris and Jean-Claude Van Damme stormed the ring to defend Bill Goldberg from the nWo after he'd defeated Scott Norton (WWE.com Staff, 2019). On the pitch, English soccer legend Wayne Rooney has won the Premier League, the FA Cup, two UEFA titles and the FIFA Club World Cup; in the wrestling ring he famously slapped Wade Barrett in 2015 (McGeorge, 2020). Ty Murray is a hall of famer and 9x world champion in the world of rodeo, and he would show WWE Raw alongside his pop star wife Jewel in 2010 (Hughes, 2010). Former NCAA soccer star-turned-Sportscaster Rob Stone would join the fraternal order of celebrity holders of the WWE 24/7 championship by winning the title on the set of Fox College Football in 2019 (Tanabe et al., 2022).

## 4.0 Analysis of The Industry, Craft & Cultural Impact of American Professional Wrestling

### 4.1 Criticisms of Professional Wrestling

Professional wrestling has been demonstrated to be a number of things. Existing at the intersection of sports and performance art, it has carved out an indelible, if heretofore ill-defined, place in the collective consciousness of popular culture. American professional wrestling has long been the dominant and leading segment of a global phenomenon. It exists as a performance art, a theoretical sport, an industry, an omnipresent multimedia entity and a surprisingly prominent part of our collective popular culture. Indeed, in most rooms with a large group of people, there is at least one active professional wrestling fan, and even those who are not fans are aware of the existence of the sport-theme theatrical genre. Professional wrestling has been demonstrated across scholarly metrics to be a form of theatrical performance.

Public awareness of the performative nature of the genre was widely believed long before it was legally confirmed. The narrative structuring of professional wrestling performance follows its own unique seven act structure throughout a standard match, and the established narrative formats theorists have used to define literary story structure across genres. This study has provided case-studies of both in-ring match narrative and overarching episodic story narrative. The themes of both the match and episodic story arc reflect cultural values and human universals. The cultural values vary based on the home culture producing the wrestling; American professional wrestling themes are reflective of American cultural values. Human universals apply to all of the many culturally distinct styles of professional wrestling. As cultures evolve socially, so do the values expressed in professional wrestling. This growth has led to an erosion, though not necessarily an elimination of the prejudicial aspects of classical professional wrestling presentation.

As with other literary and theatrical forms, professional wrestling has reflected both the glorious values and the despicable prejudices of its culture. The evolution of storytelling in professional wrestling is not isolated to the social changes of the society presenting it, but



also to the public's evolving preferences in content, style, and media accessibility. The in-ring narrative of American professional wrestling has evolved with ever-increasing speed, athleticism and complexity, as each successive generation of fans have demanded a more exciting style. The preferred content of professional wrestling has grown similarly, filling an ever-growing number of niches for specific sub-genres within the professional wrestling genre. While professional wrestling alone used to be a small part of the vaudevillian carnival's variety show, now professional wrestling is a variety show unto and within its own genre. Global fandom has dictated an ever-growing intersection of presentational skills, with specific preferences being the source of endless and impassioned debates among those fans. Likewise, the evolutions of media throughout the past century and a half have seen the promotional style and consumer access to professional wrestling constantly advance. This study has demonstrated that professional wrestling has joined the forefront of every evolution of media technology since the 1870's to better access the consuming public. This process has gone from promotion in daily newspapers, to radio, to television, to closed-circuit theatre television, to home broadcast pay-per-view, to podcasting, to streaming, to social media, and in all likelihood to the next great evolution of entertainment consumption. Throughout the past 150 years, American professional wrestling (and its international counterparts) has evolved alongside the dominant social, cultural, media, and artistic norms of American society.

Criticisms of professional wrestling as an art form and a genre are also numerous. Many of these criticisms involve professional wrestling acting as a conduit for the innate or explicit prejudices of the audience. It has also been widely stated that in professional wrestling many characters serve as stereotypical caricatures of a race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or other historically disenfranchised group, and thereby reinforce prejudices among members of the public. Taking the long view of such characters in professional wrestling, that criticism is justified. Hamscha also observes that the model American against which all others were is a heteronormative white male, and this also holds true for most top babyfaces in American professional wrestling history (Hamscha, 2013, p. 83). That criticism is also applicable to the whole entertainment industry. Television and cinema are lousy with similar caricatures, and it is and has likewise been a problem. Is that problem in American pop culture getting better? Yes. Has it been totally solved? No.

#### 4.1.a Criticism of the Portrayal of Women in Professional Wrestling

Accusations of misogyny in storylines are also common, and indeed did tremendous damage to Linda McMahon's senate campaigns. There are also accusations of rampant racism, bigotry and sexism backstage. During the course of the writing of this study, WWE founder Vince McMahon was forced to resign from his positions of CEO and Chairman of the WWE and later TKO due to accusations of various acts of sexual misconduct and relating unreported millions in total payments to those female employees as a part of their non-disclosure agreements with McMahon and WWE. Exploitation of female wrestlers by their male colleagues, female trainers, and booking agents have also been historically reported. The history of exploitation within and surrounding professional wrestling had a moment of public reckoning with the #SpeakingOut movement of 2020, which served to some degree as professional wrestling's #MeToo movement. Thanks to a renewed focus on women's wrestling pioneered in the United States largely by the TNA/Impact "Knockouts Division" in the 21st century, there is an ongoing renaissance of women's wrestling in the United States. Much of the mainstream popularity of this work has come from the efforts of WWE producer David "Fit" Finlay training the current vanguard of WWE women's talent in a more serious and hard-hitting style. Seemingly gone are the days of "bikini contest" and "bra and panties matches" in mainstream professional wrestling. Women's wrestling is now largely treated as co-equal to the male divisions, if public perception of that equality still lags behind. Generations of female wrestlers fought for the legality and respect of their male counterparts and the audience. Pioneers like Mildred Burke and Mae Young fought for the legality of women's wrestling in the territories. A generation of stars like Wendy Richter and the Jumping Bomb Angels made women's wrestling a major attraction in the United States. While for some decades women's wrestling has been a respected subdivision in Japan, it took longer for that perception to reach the United States. Modern pioneers like Joanie "Chyna" Laurer, Jackie Moore, and Debrah "Medusa" Miceli showed themselves as co-equal to men in drawing power and in the ring. In the 21st Century, the rivalry between Amy "Lita" Dumas and Patricia "Trish Stratus" Stratigeas broke down barriers for mainstream wrestling fans, while simultaneously their contemporaries Gail Kim and Kia "Awesome Kong" Stevens were shattering the perception of women's wrestling for die-hard fans. With the rise of the NXT brand, and under the auspices of Finlay's training the current generation of women's wrestlers in the WWE and in other mainstream brands have become top attractions in their own right. On 13 July 2015 the WWE dropped the moniker of "Divas" from its women's

division and kicked off their “Women’s Revolution” which oversaw a massive expansion of the female rosters, the creation of three women’s world championships that were co-equal to the men’s, the creation of women’s Royal Rumble matches and Queen’s Crown tournaments, and for the first time in its history the highlighting of women’s wrestling as a viable and equal portion of the program. Over the better part of the past decade, women’s wrestling has grown by leaps and bounds following top stars like Charlotte Flair, Becky Lynch, Asuka, Thunder Rosa, Dr. Britt Baker, Bianca Belair, Sasha Banks, Bailey, Io Sharai, Rhea Ripley, Toni Storm, Carmella, Tessa Blanchard, Nia Jaxx, Alexa Bliss, Lana, and Naomi, among hundreds of others. Former WWF Women’s champion Stephanie McMahon is the co-CEO of WWE and the Chairperson of the board of directors, and thus the most powerful person in the professional wrestling industry. There is no card in the world that women cannot headline, including Wrestlemania (as of Wrestlemania 35 in 2019). While sexism in among portions of the fanbase and exploitative behavior by some persists, those issues are not particular to professional wrestling. Indeed, those are issues with the whole of the entertainment industry, and the historical tide seems to have gratefully shifted against them. Once again, this issue is not isolated to the professional industry, but its presence in professional wrestling is indicative of a broader societal problem in American popular culture.

#### 4.1.b Criticism of Prejudice in Professional Wrestling

The use of homophobia, xenophobia, jingoism, racism, sexism and other prejudices in the storyline has long been a criticism of the genre. American professional wrestling has indeed historically reflected these various prejudices, because those prejudices existed in American society. Just as American culture has evolved in the prevailing attitudes towards women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and members of ethnic and racial minorities, so too has professional wrestling. These stereotypical depictions of women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and minorities have become dominantly passe and increasingly taboo within the industry, as their inclusion in the narrative has fallen into the category of bad taste. While great strides have been made in the inclusivity of women, minorities, and LGBTQ+ individuals as stars in professional wrestling storylines, as has the erosion of the use of stereotypes in characters and storylines, these problems have not disappeared from professional wrestling. Some problems of prejudice persist in professional wrestling in causal relation to the persistence of those same prejudices in American society. As Prof. Eero Laine said in *Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage*, “The problems of professional wrestling are the problems of theatre.”

(Laine, 32, 2021) The heteronormative Caucasian-American male domination of the art has eroded in corollary pace with that of the remainder of the narrative entertainment industry. The broadened demographic appeal of professional wrestling beyond the “white male 18-35” consumer demographic has led to a wider variety of stars and historic growth in the markets of the developing world and has led to a widely expanded and diverse audience within the United States (Thomson & Bischoff, 2018). While appealing to heteronormative Caucasian-American males is not (and should not be) in and of itself a criticism of the genre, the exclusion of appeal to other cross-sectional demographic groups both limits the creative scope and market appeal of a particular artistic product. Inclusivity has been a major source of growth for professional wrestling and is widely seen as a key pathway to growth in the future of the art form.

#### 4.1.c Criticism of Connections to Political Conservatism with Professional Wrestling

Much has also been made of professional wrestling’s connection to conservative American politics, with an overwhelming number of professional wrestling performers who have entered politics have done so in the conservative Republican party. The McMahon’s connection to disgrace former American President Trump is a prominent feature of these. However, this criticism does not hold up well to particular scrutiny. Firstly, as professional wrestling is a reflection of American culture, slightly less than half of the American voting public chooses to vote for that same party. Moreover, among the performing arts, there is a long-standing history of patronage with political conservatism, examples including (but in no way limited to) Lincoln Center being named after conservative mega-donor David Koch, the political affiliations of any number of cinema or Broadway producers, and as well as any number of well-known performers across media platforms. The personal politics of individual performers and fans varies wildly across the American political spectrum. If professional wrestling has a problem with political conservatism, it is because the United States has a corollary problem with political conservatism.

#### 4.1.d Criticism of Professional Wrestling as Low-Class Entertainment

Another common criticism of professional wrestling is that it can only be rightly included in academic discussions of “low culture” as it appeals to the working class (Sehmy, 2, 2002). As discussed in Section 1.2, Lizardo, among others, contends that the distinction between

high and low culture is an expression of classist cultural authority dictated by wealth and its connected social status (Lizardo, 1-2, 2008). The distinction between “high culture” which panders to the highest socio-economic rung of a society and “low culture,” which is targeted at the masses, is an esoteric fallacy based on classist bigotry. There is no definable metric by which artistic quality can be measured in such a way as to quantifiable or qualifiable differentiate art alone. The fact that certain artistic media are traditionally popular among separate socio-economic strata is completely immaterial to quality, complexity or value of art. This study has not indulged a facile argument comparing the artistic value of one form of theatre against another with the goal of appeasing elitist gatekeepers desire to have some vote over whether or not this form of theatre is fine art. Acceptance of the upper strata of income has no bearing on artistic value. “High and low culture” is a demographic distinction propagated by the privileged class which has no veto power over what is and is not fine art. As there are no legal classes in the United States, American professional wrestling is doubly immune from this manner of discussion. Let it be stated here unequivocally that no income class has a monopoly on art. No income class has veto power over what does and does not constitute good taste. No form of art is diminished by being loved by the working class. Neither Old World aristocracy, nor wealthy bourgeoisie posturing will change that simple fact. The wealth and sociology-economic class of the audience does not define the merit of art. Whether the board of the Metropolitan Opera at Lincoln Center likes it or not, the WWE sells more tickets by several multiples. The metric of artistic influence within a culture has a causal relationship with how viewed, liked and accepted that art is within that culture. A minuscule minority of a population does not outweigh the relevance of an art form to an exponentially larger segment of that population. Indeed, the true culture of a society permeates through the largest segments of that society. The interests of high society have absolutely no bearing on what is and is not “high culture.” But rather the interests and values of the largest pluralities and sometimes majority of members of a society is the defining metric of artistic relevance to culture.

#### 4.1.e Criticism of Professional Wrestling as Violent

Perhaps the most intuitive criticism of professional wrestling is the presence of violence and the dangers the performance style poses to performer health. The influence of violent content in media has been shown to have short-term relationship to acts of violence in children and adults in metadata analysis of randomized studies, mostly through the mimicry of those

actions. However, this is again an issue affecting the entire spectrum of multimedia entertainment and not a direct criticism of professional wrestling alone. Moreover, the public awareness that professional wrestling is indeed a performance art and that no one is intended to actually be injured is an important qualifier. Still, public opponents of professional wrestling have often cited such research to the deserved detriment of the art form. This has led many major companies to abandon particularly dangerous maneuvers, the use of a number of improvised weapons, the repeated and recurring banning of the use of blood, and the presence of constant disclaimers that the performers are trained professionals, and this manner of performance should not be tried at home. Likewise, the effects of physical trauma, concussions, and injury to performers has also become a point of major contention. Many top professional wrestling companies continue to refuse to provide health insurance for employees, and because there is no major acting union that has openly endorsed professional wrestlers as actors, performers are often left to fend for themselves against the bloated costs of American healthcare with the injuries of their career. While some major professional wrestling companies have historically offered some manner of health coverage, this is the rare exception that proves the rule. The absence of collective bargaining in professional wrestling has also seen this and other such benefits such as pensions, required minimum working conditions, and other fringe benefits blocked from the industry. The role of performers as somehow both independent contractors under exclusive contracts has been seen as a demonstration of bad faith by some promoters. While many advocates seek a safer, tamer style of professional wrestling, many performers, critics and fans demand quite the opposite, and oppose limiting the artistic agency of performers as consenting adults.

## 4.2 Analysis & Conclusions on The Industry, Craft & Cultural Impact of American Professional Wrestling

This study has demonstrated that professional wrestling is a format of storytelling whereby cultural morality tales are told. The dominant themes of those stories tend to fall onto the topics of insecurity and self-actualization. Professional wrestling stories are built around aspirational heroes seeking to prove themselves to themselves and the world through their struggles in the ring. While other human universals like romantic relationships, the betrayal of friendship, and family legacy are common, the journey of the individual towards self-actualization of their internal greatness is at the center of most of the great arcs of professional wrestling. Indeed, the insecurity of powerful heels leads them to adopt unseemly

tactics to achieve their goals, and the virtuous babyfaces gamble on their ability to overcome these seemingly insurmountable odds without cheating. The six traditional American values discussed herein include: individual freedom, self-reliance (independence), equality of opportunity, fairness, hard work and material wealth (Datesman et al., 2014). American professional wrestling describes each of them in its traditional ethical binary wherein a babyface engages in self-reliant hard work in pursuit of their goals of material success (namely golden belts and the income they promise) and are foiled by unequal opportunity. Personal freedom allows each wrestler to choose their ethics and their companionship throughout their journey. An absence of fair play limits their ability to achieve, and those who gleefully cheat and corrupt the system are considered selfish heels. When the babyface overcomes in American professional wrestling, it is not just a victory for them, but a victory for that era's understanding of the American Dream.

The road to self-actualization in the ring is not simply an American phenomenon, but indeed sits at the core of many of wrestling's great storylines across cultures. In the United States, heroes like Mick Foley or Daniel Bryan overcame gangs of hand-picked and meticulous groom prospects on their way to the top of the WWE. In Japan, upstart Kenta Kobashi began his career as a singles wrestler with a 63-match losing streak (Sidgwick, 2017). However, Kobashi displayed "fighting spirit" a key Japanese cultural value which saw the charismatic fireplug win the hearts of fans with his ever-increasing gutsy efforts. He would eventually win his first match, and swiftly rise as a hero with dominant lead will and courage in the face of defeat for the remainder of his career. In Mexico, this story was told with Mistico, whose character was an orphan, raised and trained by Fray Tormenta, the real-life Mexican priest who funded his orphanage for years with his winnings from Lucha Libre (Ravelo, 2017). A charismatic orphan chasing a dream, the high-flying underdog allied with El Hiro Del Santo, the son of the greatest luchador of all-time to win his first tag-team title. A tecnico (lucha libre hero), he would embrace the virtuous path of his mentors. He was nicknamed "The Prince of Silver and Gold" and would claim the NWA world Middleweight Championship in a long feud with Los Guerreros, the most renowned rudos (lucha libre villains) in Mexico. The story of a hero coming to reach their dormant potential within is at the core of most literary narrative, and the same is true for professional wrestling. At some point, the hero must endure the great trials, overcome the great challenges, and show themselves to be good enough. This triumphant journey through trials is at the core of most cultural myths and

trumpets the human universal experience of believing that one can be more if they dare to be great.

As American cultural values evolve, so do the qualities that fans seek to see in their heroes. The America of the late-1800's and early 1900's embraced heroes like Martin "Farmer" Burns or chilled scholar-athlete George Hackenschmidt. The America of the 1920's, 1930's and 1940's embraced heroes like the late-stage country boy Joe Stecher and the grizzled New Yorker Ed "Strangler" Lewis. The America of the 1950's embraced the staunch traditionalist Lou Thesz and the flamboyant "Gorgeous" George. The America of the 1960's embraced the flashiness and style of "The Nature Boy" Buddy Rogers or the virtuous stoicism of immigrant hero Bruno Sammartino. The America of the 1970's embraced the grizzled bootstrapper Harley Race and the powerhouse hippie "Superstar" Billy Graham. The America of the 1980's embraced a super-powered cornball patriot like Hulk Hogan and the irrepressible courage of a son of a plumber achieving the American Dream like Dusty Rhodes. The America of the 1990's embraced an anti-establishment redneck beating up his boss like Steve Austin or a charismatic trash-talking super-athlete like Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson. The America of the 21st Century embraced an undersized bearded vegan spitfire fighting the forces of corrupt legacy like Daniel Bryan or a high-flying Ghanian nerd overachieving with his friends like Kofi Kingston.

The evolution of culture has expanded the kinds of heroes and villains available to a diverse array of people to represent the next global generation of fans. Who will be embraced by the next generation of fans will be chosen by the fans, despite whatever machinations or insinuations of the powerbroker backstage. But the story of the aspirational hero overcoming the odds against dastardly villains hoping to suppress the greatness of that hero will be a story that continues around the world and through the subsequent generations of professional wrestling, much as it has in mythos of cultures throughout human history. For it is this story that fans most identify with, as each fan lives vicariously through their heroes, and hope to reveal their own internal greatness in such a spectacular way. Inspiration from these moments stays with fans long after they have left the world of kayfabe and returned to life on Earth. All of professional wrestling is about insecurity and self-actualization because on some level all of modern life is about insecurity and self-actualization. In the end, the fans hold the final vote over what content will be produced, and those votes are made with their disposable



dollars and their time. The monetization of professional wrestling and the ever-growing voice of fandom will trumpet the truth of what fans want from the business, and like all forms of entertainment, professional wrestling seeks to give the people what they want.

As it stands now, the appeal, business, cultural footprint, accessibility, and artistic complexity of professional wrestling has never been greater. Indeed, professional wrestling stands at an inflection point. For the first time in generations, the future trajectory of the business is unknown. New media platforms, a litany of upstart promotions, and massive regime changes at the top of the industry will play out in the years to come. The characters and how those characters look may change, but the human universals at the core of the art form will remain the same. Those moments of glorious actualization will always stand out in the collective hearts, minds and memories of the culture, fans and performers who happen to be the biggest fans. One such moment occurred during the writing of this study.

On 31 July 2022, Ric Flair crossed the curtain and walked the aisle to perform in the ring one final time. Wrestling in his sixth decade, one of the top drawing leading men of the industry who is considered by many to be the greatest performer within the genre to ever live, would perform one final time for an arena of die-hard fans. Generations gathered in the thousands in Nashville's Municipal Auditorium under the auspices of a one-performance-long resurrection of Jim Crockett Promotions to see the last dance of the best melodramatic stage combatant in the history of the genre. He entered in an ornate sequined and feathered robe to the orchestral sounds of Also Sprach Zarathustra. "The Nature Boy" Ric Flair entered to a chorus of cheers and a standing ovation. He opened his glimmering white and pink robe to reveal the "Big Gold Belt," which debuted with him some 36 years prior and had once been the symbol of the primo uomo of the top promotions of its day, the NWA, WCW and the WWE. But today the belt has been retired and symbolized no promotion or territory. Flair and his son-in-law would defeat one last pair of dastardly cutthroats in the center of the ring. Why did he walk in (and out) wearing the belt? Because, despite the fact that the belt has long-since been abandoned, it symbolized his place as the primo uomo of professional wrestling history. One last standing ovation. One last spellbound crowd. One last chorus of woos promising a lonely orphan from Tennessee that his life as one of America's great storytellers had been a worthwhile endeavor. Over 5,000 onlookers, this writer included, will speak of the Nature Boy's final performance all the days of their lives. And those final moments of oiled-up

drama and confetti-blasting glory, the onlooking public would one last time dare to dream, for both the lion in winter and for the dormant greatness within.

Or at least that's how it felt from section H2, seat E9.

Open and close quote, "Woo!"

# VOLUME II: American Professional Wrestling History

## 5.0 A Subcultural History of Professional Wrestling

This section will examine the history of professional wrestling. The origins of the performance art in the legitimate sport of catch wrestling will be discussed. The evolution of catch wrestling into performance art will be examined. The expansion of the art form's popularity throughout the evolving values and norms of American culture from the late-19th to early-21st century will be dissected in detail. The variations in styles of and characters within professional wrestling in different regions and countries will be discussed. The evolution of professional wrestling relating to media technology will also be reviewed.

### 5.1 From Olympic to Outlaw

Wrestling is an ancient sport. And as long as there have been wrestling matches, wrestling matches have been fixed. The earliest documentation of a fixed wrestling match comes from a regional tournament in Egypt in the year 267CE (Jarus, 2014). It was there in an event more than a century old, that a wrestler was first signed to a contract to purposefully lose a title match. In lieu of glory he was offered financially compensated in silver drachmas, roughly equal in value to the price of a donkey (Janus 2014). Historian and writer Owen Janus wrote of the occasion in *Scientific American*:

In the contract, the father of a wrestler named Nicantinous agrees to pay a bribe to the guarantors (likely the trainers) of another wrestler named Demetrius. Both wrestlers were set to compete in the final wrestling match of the 138th Great Antinoeia, an important series of regional games held along with a religious festival in Antinoopolis, in Egypt. They were in the boys' division, which was generally reserved for teenagers. The contract stipulates that Demetrius "when competing in the competition for the boy [wrestlers], to fall three times and yield," and in return would receive "three thousand eight hundred drachmas of silver of old coinage (Jarus, 2014).

Yet between the reign of Roman Emperor Gallienus and today, there have been many fixed wrestling matches. Uniquely, however, wrestling has displayed a divergence of its viable

forms. Indeed, while public interest in legitimately competitive wrestling has languished over the past century, fixed wrestling has evolved into a wildly popular global subculture that supports a multi-billion dollar trans-national industry. Indeed in 2013, the International Olympic committee voted to remove wrestling from the Summer Olympic programme; meanwhile Wrestlemania 29 purportedly drew over 80,000 fans to MetLife Stadium with over 1,000,000 fans paying to watch live on pay-per-view for a then-record gross of over \$72,000,000 (Grohmann, 2013; Grasser, 2013). This divergence of sport and combative melodrama is obscured by their common origins in the modern public consciousness beginning in the mid-19th Century.

In the early days of professional wrestling, most of the bouts were legitimate contests. It was a sport like boxing. Catch wrestling emerged as a balanced method of grappling which gave equal values to holds and pins. Takedowns and dominant position were also vital to the style as it is highly offense oriented. Indeed, even modern proponents of the catch wrestling style refer to it as “the violent art” as opposed to systems like judo and jujitsu which translate to “the gentle way/art/path” (Catch Wrestling, 2022). This branding reflects the difference in mentality among combatants, and highlights the irony that this violent dominating sport would eventually evolve into a cooperative performance art.

Indeed, catch wrestling is actually a former Olympic sport. For 17 years and three separate modern Olympics, Catch wrestling was contested. At the time, it was referred to as “freestyle wrestling” (Nash, 2012). It appeared as the only form of wrestling allowed for the 1904 Summer games in Saint Louis, where American wrestler won an astounding 19 of 21 medals, including seven gold, though Norway has since lobbied the IOC to recognize Norwegian-American gold medalists Charles Erickson and Bernhoff Hansen as Norwegian citizens in Olympic record books, despite their permanent emigration to the United States (Nash, 2012; IOC St. Louis, 2022). To this day, it is the most dominant performance ever by any Olympic wrestling team, and likely will never be topped. It was also contested alongside Greco-Roman wrestling at the 1908 London Olympics (Nash, 2012). There, Great Britain would dominate, seizing 11 of 15 medals, including 3 of the 5 golds (IOC London, 2022). In 1912, while only Greco-Roman wrestling was included in the Olympics, Catch wrestling was experiencing a professional boom across Europe and the US, but Most of the best catch wrestlers in the world were unable to compete in the games as they were actively touring,

competing and being compensated for their sport, and the dubious institution of “amateurism” was being selectively enforced by the IOC (Nash, 2012).

It was also in 1912 that the Federation d’International Lutta Amateur (FILA), the international governing body of amateur wrestling, was founded, which was the beginning of the end of catch-as-catch-can wrestling as a legitimate sport (Nash, 2012). FILA would seek to regulate the brutality out of catch wrestling by banning “punishing holds” and with World War I forcing the cancellation of the 1916 Games, 1920 would be the final year for catch wrestling as an Olympic sport (Nash, 2012). At the 1920 Antwerp Olympic Games, the US took home 7 of the 15 medals, including one gold, and Great Britain took home two bronze (Nash, 2012; IOC Antwerp, 2022). In 1921 FILA codified the “Rules of the Game” which banned submissions from Freestyle wrestling and caused a permanent schism between Catch and freestyle wrestling (Nash, 2012). That same year the New York State Athletic Commission also sought to regulate matches and barred many holds, added time limits and added time limits (Nash, 2012). In 1922, the US-based Amateur Athletics Union, which is a major governing organization of American amateur sports and was the governing body of all US high school and collegiate sports at the time, adopted the FILA freestyle wrestling rules (Nash, 2012). This was essentially the death blow of legitimate catch wrestling as a major sport in the United States, despite there still being shoot catch wrestling title matches in major arenas all over the country.

In the name of a safer, more sterilized style, FILA, NYSAC and the AAU ostensibly killed catch wrestling as a legitimately contested international amateur sport. There are no known instances of “worked” matches at the Olympic Games, though most of the Olympic competitors would go on to become professional wrestlers during the “Carnival Era.” Because of its lack of viability as an amateur sport, participation in catch wrestling eroded for the next century. Despite the unyielding efforts by passionate scholar-athletes to zealously promote both training and competition in the former Olympic style, today catch wrestling exists as a fledgling-though-legitimate martial art on the far periphery of legitimated grappling competitions. It is now stigmatized to a great degree because of its connection to the performance art of professional wrestling. In a display of jaw-droppingly poetic historical irony, 100 years after the ban, the heavyweight freestyle wrestling champion of the

2020/2021 Tokyo Summer Olympic Games, Gable Steveson, signed a contract with the WWE within days of taking the gold (Coppinger, 2022).

### 5.1.a The Snake Pit

It was during this time that the father of modern catch wrestling was mastering his trade in Europe. Billy Riley is considered by most to be The Godfather of all modern catch wrestling, and therefore a lineal progenitor of professional wrestling. A student of Willy “Pops” Charnock, an Irish catch wrestler and winner of several local titles across England, Riley debuted in the 1920’s (Pasheyev, 2021). Riley is also reported to have been coached by Peter Burns and Waino Ketonen (History, 2022). A native of the rough-and-tumble mining town of Wigan, Riley would reach his competitive peak in 1930’s by winning the British Empire championship in a bout in South Africa (History, 2022). He would go on to found “The Snake Pit,” a small but elite school that produced most of the top catch wrestlers of the mid-20th Century (History, 2022). Essentially all lineages of catch wrestling mastery lead back to Riley and the Snake Pit (History, 2022). Students of this school include legendary professional wrestlers Karl Gotch and Billy Robinson, both of whom would become luminaries of professional wrestling and mixed martial arts because of their mastery of traditional catch wrestling (History, 2022). Through Gotch, Robinson, and Riley, legitimately competitive catch wrestling as a martial art would retain some level of international popularity throughout the 20th century, particularly in Japan (History, 2022).

### 5.2 Birth of the Babyface

The true transition of the sport of catch wrestling to the performance art of professional wrestling and the birth of the international kayfabe conspiracy happened during the “Carnival Era.” While catch wrestling was still a viable amateur and Olympic sport, the money-making potential of catch-as-catch-can wrestling as a touring attraction emerged in a parallel narrative. It would also be during this period that (for better or worse) many of the standards, tropes, traditions, and aesthetics of the art form would emerge. During this period, Legitimate wrestlers became literal vaudeville acts meant to impress the locals (Thesz et al., 2000). It was a common practice at the time for the great wrestlers of the day to make increasingly spectacular demonstrations of techniques and physical prowess (Diesem, 2003). This was often accompanied by a barker’s wild pronouncements to an awed or entertained crowd by

sharing the fictitious backstories of the bizarre and exotic wrestling characters on the show (Albano et al., 2000). This tradition of a dominant wrestler paired with a “mouthpiece” who could rile fans into a frenzy would become a staple formula and archetype in the history of professional wrestling.

This would also lead to an inevitable challenge where a local champion would be allowed to challenge the champion. A grifting technique for this process was honed over time.

Legendary professional wrestler “Rowdy” Roddy Piper described the modus operandi of a carnary wrestler during this period in a 2010 interview with Matt Fowler of IGN:

Picture the carnival pulls into town, one that looks like Little House on the Prairie, and the covered wagons would come through, and there’d be the Bearded Lady and the Strong Man and some animals. And then there’d be the wrestler.

And so the night before the carnival on Saturday, there’d be people at the bars. And the people from the carnival would find out who the tough guys were. And they would talk up The Wrestler. And so in the afternoon, the next day, everyone would come down, and some local guy would take him on for maybe a nickel or something. And if you won, you got fifty cents. And the wrestler would get him in a hold, and there’s a hold called ‘The Sugar Hold’ and it’s a hold in which it makes all the blood rush to your head and blood comes out of your eyes, nose, and ears, etcetera.

But he doesn’t pin him.

So the wrestler would catch him in this hold and slap him on the ribs, and it would make the guy scream. Well, the crowd would get so upset and so angry that all of a sudden, a guy would jump up and say, ‘I’ll take you on!’ And the promoter would come out and say, ‘Whoa!’ And the wrestler would let the guy go, and the promoter would say, ‘My guy just fought. You come back tonight!’

They’d all come back that night, but the guy who stood up was part of the carnival. Everyone would come back and pay another nickel.

That's the answer to when did wrestling begin. (Fowler, 2010)

This carnival system would fascinate the rise of the first undisputed world heavyweight champion of both legitimate catch and performance professional wrestling: “The Russian Bear” George Hackenschmidt. Hackenschmidt was a Baltic-Russian bodybuilder, strongman, and Greco-Roman wrestler (Zimmerman, 2016). After a blue collar childhood in the Governorate of Livonia (modern Estonia), a chiseled 99 kg and 175 cm Hackenschmidt rose to dominance across Europe (Zimmerman, 2016). After spending his formative years performing purported displays of freakish athleticism that could purportedly have made Bruce Lee or Bo Jackson blush, Hackenschmidt would capture the lineal Greco-Roman wrestling championship of Russia (Zimmerman, 2016). His nickname was connected to his “signature move,” the then-spectacular, bear hug (Zimmerman, 2016). A *signature move* is a maneuver a wrestler uses as a hallmark in their matches; it is often used interchangeably with *finishing move* which is a maneuver a wrestler uses to end the contest.

Hackenschmidt won his first Russian national title in 1899 and unified it with other competing Russian titles by winning a 40-day tournament in Moscow in 1900 (Zimmerman, 2016). Hackenschmidt set about unifying the various lineages of claimed “world” titles at the time, securing the Viennese and Parisian version of the titles respectively in 1901 (Zimmerman, 2016). By 1903, Hackenschmidt would reach the shores of Great Britain seeking to further cement his position as the world's most dominant grappler (Zimmerman, 2016). By this time, there were almost assuredly worked matches being executed, but verification of those works is too well protected from the time. As far as documented proof goes, George Hackenschmidt did indeed seem to be the top heavyweight in the world of Greco-Roman wrestling at the time.

It was at this time that Hackenschmidt found his ideal promoter, vaudevillian impresario, C.B. Cochran (Hollidge, 1950). Under Cochran's guidance, Hackenschmidt's popularity across Britain exploded. The handsome, hulking, soft-spoken, 25-year-old wrestler appealed to a classic marketing strategy: women wanted him, and men wanted to be him. Indeed, even then-President of the United States and documented judo/jujitsu student Theodore Roosevelt said, “If I wasn't president of the United States, I'd like to be George Hackenschmidt” (Alari, 2016). This would not be the last time that professional wrestling and the American



presidency crossed paths. Under Cochran's promotional guidance, Hackenschmidt became the prototype of a hero in professional wrestling. A humble matinee idol from humble beginnings who rose to fame and fortune through grit and brawn. George Hackenschmidt was then, and remains the handsome hero, known in the parlance of professional wrestling as a *babyface*.

The term babyface derives from youthful good looks often associated with heroes of wrestling. However, the term is used as a catch-all for fan favorites in the wrestling space. The aesthetic is well known. A classic babyface bodybuilder is sculpted, handsome, virtuous, kind, humble and charismatic. If a wrestler arrives with those qualities, and a *reasonable* understanding of the craft of in-ring storytelling, they will certainly become a valued commodity to any promoter. Though the accepted physical and disposition of all characteristics of a babyface have loosened in recent decades, the mold for the archetype was forged in the image of Hackenschmidt. While the scope of possible characteristics that the term *babyface* encompasses has grown, the specific sub-genre of babyface for which Hackenschmidt is the model is what is today called a *white meat babyface*.

The presence of a nigh-beatable handsome foreigner who had become a media darling inspired no shortage of British wrestlers to try to hunt the Russian Bear. Or course, they would seek to do so under the rules of the then-ubiquitous Catch-as-catch-can wrestling style. The partnership of Hackenschmidt and Cochran, stoked by a revolving door of big name local challengers, fueled a boom of events in music halls all over the country.

It was during this period that Cochran elevated his hulking champion into a massive box office draw. Throughout 1903 and into 1904, Hackenschmidt cut through challengers under various wrestling rule sets (Zimmerman, 2016). These bouts would see standing room only crowds all throughout Great Britain. Hackenschmidt's greatest test during this period came at a sold out Royal Albert Hall, where he would tangle Tom Jenkins, the American heavyweight champion (Tanabe et al., 2022). Jenkins was an adept catch wrestler, but this bout was contested under Greco-Roman rules. Jenkins would make an historically impressive showing in a losing effort to Hackenschmidt, who won in two straight falls, though the competitiveness of the bout set off much speculation among fans and the sports media that Jenkins may be the man to finally take the title from Hackenschmidt (Zimmerman, 2016).

Though his position as Europe's top heavyweight was secured, Hackenschmidt sought to grow his reputation on foreign shores. Hackenschmidt would leave his partnership with Cochran, while he sought to increase the scope of his clout beyond Europe. This world tour with stops in Australia and North America, would see Hackenschmidt defeat champions from Australia, Scotland and Canada. However, the most notable match of the tour would be a hotly anticipated rematch with his greatest rival, in an enemy territory.

In 1905, Hackenschmidt would have a legendary bout with Tom Jenkins at Madison Square Garden in New York City (Wheeler, 2014). The catch-as-catch-can rules bout would be contested for the first ever true world heavyweight wrestling championship. Between Hackenschmidt's unified titles under various rule sets and Jenkins being the top American catch wrestler of the day, there could be no pretenders to the throne thereafter. In a brutal contest that lasted over 54 minutes, Hackenschmidt would claim two straight pin falls and the coveted title belt in the contest (Zimmerman, 2016). This moment is considered the ostensive genesis of professional wrestling as an art form. All roads thereafter lead back to this particular bout at the World's Most Famous Arena. Even to this day, there is a direct lineage traced from Hackenschmidt's (probably) legitimate world title, and the WWE championship belt. As of this writing, for 117 years, "the world heavyweight championship" has served as the timeless top attraction and grand talisman which drives the central plot of professional wrestling (Tanabe et al., 2022). This would also mark the first contest for the world championship of professional wrestling at Madison Square Garden, which would become the most significant arena in the art and industry of professional wrestling.

Hackenschmidt would continue his reign for three years, until his return to the United State in 1908. It would be there that Hackenschmidt had a date with destiny. In front of a crowd of over 30,000 at Dexter Park Pavilion in Chicago, the prototypical babyface would meet his greatest adversary, and the prototype for the second half of professional wrestling's ethical binary (George, 2022). It was there that he met American champion Frank Gotch, the dastardly *heel*.

### 5.3 The Carnival Era

The feud between Gotch and Hackenschmidt would forever shift the epicenter of the professional wrestling world from England to the United States. However, professional wrestling was not new to the United States. Grappling in colonial America and the early United States had been popular since the 1700's (Greenberg, 2001). Indeed, American professional wrestling had already become firmly embedded as part of the culture. This included the advent of fixed matches and colorful fictitious backstories of characters which sit at the core of the theatrical subgenre.

After the American Civil War (1861-1865), traveling carnivals would emerge as a national pastime. The American Heavyweight Championship of wrestling was created in 1881 and contested as a lineal title until 1922 (Tanabe et al., 2022). With a variety of attractions like side-shows, circuses and vaudeville acts, these traveling shows would tour the country. One of the common events to emerge was professional wrestling. Amateur wrestling had already existed throughout the United States. That popularity in this era is sometimes attributed to martyred American President Abraham Lincoln, who was an amateur wrestler of such tremendous repute that he garnered the nickname "The Rail Splitter" (Graham, 2022).

During this era, skilled amateur wrestlers would perform demonstrations of their craft. With carnies acting as barkers, many of the wrestlers were assigned colorful and interesting costumes and backstories. This was the genesis of the *gimmick* in professional wrestling. With over 50% of Americans working in agriculture at the time, this type of character differentiation was necessary to create an interesting narrative among performers who had fairly similar backgrounds (Brady, 1966).

Wrestlers at the time were paid a portion of the live gate from the wrestling events or carnivals. Wrestlers hoping to earn more money would want to compete more often. However, catch wrestling was a brutal and grueling sport where combatants would rip, twist, choke and slam one another in hopes of winning the coveted trophy and the financial windfall that being the champion brought with it. There were also a number of different tactics used to draw in spectators, and many of them involved a fair amount of trickery.

A classic carny wrestling gambit was to give a local champion an opportunity to wrestle for the American (and later world) championship. Because these carnival events often happened in small communities, the local challenger would be well known to the audience (Albano et al., 2000). Notably, most of the time, the local champion would be a *shooter* who had no intention of participating in a fixed match (Albano et al., 2000). However, because the carnivals employed some of the most sophisticated and skilled wrestlers in the country (or world), that was rendered moot. The first step in this theatrical long con would be to have the local champion participate in a qualifier match (Albano et al., 2000). If the local champion won the qualifier, he would be given an opportunity to challenge for the title in the main event. Unfortunately for the aspiring hometown hero, the best wrestler in the carnival was (by design) not the champion, but the opponent in the qualifier. This opponent is said to be a “running block” to protect the champion (Albano et al., 2000). The job of the blocker would be to test the local wrestler’s ability and make sure they were not an actual threat to the champion (Albano et al., 2000). This was typically never the case. However, the blocker would make sure of this by intentionally weakening and injuring the local contender, while *still* managing to lose the match. The next day, the injured local would challenge the champion, typically in a 2-out-of-3 falls contest (Albano et al., 2000). Having the local champion challenge for the American Heavyweight title was a tremendous draw for local fans, and the people of a given area would turn out in force to see it. Often the champion would allow the injured local to win a fall, creating a dramatic crescendo for the crowd. Ultimately though, the champion would emerge victorious.

This massive crowd would have the opportunity to enjoy the other attractions at the carnival while they were there to see the wrestling, thus bringing in more income for the company. Moreover, once locals had seen their aspiring local hero lose to the champion in the most exciting circumstances, they would be prone to coming out to take part the next time the carnival came to town. The next time through, the attraction would include another actual professional wrestler in a worked match. Because the crowd had seen the legitimate contests prior, they had no reason to question the legitimacy of the proceedings, particularly when the local champion could bear witness to having given it their very best and having been left wanting.

The wrestler best known for running block was the venerable Martin “Farmer” Burns (Greer, 2019). Burns was known among the wrestling community to be the best American catch wrestler in the latter decades of the 19th Century. Despite weighing only 75kg (165lbs), Burns was known for his intellect, mobility, skill and indomitable will in wrestling (Greer, 2019). His various titles included being billed as the “world catch-as-catch-can wrestling champion” (Tanabe et al., 2022). Famously, Burns’s neck was reportedly 51cm (20in) in circumference (Greer, 2019). Burns would perform a stunt at carnivals where he would be legitimately hanged by his neck from a noose and, using his freakish neck strength, would be unaffected for several minutes (Greer, 2019). Photos of this terrifying spectacle exist. Thereafter, he would often wrestle a local champion in his capacity of being a blocker for the traveling titlist.

He would first rise to national fame in his rivalry with Henry Clayton, also known as Evan “The Strangler” Lewis, though in this study his given name is used to avoid confusion with Ed “Strangler” Lewis (Greer, 2019). His nickname became the stuff of legend in 1889 at Chicago’s Olympic theatre when he answered a \$25 challenge against Jack Carleek and Clayton, in overalls (Greer, 2019). The 28-year-old was christened “Farmer” Burns by the announcer before defeating both Carleek and avenging a teenage defeat to Clayton and his famed *sleeper hold* from a decade before (Greer, 2019). Burns would defeat a slew of top wrestlers from the era including Shorakichi Matsuda, who is reputed to be the first ever Japanese professional wrestler (Greer, 2019). Burns would go on to claim the American Heavyweight title in 1895 when he finally pinned Clayton to claim the title (Greer, 2019). Burns would reign until being defeated by the aforementioned Tom Jenkins (Greer, 2019). Burns would continue to compete into the 20th Century, reclaiming his world light heavyweight championship after over 20 years in 1902 (American Light Heavyweight title, 2022).

Burns would also become a trainer of historic repute. After the loss of his title, Burns entered semi-retirement as a competitor and performer. He spent his time honing the skills of a new generation of grapplers, many of whom would go on to become champions of both shoot and worked wrestling. Burns compiled his knowledge of calisthenics and conditioning into a timeless work of physical education titled *The Lessons in Wrestling and Physical Culture* (Greer, 2019).

In 1899, he would spend 11 minutes in a match with a 22-year-old opponent who oozed raw talent in defeat (Greer, 2019). Burns would recruit fellow Iowan Frank Gotch to train at his school. Under Burns's tutelage, Gotch would become American Heavyweight Champion in 1904 by avenging his mentor's defeat to Jenkins (Palmer, 2017). Gotch would hold this title three times (Tanabe et al., 2022). 1908, would finally challenge undefeated champion George Hackenschmidt for the undisputed world heavyweight wrestling title.

Gotch emerged as something of a wrestling prodigy in 1899 (Palmer, 2017). It was in June of that year that the native of Humboldt, Iowa unwittingly accepted a match with then-American Heavyweight Champion, Dan McLeod. The scrappy young upstart grappled with McLeod for over two full hours before being defeated (Palmer 2017). It was later that same year that he dropped the bout to Farmer Burns. With Burns as his coach, Gotch would go on a reported winning streak for the next four years, including claiming the title of "Champion of the Klondike" after a stint wrestling in the Yukon Territory (Palmer, 2017). It was also during this time that Gotch famously began defeating opponents with his dreaded "toe hold," a catch wrestling maneuver which is still common in professional wrestling, Brazilian jiu jitsu, and mixed martial arts today.

Gotch's good fortune would hit a speed bump in 1903 when he dropped a bout to then-American champion Jenkins (Palmer, 2017). Gotch and Jenkins would trade the American title back and forth from 1903-1906 (Tanabe et al., 2022). It was in the interim of this rivalry that Hackenschmidt defeated Jenkins to claim the undisputed heavyweight title. Also, during this span, Gotch would participate in a purportedly legitimate wrestling match under Cornish rules against seven-time world Cornish Wrestling champion Jack Carkeek, topping the Michigan-born grappler in the contest (Zimmerman, 2016). After relieving Jenkins of the title for the second and final time, Gotch would again trade the title with thrice former world light heavyweight champion Fred Beell in New Orleans on 1 December 1906 (Zimmerman, 2016). Gotch would reclaim the title in Kansas City, Missouri only 16 days later on December 17th (Zimmerman, 2016).

While these title histories make for fascinating sports history, which matches were worked, and which were fixed, remains an historical mystery. While working matches were becoming

more common, particularly amongst the upper echelon of drawing wrestlers, we have no definitive primary documents confirming which. It is in this foggy era that the questions of professional wrestling's sporting legitimacy were justly founded. However, no matter how cooperative a wrestling presentation, matches over two hours in length are grueling affairs.

Hackenschmidt and Gotch finally collided at Dexter Park in Chicago in 1908 (Zimmerman, 2016). In front of a crowd of over 30,000, the world's premiere professional wrestlers locked horns in a scheduled best-of-three falls title match (Zimmerman, 2016). According to accounts of the match, Hackenschmidt did not show up to the match in peak physical condition (Zimmerman, 2016). The two grapplers struggled to position on their feet for over two hours (Zimmerman, 2016). As a student of Burns, Gotch was in superior physical shape for the match. Gotch was able to avoid the patented bear hug and proceeded to push the pace on the champion throughout, battering him badly with dirty tricks (Zimmerman, 2016). Gotch is reported to have repeatedly fouled Hackenschmidt, causing the Estonian strongman to become covered in blood (Zimmerman, 2016). Eventually, Gotch was able to gain the upper hand on the battered Hackenschmidt and forced his opponent to the ground (Zimmerman, 2016). Gotch fished for his signature toe hold, but was unable to secure it (Zimmerman, 2016). After securing a safer position on the ground, an exhausted Hackenschmidt verbally submitted the fall to the referee, giving Gotch the fall (Zimmerman, 2016).

Upon returning to their feet, Hackenschmidt shook Gotch's hand, declaring him the victor and champion of the world (Zimmerman, 2016). Hackenschmidt refused to rejoin the match for the second fall and Gotch became the first American world champion of professional wrestling (Zimmerman, 2016). Thereafter, a gracious Hackenschmidt would call Gotch, "the greatest man, by far, that I have ever met" (Zimmerman, 2016). It is not known whether this contest was worked or a shoot.

Hackenschmidt would later change his tune regarding the match in the press. He cited Gotch's repeated fouls and made accusations of Gotch oiling his body prior to the match (Zimmerman, 2016; Thesz et al., 2000). Hackenschmidt lobbied unsuccessfully for a rematch in Europe. Gotch would reign as a successfully traveling champion, with his mentor close by for the next three years.

Three years later, the two would meet again in Chicago with the undisputed heavyweight wrestling championship of the world on the line (Zimmerman, 2016). Just shy of 30,000 fans would sell out Comiskey Park, a baseball stadium, to watch the live event (Zimmerman, 2016). While there are no surviving historical records of whether or not their first meeting was fixed, it is a widely confirmed historical fact that the second bout was *intended* to be fixed, and became one of the first instances of a *swerve* in professional wrestling (Madison, 2020). Images of the bout still exist.

There are competing legends about the events preceding the bout. Some accounts say that Hackenschmidt had a leg injury and met with Gotch to ask to have a strong showing before his defeat (Thesz et al., 2000). Hackenschmidt would claim to have been injured in training prior to the bout, though his training partners and promoter did not confirm that account (Thesz et al., 2000). What is known for certain is that Gotch would defeat Hackenschmidt 2 falls to nil in a relatively tidy 20 minutes (Zimmerman, 2016). It is believed that Gotch had betrayed Hackenschmidt and attacked his weakness to secure the win (Madison, 2020). Whichever the case, Gotch emerged from the rivalry as champion; whether he was actually guilty doing so by unscrupulous means or if these accusations were later made by Hackenschmidt to save face, remains unknown.

After their second bout, Hackenschmidt would suffer an injury in training that would require surgery (Alari, 2016). It was at this time that he retired to his adopted home of England. Since his reign ended in 1908, no other Estonian has claimed the undisputed world heavyweight title of professional wrestling. Ever the babyface, Hackenschmidt answered the call to service in World War I for Russia (Zimmerman, 2016). He was taken as a prisoner of war but was eventually released. After the Allied victory, he was named a citizen of France, and eventually the United Kingdom (Alari, 2016). He would go on to be a prolific author, penning several books on philosophy, diet, wrestling, and his memoirs. He would live to age 90, before passing away peacefully in 1968 (Alari, 2016).

In the interim between the Hackenschmidt bouts, Frank Gotch became a sensation in the American consciousness (Palmer, 2017). During this time, he would vault to fame engaging in various appearances and projects to build his brand. He was invited by jujitsu student Teddy Roosevelt to give a wrestling demonstration at the White House (Frank, 1999). Gotch



would also become a stage actor and tour internationally with the play *All About a Bout* (Frank, 2022). During this period Gotch would continue his run of dominance through American professional wrestling, defeating several highly reputed challengers during that span. Gotch toured the country as a carnival champion, traveling with Sells-Floto Circus (Madison, 2020). However, true to his roots, Gotch did much to inspire faith in the legitimacy of professional wrestling. While touring with the circus, he had a standing bet of \$250 (adjusted for inflation, just under \$7,000) to any man in the crowd who could throw him; Gotch never had to pay out his self-addressed bounty (Palmer, 2017). Gotch would reign for five years, until finally ceding the world title in 1913 (Frank, 1999). Shockingly, Gotch would die just four years later in 1917 (Palmer, 2017).

## 5.4 The Gold Dust Trio and the Slam Bang Western Wrestling Era

From 1908-1913, Frank Gotch kept a stranglehold on the world heavyweight wrestling title (Zimmerman, 2016). In those days, a professional wrestling match was a single attraction in a wide carnival of curiosities, performances and vaudevillian acts to delight the paying customers. After years of touring with the title, Gotch retired without passing the belt on to a successor. During this era, it is next to impossible to prove which matches were worked and which were legitimate contests, however Gotch's never losing the title does show that no one ever legitimately defeated him for it, and that he never agreed to drop the title to anyone.

At this time, the industry was a chaotic hodgepodge of event promoters and performers bouncing wildly into and around one another. There was no national sanctioning body. There were no exclusive contracts. There was no such thing as a "wrestling show," only a singular wrestling match. As an attraction, professional wrestling was somewhere between a boxing match and a side-show oddity.

Professional wrestling had been an attraction in the United States for over three decades at the turn of the 20th Century. At its inception, it was entertainment for an agrarian society recovering from a social, cultural, and military rift that killed over a million of its citizens. By the turn of the century America was swiftly becoming a dominant manufacturing hub for the western world (Library of Congress, 2022). Beyond that, the creation of the first Transcontinental Railroad had exponentially increased the productive capacity of the United States (History.com, 2009). Of course, the creation of that railroad also brought with it the final stages of the Indian Wars, which both completed the American conquest of the central North American continent and perpetuated the ongoing genocide of Native Americans (History.com, 2021). The control of the contiguous United States was settled by the 1890 Massacre at Wounded Knee, a Congressionally celebrated event where the US cavalry executed over 300 tribal civilians, composed primarily of children, women and the elderly (History.com, 2010). This effectively ended the centuries-long campaign by European-Americans to conquer the frontier (History.com, 2021). With the empire built at home, the United States then became a world power by trouncing the Spanish Empire in the summer of 1898 and taking control of a litany of colonies around the world (US Department of State, 2022).

The professional wrestling of that time reflected the society. America was then still very much defined by the pioneering spirit. Rugged individualists and snake oil attractions permeated the frontier. Much of the upper crust of professional wrestling in those days came from the American Midwest, a region in the north-central United States. This region was the border between the centuries-old population centers of the East and the wide-open frontier of the American West. Nestled in this cultural borderland is the cradle (accidental pun) of American wrestling. That tradition continues to this day. The same unyielding grit that often leads to success on the wrestling mat, is found in these open farmlands. It was in this region where Farmer Burns, Frank Gotch, Tom Jenkins, and a litany of other prominent figures of the Carnival Era emerged. While American culture was still fascinated by the Wild West shows of Buffalo Bill Cody, professional wrestling followed much of the same model. A shooting demonstration, a song, some flying acrobats, a championship wrestling match, a trip through the museum of oddities, and the family had wisely spent their meager entertainment budget.

The professional wrestling style of the time reflected that. Matches could grind on for hours. No frills struggle against an adversary. Exchanges of holds became familiar. Early iterations of this presentation were fascinating to fans. Much like on the farm, patience and indomitable will were the paths to achievement in wrestling. The dominance of the United States at Olympic wrestling also contributed to the assumption that the people would turn out to see wholesome, honest-to-goodness wrestling. However, after a few decades of traveling through the same carnival route, the local fans began to grow tired of similar tactics playing out in similar ways. While the barkers had sold the audience on wild characters, the action in the bouts became quite familiar to fans. Attendance began to dwindle as the cultural shift from a pioneering society filtered through the iterations of American culture.

Likewise American culture was evolving from agrarian grit to industrial action. Clocks became the dominant forces in the employment of many. An explosion of immigration through the latter decades of the 19th Century and the explosion of immigration through Ellis Island in New York City was creating a drastic and permanent demographic shift in the United States (Kraut, 2001). Many immigrants and their children sought success and acceptance in the world of sports. Drawing on the enthusiasm of these ethnic communities, it

would become a central component of professional wrestling through much of the early-mid 20th century (Kraut, 2001). At best, it would become a cause for cultural enclaves to celebrate their heritage together; at worst, it would be a deeply problematic exercise in jingoist, xenophobic and racist exploitation.

Perhaps the most significant change in American culture was that the pace had picked up. Gotch won the title the same year that Henry Ford would debut the Model T, by the time of his death less than a decade later, their mechanized swarm were reshaping the literal landscape of the country (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2022). Spending hours in the factory produced tangible results much faster than tilling the soil (Bellis, 2020). Electricity was now becoming more utility than luxury (Bellis, 2020). The sounds of gramophones and phonographs brought music and entertainment into the lighted home (Bellis, 2020). Cinemas were popping up all over the country (Bellis, 2020). World War I had simultaneously decimated European manufacturing and ended American neutrality forever (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2022). With the Allies propelled to victory partly by the infusion of fresh American troops and equipment and President Wilson's leadership in establishing the Treaty of Versailles, the United States was now positioned as the economic center of the Western world (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2022). The 20th century was about to give way to the Roaring 20's and the American people were looking for a lot more bang for their buck from their professional wrestling.

To provide that bang, a triumvirate of wrestlers would create the most influential alliance in the history of the business. Their business savvy and entertainment acumen would see them dubbed "The Gold Dust Trio" in the famed 1937 expose novel *The Fall Guys* (Griffin, 1937). What is for certain is that the partnership between feared catch wrestler Ed "Strangler" Lewis, expert promoter Billy Sandow, and artistic visionary Toots Mondt, would forever change the performance sport of professional wrestling (Zimmerman, 2021). And much like most partnerships in professional wrestling, dissection would lead to fracture and one of the partners would soar to greater heights yet.

## 5.4.a Reworking the Shoot

Gotch's retirement led to ongoing schisms of title recognition throughout the rest of the 1910's. These schisms would persist more or less for the rest of professional wrestling history and continue to this day. During the Carnival Era, either Hackenschmidt or Gotch generally held the position as undisputed and universally recognized world heavyweight wrestling champion. Other weight classes existed for Light Heavyweight, Middleweight, etc., but none carried with them the prestige or drawing power of the heavyweight title (Zimmerman, 2021; Tanabe et al., 2022). It was also during this period that the American world titles became the focal point for much of the industry globally, as the industry was most viable in the United States. Several schisms over the "world title" were created in a similar fashion to modern boxing. These titles would be promoted by state athletic commissions and would-be official sanctioning bodies, as the lineal title had been lost with Gotch's retirement (Zimmerman, 2021; Tanabe et al., 2022).

Initially, it seemed that the post-Gotch world of professional wrestling would fall under the control of promoter Jack Curley (Yohe, 2022). The California-born Curley was a major promoter in professional wrestling and boxing in the first three decades of the 20th century (Yohe, 2022). He had notably brokered and promoted the infamous rematch between Gotch and Hackenschmidt. Curley was also behind the famous 1910 boxing title fight where he drew former world heavyweight boxing champion Jim Jeffries out of retirement as a "Great White Hope" in a spectacularly failed challenge to the first black world heavyweight boxing champion, "The Galveston Giant" Jack Johnson (Yohe, 2022). Subsequently, Curley would be the promoter for the 1915 bout where Jess Willard would finally end Johnson's 7-year reign as undisputed heavyweight champion with a knockout in the 26th round of a showdown in Havana, Cuba (Yohe, 2022). He had promoted wrestling matches with top stars of the era, including the Zbyszko Brothers and the Great Gama (Yohe, 2022). Indeed, Curley had been the central figure in the professional wrestling industry at the end of Gotch's title reign. He was the promoter of the next two world heavyweight champions, "Americus" Gus Schoenlein and Stanislavsky Zbyszko (Yohe, 2022; Tanabe et al., 2022). However, when Zbyszko decided to vacate the title and take up arms for the Axis powers as part of the army for his homeland Austria-Hungarian, the world of American professional wrestling sunk into disarray (Zimmerman, 2021). With the lineal title vacated for the second time in two years,

the legitimacy of any champion of the illegitimate wrestling world could legitimately be called into question (Tanabe et al., 2022). This period also saw public interest, attendance and profits begin to erode.

Different promotional organizations, sanctioning bodies, and publications would choose which champion to recognize based on various (somewhat arbitrary) regulations (Zimmerman, 2021). It is also during this period that those sanctioning bodies, promotional organizations, and publications became aware of and complicit in the kayfabe conspiracy. This is historically significant because gambling on matches was still widely practiced and, because of the predetermined nature of the business, deeply problematic. Different cities would recognize different world champions, as would different states and promoters (Zimmerman, 2021; Tanabe et al., 2022). Of course, these situations always lent themselves to profitable unification bouts that often had then-inexplicably controversial finishes.

By 1920, Curley had once again managed to organize the wrestling world once again solidly behind a single champion (Yohe, 2022). This time it was prodigious wrestler Joe Stecher (Solomon, 2020; Tanabe et al., 2022). Stecher himself is one of the most tragically fascinating characters in a genre packed to the brim with them. Like many wrestlers of his era, Stecher was the son of immigrants, in this case Bohemian-Germans (Solomon, 2020). Stecher's two older brothers established a family tradition of wrestling acumen (Solomon, 2020). Lewis, the eldest of the Brothers Stecher, legitimately won the National Intercollegiate Light-heavyweight Wrestling Championship while at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis (Solomon, 2020). Stecher's other older brother, Anton ("Tony") was an outstanding high school wrestler who would serve as Stecher's manager throughout his career (Solomon, 2020). He also carried on the midwestern tradition, as the native Nebraskan would rise to becoming the next world heavyweight champion from the region (Solomon, 2020; Tanabe et al., 2022). Stecher also suffered from crippling anxiety and mental illness throughout his life (Solomon, 2020). The intersection of his illness and career reached a poetic climax in a 1920 title match at Madison Square Garden versus rival Earl Caddock (Solomon, 2020). Caddock was another Midwestern farm boy who would rise to the world heavyweight wrestling title, and in the massive arena, with falls split between the grapplers, Stecher had an anxiety attack during the time out between falls and attempted to quit the match (Solomon, 2020). After heavy goading by his corner, Stecher re-entered the match and emerged victorious (Solomon,

2020). This bout is believed to be one of the last-ever legitimate contests for a lineal world wrestling title, so Stecher's aspirational gallantry in the face of mental illness takes on a heroic tone. Just under 26 minutes of footage of this bout exists and is available for viewing for free online (Films, 2015). It is one of the earliest known films of an American professional wrestling match; the earliest known match is a Prague match between Gustav Fristensky and Josef Smejkal (WRESTLINGHDD, 2012).

Stecher's role in the evolution of professional wrestling is significant as he was the first champion known for certain to have agreed to fix matches for entertainment value (Solomon, 2020). Though there is considerable anecdotal evidence to suggest that the results of matches were being predetermined prior to Stecher, it was by his reigns in the late-1910's and 1920's that finalized the transition into the worked sport. In the parlance of professional wrestling, Stecher was the first known legitimate world professional wrestling champion to have agreed to "do business" by participating in, winning and losing fixed matches (Solomon, 2020). Though he is a largely forgotten figure, Stecher won his first world heavyweight title at 22 years old, a record that stands to this day (Solomon, 2020; Tanabe et al., 2022).

Now that Stecher had reunified the title for the time being, it was to make money. Seeing that the gritty midwestern-style of wrestling was beginning to fade in popularity, another Iowa native and Farmer Burns protege decided to change the formula forever (Zimmerman, 2021). Joseph Mondt was born in 1894 and there is some historical debate as to how he came by his nickname "Toots" (Zimmerman, 2021). Mondt would become a successful wrestler and a feared submission artist under the tutelage of the Farmer (Zimmerman, 2021). It was through Burns that Mondt joined the camp of rising star Ed "The Strangler" Lewis (Zimmerman, 2021). Lewis used the famous sleeper hold to vanquish his opponents (Zimmerman, 2021). Born in Wisconsin (yet another Midwestern state) in 1891, Lewis was regarded as arguably the best American wrestler of his day, with the most notable exception being Stecher (Zimmerman, 2021). Lewis and Mondt became sparring partners and co-promoters (Zimmerman, 2021). Managing Lewis's camp was legendary manager and promoter Wilhelm Baumann, known to history as Billy Sandow (Zimmerman, 2021). Sandow was a native of Rochester, New York. Sandow had been born in 1881 and was an experienced promoter before Lewis or Mondt had entered the business (Zimmerman, 2021). Sandow had partnered with his brother Max to promote professional wrestling events throughout the Eastern United

States (Zimmerman, 2021). Sandow met Lewis during the First World War while teaching American soldiers hand-to-hand fighting techniques (Zimmerman, 2021). Lewis had already been the American Heavyweight champion prior to the war, and soon thereafter Sandow added Lewis to the stable of wrestlers he managed (Zimmerman, 2021).

In 1921, Sandow and Mondt decided to break from Curley's professional wrestling trust and form their own promotional group with Lewis as their champion and star attraction (Zimmerman, 2021). While Stecher and Lewis were famously evenly-matched rivals, Sandow and Mondt chose Lewis as their premier star (Zimmerman, 2021). This is mostly likely due to a number of factors, including Stecher's well-known erratic behavior due to his mental illness and his having been anointed and championed by Curley for over five years (Yohe, 2022; Zimmerman, 2021). When Lewis claimed the undisputed title from Stecher in December 1920, the Gold Dust Trio broke the professional wrestling trust and took the crown jewel of the industry with them (Zimmerman, 2021).

These three men would lay the foundation of the commercial performance art of professional wrestling from then forward. Sandow became the consummate promoter, the charismatic Lewis would become the top star, and Mondt would reimagine professional wrestling as a narrative art form (Zimmerman, 2021). Sandow was not the caliber of wrestler that his partners were, but he had the advantage of being extremely media savvy, from growing up nearby New York City (Zimmerman, 2021). Their operation would drop anchor in the population centers of the Northeastern United States, where much of the national media and culture was (and is) centered (Zimmerman, 2021). New York City, Boston, Washington DC, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh formed a consolation of major markets where they could operate effectively and profitably (Zimmerman, 2021). Sandow was a master of drumming up public interest in an attraction. Sandow is purported to have signed hundreds of wrestlers from throughout the country to exclusive contracts (Zimmerman, 2021). With Sandow acting as the central talent agency, they established the first iteration of a truly national wrestling promotion. And for each booking, Sandow would take a fee (Zimmerman, 2021).

Lewis, along with Stecher and Stanislawsky Zbyszko would dominate the world heavyweight title scene in the United States throughout most of the 1920's (Zimmerman, 2021). Zbyszko has once been tapped as an heir to Gotch's title but vacated it to fight for Austria-Hungary in



the First World War (Zimmerman, 2021). This, or course, was used for promotional purposes after the war, making him a foreign heel. Zbyszko had made his name in Europe during the wrestling boom of the first decade of the 1900's (Zimmerman, 2021). In England, Zbyszko had become embroiled in scandal when his "Turkish" rival was revealed to be a Bulgarian in the employ of his manager (Zimmerman, 2021). This 1908 incident was an early exposure of professional wrestling being a theatrical enterprise (Zimmerman, 2021). Zbyszko would also have a rivalry with legendary Pakistani-Indian wrestler "The Great Gama," once battling the Kashmiri juggernaut to a draw (The Great Gama, 2021).<sup>49</sup>

Thus far, most of the characters in the Carnival and Gold Dust Eras fought in World War I. George Hackenschmidt fought for Russia but would become a German prisoner of war (Zimmerman, 2016). Zbyszko fought for Austria-Hungary (Zimmerman, 2021). Gotch died before the US had entered the war and Farmer Burns was in his late 50's. Lewis and Sandow served for the US in some capacity (Zimmerman, 2021).

When Mondt joined camps with Sandow and Lewis in 1919, the in-ring product had become dull to rapidly modernizing fans (Phantom, 1997). It was Mondt would reimagine the down and dirty style of wrestling sideshows in prior eras, to an exciting showcase that would simultaneously tell stories, build stars and create an exciting attraction for the paying audience (Phantom, 1997). While the United States was still claiming Olympic glory in Antwerp in 1920, Mondt realized that the pure sport of wrestling could no longer hold the attention of the crowd. Lewis and Stecher once wrestled to a draw in a bout that lasted more than five hours) and during that epic contest, the crowd was still left unhappy (Solomon, 2020). Mondt took to rethinking the way wrestling was conducted (Phantom, 1997).

Mondt envisioned a new style of wrestling which blended catch and Greco-Roman wrestling with gritty lumber-camp boxing and a traditional boxing ring (Phantom, 1997). Mondt called the style "Slam Bang Western Style Wrestling" (Phantom, 1997). Lumber camp boxing was a chaotic style of rough-and-tumble pugilism popularized at remote logging outfits on the

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<sup>49</sup> While Gama was perhaps the most notable wrestler in the eastern world, and a professional wrestling world champion in his own right, his achievements and legend are outside of the main scope of this study. If there were a subsequent scholar to search out a character study of a Pehlواني and professional wrestling icon, or for a towering sports figure in 20th Century South Asia, Gama would be an excellent choice.

frontier Mullin, 2022). Mondt also instituted innovations like wrestling undercards where more wrestlers could be featured on a show (Phantom, 1997). This gave promoters more options for building rivalries, targeting local demographics, and building stars. Of course, having multiple matches on the same card meant that the show needed to keep moving; for this, Mondt popularized public time limits on wrestling matches (Phantom, 1997). This, much like boxing, allowed multiple bouts to take place, rather than a one-match presentation. Mondt would also bring the cards out of burlesque theatres and back-alley halls and into the major arenas in the cities where the Trio promoted (Phantom, 1997). One of the most prominent innovations Mondt and Sandow made was the exclusive contract (Zimmerman, 2016). Wrestlers would sign exclusive contracts with the Gold Dust Trio, and it would elevate their platform in the national media, as well as guarantee them larger payoffs from the large gates in major arenas (Phantom, 1997). This helped him to create an all-star roster which became the envy of promoters across the country. Later on, Mondt would pass many of these promotional and management techniques to later promotional partner Vincent Jess McMahon and his son Vincent Kennedy McMahon (Phantom, 1997).

Within six months of implementing this plan in 1920, the Gold Dust Trio had established the dominant wrestling promotion in the United States (Zimmerman, 2016). This was the most seismic shift in the central axis of professional wrestling since Gotch had defeated Hackenschmidt. Now the capital of the professional wrestling business had shifted from the agrarian Midwest to the urbane Northeast. The power of the Northeastern region in American professional wrestling has not abated since.

However, as far as the craft of storytelling goes, Mondt established a more exciting style of wrestling. The actor-athletes would perform more crowd-pleasing moves throughout the match (Phantom, 1997). Wrestlers would be more active and exaggerated in performing their in-ring maneuvers (Phantom, 1997). It is speculated by many that Mondt codified the 7-phase match formula, but this is a matter of dispute among historians. Mondt also scripted many common finishes to traditional American professional wrestling matches, including the one described in the theoretical match in Chapter 3 (Phantom, 1997). Mondt would also have professional wrestlers rehearse matches in a private gym to see what spots and finishes would be most exciting (Phantom, 1997). This also gave wrestlers an opportunity to hone their craft.

This process also included methods to safely deliver those exciting moves, as well as how to safely absorb the punishment of these spectacular maneuvers.

It is also significant to point out that it is not known exactly when worked matches became the norm in professional wrestling, or which historical matches prior to this point were shoots or works. What is known for certain is that after Mondt and his partner in the Gold Dust Trio became the leading promotion in the United States in 1920, that *all* matches are expected to have a predetermined winner (Phantom, 1997). Every story of a legitimate professional wrestling bout afterward is either a double-cross, an unscripted fight, or a lie. After Mondt became the creative force behind the Gold Dust Trio, professional wrestling was absolutely performance art. Controlling the outcomes of every match allowed the promoters to build stars.

A secondary rule was that having champions like Lewis, Stecher and Zbyszko who were highly skilled in pinning and submission arts made double crosses by local promoters unlikely. Having these legitimately tough athletes as the champion also helped to maintain the apparent legitimacy of the business. Athletic commissions were apparently happy to participate in the charade, as there was tremendous taxable revenue to be made. This general policy of worked bouts with legitimately dangerous grapplers as champions would persist until the mid-1970's.

Lewis was a premier grappler, national attraction and had a promotional stake with Mondt and Sandow. This set him up in an advantageous political position to maximize his income. Knowing the earning potential with heated rivalries, Lewis entered into Mondt-designed and Sandow-promoted "programs" with other top wrestlers (Phantom, 1997). These programs would have easy-to-follow and easy-to-promote narratives based on in-ring controversies and out-of-ring personalities (Phantom, 1997). Sandow could sell these programs and angles to the press. Lewis could deliver them in the ring, along with his rivals (Phantom, 1997). And even when Lewis would relinquish the belt, he could battle his way back into title contention on that same card where the new champion was taking on another rival. This formatting of constantly rising and falling status of characters is used to keep presentation and positioning fresh (Phantom, 1997). That formula is still used today.

The partnership would dominate professional wrestling in the United States and Canada for the 1920's. This reign was not without its challenges. The rivalry between Lewis and Stecher spilled out of the ring and into the boardroom (Solomon, 2020). Stecher eventually left the promotion and started his own competing organization (Solomon 2020; Zimmerman, 2016)). In defiance of historical norms, the Gold Dust Trio decided to place the world title on a charismatic rising star named Wayne Munn, who's appeal as a performer far outpaced his grappling skills (Sweeny, 2014).

Munn was a Kansas-born collegiate American football star at the University of Nebraska, a midwestern sporting powerhouse (Sweeny, 2014). Munn is also documented to have competed with some success in intercollegiate basketball, baseball, and boxing (Sweeny, 2014). Munn had also won the intercollegiate heavyweight wrestling championship of the Missouri Valley Conference (Sweeny, 2014). At a purported 188cm tall and 105kg, Munn cut an imposing figure (Sweeny, 2014). Moreover, Munn had spent his teenage years working as a clown at Campbell Brothers Circus, so his showmanship was not at all in dispute (Sweeny, 2014). In Munn, Lewis, Sandow and Mondt saw a young performer with all of the tools to become a huge star in the for-profit performance art of professional wrestling (Sweeny, 2014).

However, Munn would ultimately fall victim to a complex power struggle among the top promoters and performers of his era. Stecher had risen to the status of undisputed champion under the guidance of the professional wrestling "trust" agreement (Sweeny, 2014). Curley was out to regain control of the industry from the upstarts (Zimmerman, 2016). Stecher and his brother Tony had decided to align themselves with competing New York promoter Jack Curley to attempt to stake their own claim as top promoters of professional wrestling (Solomon, 2020). This rivalry between competing camps of professional wrestlers and promoters attempting to excerpt political control over worked championships would become a hallmark of the industry that persists to this day. In this promotional rivalry, the Gold Dust Trio and the Professional Wrestling Trust would each seek to take control of the lineal undisputed heavyweight championship. While this title, and the belt that represented it, was now absolutely and completely a prop in a genre of performance art, control of it was worth tremendous amounts of money to the unknowing fans who would pay to see it contested.

The trust would seek to return the favor of taking the title through subterfuge by setting up another famous world title double-cross in professional wrestling. In 1925, the Gold Dust Trio were solidly behind building Munn into a superstar of professional wrestling (Sweeny, 2014). In these early days of the industry, we see the most prominent and persistent philosophical rivalry relating to professional wrestling emerge: Sport versus Performance. Since Mondt had championed the departure from gritty ultra-realism in the performance sport, many supporters of the then-traditional style had concerns that the flashiness of Mondt's Slam Bang Western Style Wrestling would delegitimize professional wrestling (Phantom, 1997). These tradition-minded industry professionals were not willing to risk their livelihood on the idea that fans were really coming for the show and not the sport. This ethical position was then, and now remains, ironic, as the entire industry was and is built around worked matches. However, the fear that exposure of the conspiracy among wrestlers and promoters to keep the fixed nature of professional wrestling secret was deadly serious. For his part, Curley had also tried to shorten matches and make the wrestling product more attractive to the rapidly modernizing fan base, but his efforts had not been nearly as successful as those of the Gold Dust Trio (Yohe, 2022; Phantom, 1997). In some form, this debate persists today with many critics believing that wrestling should be treated as a deadly-serious gladiatorial sport, and some believing that it is simply a colorful world of caricatures play fighting. In truth, the audience tends to like a quasi-vaudevillian mixture of both, a phenomenon legendary professional wrestling announcer Jim "Good Ol JR" Ross calls "Sizzle and Steak" (DeFelice, 2020).

Verily, Lewis and Munn would have a world title match before a crowd of over 15,000 fans in Munn's native Kansas (Sweeny, 2014). Their back-and-forth bout ended in controversy when Munn took the third and deciding fall after allegedly fouling Lewis (Sweeny, 2014). The local hero claimed the title, but Lewis's corner refused to surrender the championship belt, this version purported to be worth \$10,000 and encrusted with 20 diamonds from the Buttfuck Athletic Club (Sweeny, 2014). As with all professional wrestling bout decisions, this one was predetermined (Sweeny, 2014). Lewis had agreed to lose the title to the rising star to give a new attraction to fans around the country. That April, Munn was slated to defend the title against Stanislav Zbyszko in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Zimmerman, 2016). Curley and the Stecher brothers lobbied the elder Zbyszko to shoot on Munn and legitimately take the title from him (Zimmerman, 2016). Much of the historical reasoning behind this

double-cross is that Munn did not fit the bill as a legitimate champion, as his legitimate grappling skills paled in comparison to those of many of the top professional wrestlers of the 1920's (Zimmerman, 2016). The wrestlers of the era had hardened their catch wrestling skills during the Carnival Era and were said to have resented Munn for being elevated to the world title (Zimmerman, 2016). This reasoning does not stand up to tremendous scrutiny, as Munn had been a collegiate wrestling champion, and the industry was now based entirely in performance art (Zimmerman, 2016). The real motivation behind this action was most likely commercial, as the prop-title of champion was being contested in public and this was a rare instance where that prop could be stolen. Zbyszko was, in all likelihood, paid an exorbitant bounty for executing the plan.

Zbyszko quickly defeated the overmatched Munn and reclaimed the title, though Munn's claim upon it was still in dispute (Zimmerman, 2016). Within weeks Zbyszko would drop the title back to Stecher, likely leveraging it for yet another impressive bounty (Solomon, 2020; Zimmerman, 2016). Further complicating matters, the title was thrown into further dispute when several state athletic commissions under the control of the Gold Dust Trio refused to recognize Zbyszko as the world champion (Zimmerman, 2016; Tanabe et al., 2022). Notably among these commissions were Michigan and Illinois, the states home to major midwestern markets Detroit and Chicago (Tanabe et al., 2022). Stecher would reign as champion for another three years (Tanabe et al., 2022). Lewis would eventually defeat Munn to realign their lineage of the title (Tanabe et al., 2022). The camps would remain at an impasse for several years, promoting competing shows with world champions who would not wrestle each other due to disputes between their promoters, not unlike modern boxing. Both wrestlers cited competing claims of superiority as Stecher had taken the lineal title, however Lewis had publicly held Munn's title in dispute and had already defeated Stecher for the undisputed title in 1920 (Phantom, 1997). The wrestlers and promoters were at loggerheads until 1928.

By 1928, dissection had begun to form in the Gold Dust Trio. Sandow's brother Max had been added to the staff, but Mondt balked at Max's ideas, leading Mondt to leave the organization (Phantom, 1997). Later Sandow would criticize an aging Lewis's physique, leading Lewis to break away from Sandow as well (Yohe, 2015). Sandow would continue to promote for several years, though his influence on the industry would wane after the partnership ended (Yohe, 2015).

Lewis and Stecher would eventually reconcile for the sake of business in their blockbuster 1928 title in St. Louis. After dropping the title in 1929, Lewis would remain a top draw for promoters in the years to come, claiming the title yet again from 1931-1935 (Yohe, 2015). After his career ended, Lewis would train some of the most respected and legitimately feared professional wrestlers of the next generation (Yohe, 2015). This included the iconic grappler Lou Thesz, “Judo” Gene LeBell and American sports folk hero Danny Hodge (Yohe, 2015).

Zbyszko never held the title again after betraying the Gold Dust Trio (Zimmerman, 2016; Tanabe et al., 2022). He did challenge the Great Gama once again for his version of the world title in 1928, being defeated by the South Asian icon in under a minute in front of 60,000 spectators (The Great Gama, 2021). Zbyszko would retire thereafter (Zimmerman, 2016). While he often lamented the theater of the new age of professional wrestling, he did train future top attraction Antonio Rocca and perennial NWA world title-holder Harley Race (Zimmerman, 2016).

Zbyszko’s betrayal also had the ancillary effect of changing how professional wrestling world champions were chosen. After his double-cross of Munn, promoters were wary of placing their title in the hands of any performer who was not a highly skilled grappler (Zimmerman, 2016). This served two purposes in the minds of the major promoters. Firstly, it maintained the apparent legitimacy of the championship, much the way local challenges had in the Carnival Era (Zimmerman, 2016). Any unruly local who had the poor sense to attack the world champion would suffer a severe and humiliating beating for it. Secondly, any prideful wrestler sent by an unscrupulous promoter to betray the champion would similarly suffer a severe and humiliating beating (Phantom, 1997). This soft requirement of champions having to be particularly skilled fighters persisted for several decades. This policy is often described as “protecting the business,” which in layman’s terms means to make the lie of legitimate competition plausible.

Stecher’s tale took a number of heart-wrenching turns. After agreeing to lose the title back to Lewis, Stecher was never again the top star of the industry (Solomon, 2020). Likewise, after the success of Mondt’s Slam Bang Western Style Wrestling, the national audience was no longer interested in gritty midwestern fundamental wrestling. Indeed New York glitz had

finally supplanted the agrarian roots of the American sport. Stecher would compete in matches throughout the country, losing worked bouts to new stars (Solomon, 2020). In an ironic twist, one of those new stars was a former collegiate American football from Dartmouth star and future world heavyweight champion of professional wrestling Gus Sonnenberg (Solomon, 2020). In 1934, Stecher would retire at age 41 (Solomon, 2020). Stecher's mental illness continued to advance (Solomon, 2020). Eventually, Stecher's wife divorced him after 20 years of marriage and was granted custody of their children (Solomon, 2020). Stecher would eventually be institutionalized due to his worsening mental illness at St. Cloud Veterans Hospital (Solomon, 2020). Despite his illness, Stecher remained a widely respected figure among members of the industry (Solomon, 2020). During his time in St. Cloud, Stecher was reportedly the recipient of frequent visits by wrestlers and production staffers alike (Solomon, 2020). One such guest was Lou Thesz, who engaged in a sparring match with the aging and ill Stecher; Thesz would report that Stecher beat him handily and marveled at the informed veteran's acumen (Solomon, 2020). Stecher would remain institutionalized there until his death in 1974 (Solomon, 2020).

Mondt would align himself with New York promoter Ray Fabiani and eventually reconcile with Curley as part of a new professional wrestling trust (Phantom, 1997). This version of the trust would be an alliance of promoters who would work as a committee and share talent among geographic promotional fiefdoms (Phantom, 1997). This trust would be the precursor to the National Wrestling Alliance, which dominated the professional wrestling industry during the mid-20th Century, known as the Territory Era (Hornbaker, 2018).



## 5.5 The Territory Era

Influential promoter Jack Curley's theory of the professional wrestling industry differed sharply from his former rivals in the Gold Dust Trio. Curley favored a decentralized governance of professional wrestling, with shared national standards among several geographical regions. Curley would enter into a second professional wrestling trust agreement among several of the top North American professional wrestling promoters in 1933 (Yohe, 2022). The Great Depression was sapping the drawing power of live events, and creating bankable attractions was vital to the survival of promoters. Despite their business rivalry, Curley and Mondt would set aside their differences and create a new professional wrestling trust agreement along with several other top promoters around the country (Yohe, 2022). The new trust would only survive for three years. Curley would die of a heart attack in 1937 (Yohe, 2022). The year of Curley's passing saw the professional debut of a towering figure of professional wrestling history, Lou Thesz.

This theory would allow promoters in different areas of the country to focus on their own regions specifically (Hornbaker, 2007). It also allowed for wrestlers to move from region to region periodically to keep their characters fresh and to hone their craft (Hornbaker, 2007). Promoters would be granted exclusive rights to particular regions of the country, as well as the local television markets within that area (Hornbaker, 2007). The centralized national board of a national sanctioning body would be composed of promoters who serviced these regions (Hornbaker, 2007). This sanctioning authority of promoters was known as the National Wrestling Alliance (Hornbaker, 2007).

This would compete with the National Wrestling Association, an organization of athletic commissions that were directly tied to state governments (Hornbaker, 2011). This organization was an offshoot of the National Boxing Association (NBA), which at the time was the dominant boxing sanctioning body across the United States (Hornbaker, 2011). While the NBA would go on to become the World Boxing Association, the oldest of the major boxing sanctioning bodies in the world, this version of the NWA would recognize one of the top titles of the era (Hornbaker, 2011). Despite its legal authority, this organization proved to be dysfunctional, as unity among the commissions was fleeting at best (Hornbaker, 2011). Nevertheless, this organization had been the guiding force in professional wrestling

from 1930-1949 (Hornbaker, 2011). Importantly the National Wrestling Association world heavyweight title would exist as a separate lineage from Ed “The Strangler Lewis’s line, after a dispute with Gus Sonnenberg in 1930 (Hornbaker, 2011; Tanabe et al., 2022). It had proven to be dysfunctional at best as numerous states would defy the edicts of the organization and recognize their own champions (Hornbaker, 2011). Most of the top stars of the 1930’s would bounce back and forth between the NWA world heavyweight title and the Stecher-Gotch classical title (Hornbaker, 2011). This included top stars of the 1930’s and early 1940’s like Jim London’s, Dick Shikat, Danny O’Mahony, Dean Detton, Whipper Billy Watson, and American football legend Bronko Nagurski (Hornbaker, 2011; Tanabe et al., 2022). Londos had held the title from 1938-1946 and retired with the belt (Tanabe et al., 2022). The title was reactivated in the summer of 1948 when rising star Lou Thesz unified three of the major titles of the time (Hornbaker, 2011; Tanabe et al., 2022). Thesz would continue on his campaign of title unification over the next several years (Tanabe et al., 2022).

For most of the mid-20th Century this system of exclusive geographic territorial promotional rights was the norm (Hornbaker, 2007). Each territory would have its own champions, performers and stories, but all promotions would share recognition of a world heavyweight champion, a world junior heavyweight champion, and the world tag-team champions (Hornbaker, 2007). The NWA would again shift the power axis of professional wrestling away from the American northeast and back towards the heartland (Hornbaker, 2007). This move was partially due to the constant power struggles in the New York market, including overbearing commissions, a litany of competing promoters with constantly shifting alliances, and all professional wrestling was blocked from the third iteration of Madison Square Garden between 1939 and 1948 by then-arena boss and future New York Rangers founder Tex Rickard (Phantom, 1997).

A number of familiar names from the Slam Bang Era emerged as charter members of the NWA. The founder and first president of the national network of professional wrestling promotions was Paul “Pinkie George” Georgeacopoulos (Wheeler, 2016). George was a former boxer and the son of Greek immigrants (Wheeler, 2016). He would relocate from his Massachusetts home to Des Moines, Iowa in his adult life (Wheeler, 2016). George had promoted professional wrestling during the Slam Bang Era in the Midwest (Wheeler, 2016). He would go on to become a successful wrestling promoter in Iowa in the 1940’s (Wheeler,

2016). George had developed close relationships with several of the local promoters in the Midwest region and created the NWA as a cooperative cartel of wrestling promotions in 1948 (Hornbaker, 2007; Wheeler, 2016). There would be five other charter members of the NWA Board, which would govern matters relevant to all of the promotions (Hornbaker, 2007).

Anton “Tony” Stecher was one of the founding members of the NWA (Minnesota Boxing Hall of Fame, 2022). Stecher was the younger brother and business partner of Slam Bang Era world champion Joe Stecher (Minnesota Boxing Hall of Fame, 2022). Tony had also had his own in-ring career, claiming the middleweight titles of Nebraska and Kansas, even one having a bout that lasted over five hours (Minnesota Boxing Hall of Fame, 2022). Tony would leave his in-ring career to manage his brother Joe through the peaks of professional wrestling and the valleys of mental illness (Solomon, 2020). After Joe retired, he and Tony would retire to Minnesota in the upper Midwest (Minnesota Boxing Hall of Fame, 2022). Along with being his ailing brother’s longtime caretaker Tony remained involved in the professional wrestling business (Solomon, 2020). He would invest much of what he made during their years on top of the professional wrestling industry into the Minnesota Wrestling and Boxing Club (Minnesota Boxing Hall of Fame, 2022). Throughout the remainder of his career, Stecher would be a frequent promotional and business partner in both boxing and professional wrestling with Wally Karbo (Minnesota Boxing Hall of Fame, 2022). For his work as a boxing promoter, Tony would be posthumously inducted into the Minnesota Boxing Hall of Fame in 2013 (Minnesota Boxing Hall of Fame, 2022). These clubs would eventually evolve into the American Wrestling Association, with the addition of co-owners Dennis Stecher (Tony’s son) and promoter Wally Karbo (Phillips, 2022). Dennis would sell the final shares of the Stecher ownership to Karbo and the promotion’s top star Verne Gagne in 1959 (Phillips, 2022). The AWA would become one of the major promotions in the NWA, prior to branching out on its own. The AWA would become the dominant wrestling promotion in the Midwest and the training grounds for a jaw-dropping litany of talent.

Also on the team was Al Haft and Harry Light. Haft was the primary professional wrestling promoter of the Midwest Wrestling Association based in Columbus, Ohio (Hornbaker, 2007). Haft had been a successful amateur wrestling coach, leading the 1923 Ohio State University Buckeyes to the national team collegiate championship (Hornbaker, 2007). Light was a Parisian-born professional wrestling promoter based out of Detroit (Hornbaker, 2007).

During his formative years his family had settled in Montreal, leading to Light serving for Canada in the First World War (Hornbaker, 2007). Like George, he had been a professional boxer in his younger years (Hornbaker, 2007). Light's Big Time Wrestling promotion would become one of the first promotions to use local television to corner the local market (Hornbaker, 2007).

Perhaps the most influential figure on the board would be Sam Muchnick (Hornbaker, 2007). The Ukrainian-born Muchnick would settle in St. Louis, Missouri in the American Midwest during his early childhood (Missouri Sports Hall of Fame, 2014). By the time the NWA was founded, Muchnick was a veteran of the Second World War as a member of the Army Air Forces, as well as a veteran of his own promotional war with Tom Packs, a fellow St. Louis promoter and his former mentor (Missouri Sports Hall of Fame, 2014). With Packs monopolizing most of the top local talent, Muchnick sought out stars from other territories to come in and improve his draw (Missouri Sports Hall of Fame, 2014). Muchnick would go on to become one of the pillars of the organization and the era.

The final charter member was Orville Brown (Hornbaker, 2007). Unique among the group, Brown was not a promoter, but an active wrestler (Hornbaker, 2007). Brown had become one of the top stars in the Midwest under Packs promotion (Hornbaker, 2007). Brown's home promotion was in Kansas City, where he had spent 1940-1948 as a main event star (Hornbaker, 2007). Brown would emerge from that fateful 1948 meeting at the Hotel President in Waterloo, Iowa as the first world champion of the NWA (Hornbaker, 2007). This title would go on to be one of the most storied and respected titles in the history of professional wrestling. Unfortunately for Brown and the board members, a car accident would cut the first champion's career short. Brown had unified the title of the various promotions in the alliance and was heading for a Fall 1949 showdown with National Wrestling Association world heavyweight champion Lou Thesz (Hornbaker, 2007). Brown's injuries suffered in the collision just 24 days prior to the scheduled blockbuster would end his in-ring career (Hornbaker, 2007). Brown would remain on the NWA board as the promoter of the Kansas City territory until 1958 (Hornbaker, 2007). On 25 November 1949, Lou Thesz would be awarded the NWA world heavyweight title, an inauspicious beginning to an historic reign that would define Thesz's career and the NWA's dominance of American professional wrestling in the mid-20th Century (Hornbaker, 2007).

By 1950, there were 26 members of the NWA (Hornbaker, 2007). The promoters would trade talent, blacklist unreliable performers, freeze out independent promotions, and respect the territorial divisions accepted by the organization (Hornbaker, 2007). George would step down as the President of the NWA in September of 1950, and Sam Muchnick would rise to the organization's presidency (Hornbaker, 2007). Muchnick would serve as NWA President for a total of 22 years, split across two terms from 1950-1960 and from 1963-1975 respectively (Hornbaker, 2007). In early 1951, George incorporated the NWA as a non-profit organization in his home state of Iowa as a tax haven (Hornbaker, 2007). George would leave the organization later in 1951 but continue running wrestling shows (Hornbaker, 2007). Other NWA promoters set about harassing George, as was the modus operandi for the organization throughout much of its peak years (Hornbaker, 2007). Muchnick would serve as booker for Thesz while he was champion (Thesz et al., 2000). With the ever-expanding number of territories, the champion would be traveling to various territories and wrestling more than 300 days per year (Hornbaker, 2007). The tradition of the "traveling champion" had been around since the Catch Era, but the NWA's network and the proliferation of modern air travel would take this tradition to dizzying heights.

Thesz would have a more narratively satisfying moment came in the title unification bout between Thesz and Baron Michele Leone in 1952 (Thesz et al., 2000). Leone was an Italian immigrant to the United States who shot to fame during the Second World War. As an Italian citizen, Leone was exempted from the American Selective Service, a conscription lottery used by the United States when war is declared (SoCal Uncensored, 2022). A citizen of an Axis power, Leone shot to fame in the northeast as a heel during and after the Second World War (SoCal Uncensored, 2022). He had even once been a tag-team partner with historic northeastern heel "Gorgeous" George (SoCal Uncensored, 2022). Leone moved to California where he would work for promoter Johnny Doyle in the Southern California territory (SoCal Uncensored, 2022). Leone became the top draw and the holder of California's world title during Doyle's brief exit from the NWA (SoCal Uncensored, 2022). Thesz lobbied the NWA board to unify the titles, but this was a politically difficult move. Leone was the top draw in the largest state with major markets dotting the West Coast of the United States (SoCal Uncensored, 2022). Thesz would defeat Leone at Los Angeles's Gilmore Field on 21 May 1952 (Thesz et al., 2000). This bout would draw over 25,000 fans and a record gate of

\$103,277.75 (over \$1.1 million when adjusted for inflation); this was the first professional wrestling event with a gate of over \$100,000 (SoCal Uncensored, 2022). Thesz had unified the various lineages of the world heavyweight title, going back through Stecher, Gotch, and Hackenschmidt (Hornbaker, 2007). Leone, having willingly done business to help the NWA and having proven to be a massive draw in the Southern California territory, would win the NWA Junior Heavyweight title in 1953 and hold that undisputed world championship for the better part of the next two years (SoCal Uncensored, 2022).

Muchnick and Thesz would be the central figures of the NWA's rise to dominance of the professional wrestling industry in the United States (Hornbaker, 2007). In all, Thesz would spend 3,749 days of his career, as the NWA champion, across three officially recognized reigns (Hornbaker, 2007). Lou Thesz would become a prototype for the traveling champion, a classy, universally respected proven draw with legitimate martial grappling skills who could not be betrayed (People Pill, 2021). Even pioneering martial artist "Judo" Gene LeBell described Thesz as one of the toughest men he'd ever met, alongside Karl Gotch and Ed "The Strangler" Lewis (People Pill, 2021). Thrice NCAA wrestling champion, and Thesz's one-time hand-picked successor as champion, Dick Hutton marveled at the legitimate grappling acumen Thesz displayed in sparring (People Pill, 2021). Muchnick handled Thesz's bookings, giving him direct control of the top drawing performer in the industry, along with the top drawing title he held (Hornbaker, 2007). Muchnick also wielded considerable political power within the NWA network. Annual meetings would occur between the ever-expanding board of promoters. The NWA used strong arm tactics to enforce their business model across the country.

In 1956, the NWA received its first major blow from the United States federal government. The federal government accused the NWA of monopolizing the domestic professional wrestling performance industry (United States v. National Wrestling Alliance, 1956). The government would cite the practices of blacklisting talents, intimidating non-network promoters (dubbed "outlaw promoters" in the NWA), and wielding disproportionate power over the industry (United States v. National Wrestling Alliance, 1956; Hornbaker, 2007). The Justice Department had sought to dissolve the NWA's cartel (United States v. National Wrestling Alliance, 1956). Muchnick was able to use political leverage with long-time Illinois Congressman Melvin Price, who served a district in the St. Louis metro-area, to

negotiate a lesser penalty (Hornbaker, 2007). The lobbying ended up with the NWA joining a consent decree in federal court (*United States v. National Wrestling Alliance*, 1956). This decree allowed the NWA to continue operations but forced them to swear under federal legal penalties that it would abandon a number of their monopolistic practices (*United States v. National Wrestling Alliance*, 1956). The degree to which the NWA and Muchnick honored the individual provisions of the decree is historically considered to be between dubious and doubtful (Hornbaker, 2007).

In 1957, Thesz would travel to Japan and enter into a series of matches with Korean-born Japanese professional wrestling pioneer Rikidozan (Ojst, 2021). Thesz and Rikidozan would enter into a years-long rivalry. Thesz's all-business in-ring style delighted the polite Japanese fans (Thesz et al., 2000). Thesz would soon after anoint Dick Hutton as his successor after his first reign as champion (Ojst, 2021). Thesz would then summarily claim the newly minted NWA International Heavyweight championship and defend it across Europe, and then in Japan (Ojst, 2021). Thesz would face Rikidozan in a series of bouts for the NWA International title, eventually losing a bout to the Japanese hero (Ojst, 2021). Rikidozan's Japan Professional Wrestling Association (JWA) would become an NWA member and though the title was absorbed into subsequent organizations, the belt that Rikidozan won from Thesz would remain in use until the year 2000 (Ojst, 2021).

### 5.5.a The Rise of the American Wrestling Association

Though the NWA was expanding its global reach, domestic competition began to emerge. In 1960, frustrated by his inability to successfully lobby for the NWA world heavyweight title, Minnesota promoter Verne Gagne would break away from the NWA and create the American Wrestling Association (Phillips, 2022). Gagne had had a distinguished career before entering into professional wrestling. Gagne had been a stellar high school athlete (Phillips, 2022). He would then serve as a member of the elite Underwater Demolition Team of the United State Navy during the Second World War (Phillips, 2022). Gagne would then go on to be a two-time NCAA national wrestling champion at the University of Minnesota (Phillips, 2022). He won the light heavyweight title his junior year (Phillips, 2022). His senior year he moved up to knock off two-time defending national heavyweight champion and future NWA world heavyweight title holder Dick Hutton in the finals (Phillips, 2022). Gagne would become an alternate for the American Olympic freestyle wrestling team for the 1948 Games in London

(Phillips, 2022). Gagne had also played American football at Minnesota, earning all-conference honors (Phillips, 2022). In 1947, Gagne was then drafted by the powerhouse Chicago Bears in the National Football League (NFL), however a dispute with the owner of the club caused Gagne to abandon his football dreams and enter the world of professional wrestling (Phillips, 2022).

Having already led an adventurous and sporting life, Gagne became a top star for Tony Stecher and Wally Karbo, eventually becoming a promotional partner, then outright owner of the territory (Phillips, 2022). Owing to his history as a major collegiate star in Minnesota, Gagne was an instant star. He took to the performance art of professional wrestling with the grounded style of Thesz and prior generations. In 1950, less than two years into his professional career, Gagne would capture the NWA world junior heavyweight title (Phillips, 2022; Tanabe et al., 2022). Like many of the champions of the day, Gagne held the title for several years at a time. Gagne promoted himself as the top star of his promotion (Schrader, 2017). He would hold his own AWA World Heavyweight Championship ten times and for a total of 4,677 days (Schrader, 2017; Tanabe et al., 2022). Gagne would promote throughout much of the Midwest, promoting syndicated television programs, and touting his champions as the equals to the NWA. Gagne's reach made the AWA a legitimate national promotion, reaching as far west as Las Vegas (Phillips, 2022). Gagne would eventually pass the torch of being the AWA's leading man to Nick Bockwinkel in 1975 (Schrader, 2017; Phillips 2022).

This region would become a hotbed for new talents (Michaels, 2015). Gagne would hold brutal training camps for wrestling in the Minnesota winter (Michaels, 2015). Only the toughest and most dedicated talents would endure and overcome the camp. The roster of professional wrestlers personally trained by Gagne is perhaps unmatched by any other American trainer. His students included "The Nature Boy" Ric Flair, Ricky "The Dragon" Steamboat, Blackjacks Lanza and Mulligan, Sgt. Slaughter, Jimmy "The Boogie Woogie Man" Valiant, Bob Backlund, , "The Nasty Boys" Brian Knobbs and Jerry Saggs, Iranian Olympian Hussein "The Iron Sheik" Vaziri, Baron Von Raschke, Scott Norton, Larry "The Ax" Hennig and his son Curt "Mr. Perfect" Hennig, Ken Patera, "Superfly" Jimmy Snuka, Greg Gagne, along with the original Anderson Brothers (Michaels, 2015).



## 5.5.b The Rise of the Capitol Wrestling Corporation and the World Wide Wrestling Federation

Though the center of the professional wrestling industry seemed to be stationed in St. Louis, the future of the professional wrestling business was being established 1500 km away in New York. It was there that promoter Vincent J. McMahon had partnered with Gold Dust Trio veteran Toots Mondt to form the Capitol Wrestling Corporation, which oversaw the World Wide Wrestling Federation (WWWF) (Phantom, 1997). Though the Gold Dust Trio's centralized power over the industry in the 1920's had fallen apart, Mondt did not abandon his dedication to his vision for professional wrestling. During the Territory Era he would share his knowledge with his new like-minded promotional partner Vincent J. McMahon in their successful New York-based territory (Phantom, 1997). Mondt would also impart his knowledge, philosophy and methods to the eager ears of his business partner's son who happened to be working as a young staffer at the WWWF (Phantom, 1997). The protege was Vincent Kennedy McMahon, the father of modern American professional wrestling (Phantom, 1997).

Jess McMahon had been a boxing promoter and had a long-time business relationship with Tex Rickard, the then-boss of Madison Square Garden (Phantom, 1997). McMahon's son, Vincent J. McMahon founded the Capitol Wrestling Corporation (CWC) in 1953 (Phantom, 1997). Toots Mondt was brought on and the CWC would adopt much of the same philosophy and practices as were common during the Slam Bang Era (Phillips, 2019). The CWC would become a member of the NWA (Phillips, 2019). Positioned in New York City, CWC had the advantage of territorial control over the population- rich "Yankeedom" of the northeastern markets (Phillips, 2019). The New York Territory would inevitably once again become a coveted destination for talent because of the numerous opportunities for big pay off in large markets, the exposure given by the nationally circulated New York media, and the prestige of working at the world's most famous arena (Phillips, 2019).

CWC would rely on the avid interest of the ethnic enclaves in major northeastern cities as a demographic guide to promotion (Phillips, 2019). The promotion would build a heroic babyface champion who belonged to one of these ethnic groups and produce a seemingly endless roster of threatening heels to challenge them during an extended reign (Phillips,

2019). The most prominent examples of this booking style from this era were Italian-American megastar Bruno Sammartino and Puerto Rican hero Pedro Morales (Phillips, 2019). During this period of American history, the Italian-American in the northeast was at its peak, with the massive entries through Ellis Island becoming permanently settled and embedded in the region and having large families (Bruno, 2020). This period also saw New York become the capital of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, which saw the community of the Caribbean-Hispanic island territory become one of the largest and most prominent enclaves in New York (Duany, 2008). When Sammartino or Morales would compete at Madison Square Garden, their community would show up in force to support them, often to the point of riot if their heroes faced kayfabe injustice. The Italian demographic was similar in most northeastern cities at the time (Bruno, 2020). Over a decade (17 May 1963-30 April 1977) Sammartino and Morales would combine to reign as champion for all but 30 days (ESPN, 2022). Bruno alone would spend over 4,000 days of his career as the WWF world champion (ESPN, 2022). These extended world title reigns for babyface champions would be the norm until the early 1990's, when the advent of cable television made all titles more mobile across the roster (ESPN, 2022). Between Rogers winning the first world title of the WWF on 11 April 1963 to Andre the Giant willingly and immediately selling the WWF world heavyweight championship to Ted DiBiase on 5 February 1988, babyfaces spent 8,000 combined days holding the top prize of the New York territory, while heels spend a paltry 390 days in the top spot (with pioneering heel "Superstar" Billy Graham accounting for 296 of those days) (Phillips, 2019; ESPN, 2022). This philosophy would persist into the modern era where professional wrestling titles would bounce more freely among champions. In fact, the first wrestler in the combined history of CWC and WWE to begin and end a continuous title reign of more than one year as a heel was Brock Lesnar with his 504-day Universal title reign from 2017-2018 (ESPN, 2022).

This model was called the "heel factory" in a "babyface territory" and would become a staple of the creative philosophy of the future-WWE (Phillips, 2019). This is opposed to other territories and the prevailing NWA national philosophy, where a cunning heel champion would tour through various territories, and escape through nefarious means (Hornbaker, 2007). This would build local babyfaces, while creating a context for future storylines. These competing philosophies are continuously debated among both fans and administrators in the wrestling community. The CWC crowned "Nature Boy" Buddy Rogers as their first world

heavyweight champion on 11 April 1963 (ESPN, 2022). From that date, the pattern is so incredibly prominent that in 2016, the WWE separated their historical statistics and Hall of Fame wings into the ill-defined “Legacy Era” and “Modern Era” (Greer, 2021).

The northeastern style of wrestling would also distance itself from the technical style that dominated much of the national scene. The top performers in the New York territory would be personalities and spectacle to draw fans. This type of theatre bothered purists then, and the appropriate ratio of character spectacle to stage combat sport is perhaps the most prominent philosophical question in the world of professional wrestling. While it is limitlessly discussed, no imperial study of the comparative drawing power of these booking philosophies has ever been made; this topic could justify its own dissertation.

Furthermore, the CWC prototypes of top stars also differed sharply philosophically from the norms of the NWA. Physically larger performers were and are universally considered to be bigger draws, particularly if they are impressively athletic. Famed wrestling executive Jim Ross said, “Athletic big men draw money” (Rovere, 2022). While the NWA, AWA and CWC billed their top division as “heavyweight,” defined at the time as 225lbs (102kg) or more, they differed sharply in the requisite skills the performer needed to have (Tanabe et al., 2022). The NWA model largely required the top performer to be an athlete with impressive martial grappling skills or at least uncommonly tough in a legitimate fight. The AWA also followed this policy to a large extent. The CWC, built largely on Mondt’s vision of professional wrestling as a performance art, did not prioritize legitimate toughness or martial grappling skill in their stars. Reasoning that professional wrestling is performance art, the CWC would cast the wrestlers with the most engaging characters and the most interesting body types as characters.

Only steps from Broadway, the CWC would cast wrestlers with incredible physiques or impressive size throughout their time as the industry leader. Vincent K. McMahon (typically referred to as “Vince McMahon” herein) put prospective wrestlers through the “airport test” as a limit of a proper wrestler’s ability to generate interest (Hustle, 2021). The airport test is simply that if a performer draws attention based on sight at an airport, that they may have drawing power. This could be a performer taller than 200cm, or an incredibly muscular individual, or an extremely colorfully dressed personality, attention equals money in the

CWC equation. The babyface heroes who spend years atop the CWC and WWE ladder tend to have bodybuilder physiques and impressive stature. This model would place legitimate athletic credentials as a secondary. Positive attribute, rather than a deal breaker.

The CWC with Vincent J. McMahon at the helm would become a major force in the NWA throughout the 1950's (Phillips, 2019). The prestigious northeastern territory became a top destination for talent. With Sammartino as their top star, they were constantly importing new stars from other promotions to have 3-4 month runs of shows with their champion (Phillips, 2019). The relationship between the CWC and the NWA were periodically hot or cold depending on the era. From 1963-1971, the CWC operated independently of the NWA and elevated their titles and stars to being co-equal to those of the NWA (Phillips, 2019). The relationship between the two brands was repaired enough to renew their affiliation from 1973-1983, before Vince McMahon left the NWA behind for good with the WWF (Phillips, 2019). Meanwhile the AWA was the third professional wrestling company to have a wide-ranging presence at this time. All three of these organizations billed their primo uomo as "world heavyweight champion" (Tanabe et al., 2022) These three organizations are considered the biggest of the era within the sphere of American professional wrestling. All three organizations crowned long-standing world champions who held the title for years at a time: Lou Thesz spent 3,749 days of his career as the primo uomo of the NWA; Bruno Sammartino spend 4,040 days of his career as the leading actor of the WWWF; and Verne Gagne placed his own name at the top of the call sheet of the AWA for 4,677 days (Tanabe et al., 2022).

### 5.5.c The Modern Heel and the Birth of Television

By the mid-20th Century, professional wrestling in the United States had become a three-horse race. The NWA network brokering its patchwork alliance of promotional fiefdoms, and the AWA and WWWF dominating the Midwest and Northeast respectively. The NWA required consensus based on their business model requiring the consent of the organizational board of directors. This presented a double-edged sword where promoters could keep a stable presentation the proven draws as the consensus top stars, but also the gunk of bureaucracy and competing agendas stifled potential innovation. The AWA and WWWF were centrally-owned, so they had an advantage of being able to unilaterally choose their primo uomos based on their individual creative philosophies.

In the AWA, Verne Gagne had a clear, if inelegant creative philosophy where he was his own top star (Phillips, 2022). This presented the great drawback of the unilateral booking model, wherein no one could challenge the authority of the central owner, particularly one as legitimately intimidating as an Olympic alternate proclaiming himself the best wrestler in the region (Phillips, 2022). To many, this choice appeared to be a function of ego on the part of the leader of the large promotion (Phillips, 2022). As the years progressed, upper-midwestern fans would begin to get tired of an aging Gagne as the top star of the promotion (Phillips, 2022). Later on, they would get tired of the traditional presentation Gagne had insisted on perpetuating, and this slowly led to the erosion of interest in AWA in the late 1980's (Phillips, 2022).

Meanwhile, with avowed and dedicated non-wrestler Vincent J. McMahon at the helm, the WWWF had broader carte blanche to experiment with non-traditional top performers as leading stars. Toots Mondt was also a creative executive in the WWWF at this point. Despite the betrayal by Stanislav Zbyszko in 1925 and being knocked out by Pedro Morales in the 1960's, Mondt stood by his Slam Bang Era theory that legitimate grappling skills were completely secondary to showmanship and spectacle (Phantom, 2001). While it remains controversial to this day, this method (as of this writing) has shown an undeniable ability to draw consistently over the past nine decades. The innovator who would go on to become the first modern heel and the biggest drawing star of his time was born an impoverished Nebraskan farm boy named George Wagner, but would be remembered by history as the flamboyant, glamorous, charismatic, dastardly, dandy "Gorgeous" George (Jares, 1974).

Though he would become a towering figure in American culture and professional wrestling history, Gorgeous George's billed height was only 175cm (5ft 9 in) with a billed weight of 98 kg (215lbs), both of which were almost certainly exaggerated (Jares, 1974). Wagner was born in 1915, after Frank Gotch and George Hackenschmidt had already retired (Jares, 1974). This new generation of performers were born after kayfabe performance art conspiracy had truly and officially taken hold. Though trained in competitive amateur wrestling, Wagner would not stake a claim to any impressive amateur titles. Instead, he would perform at traveling carnivals across the American South and Midwest, securing a reported bounty of \$0.35 per victory (Jares, 1974). After middling throughout his career with his naturally brown hair and

unimposing stocky physique, Wagner decided to make a drastic shift to his character (Jares, 1974). The innovative changes he made to his presentation would thereafter become staples of the art form thereafter.

Wagner adopted a “glamour boy” presentation, and it would make him rich (Jares, 1974). He would dye his hair platinum blonde with curly locks (Jares, 1974). He would begin wearing ornate, shining, sequined robes to the ring (Jares, 1974). And as his arrival into the theatrical space would be heralded by the tunes of “Pomp and Circumstance” (Jares, 1974). The arrogant heel would be seen with a manservant named “Jeffries” who would spray “Chanel No. 10” perfume from a massive perfume atomizer, to “cover the stink” of the crowd (Jares, 1974). During his tediously long entrance, George would demand that the entire ring and ringside area be sprayed with the perfume (Jares, 1974). When referees would come close to him, he would shout, “Get your filthy hands off of me!” (Jares, 1974) He would then demand that Jeffries spray the referee’s hands with Chanel No. 10 to be fit to touch him (Jares, 1974). George was also openly a coward, a cheat and a trickster in the ring (Jares, 1974). In a medium where bravado is at the forefront, Gorgeous George decided to be both arrogant and cowardly, which sent crowds full of veterans of the World Wars, and everyday blue collar laborers into an absolute rage (Jares, 1974). George also married his first wife, Elizabeth “Betty” Hanson in the early in-ring wedding ceremonies which were played out in various cities in the promotions’ touring loops (Jares, 1974). This perfume would also be used to blind hapless referees or unsuspecting opponents at times (Jares, 1974). “Gorgeous George” was both flamboyant and effeminate, disgusting the audience’s expectation of the traditional image of a ruggedly masculine American hero, particularly in a combat sport (Jares, 1974). Gorgeous George would dub himself “The Human Orchid,” and later “The Sensation of the Nation,” and though the paying audiences of the nation loathed and ridiculed him, he became an icon of popular culture (Jares, 1974). Crowds across the country were simply infuriated by Gorgeous George and would pay in droves to see him get beaten. Of course, promoters, keen to keep their proverbial golden goose drawing furious crowds, would seldom let the people have it.

In the 1940’s and 1950’s the invention of television changed professional wrestling forever (Stewart, 2001). Early television channels needed content and professional wrestling companies were happy to oblige (Stewart, 2001). This medium would serve as a grand

advertisement of the entertainment available at the upcoming live shows across the various regions (Stewart, 2001). Professional wrestling was relatively cheap to produce and was wildly engaging to fans (Stewart, 2001). Gorgeous George made his television debut on 11 November 1947 (Stewart, 2001). This structure of television wrestling would persist for decades, until in the 1990's when professional wrestling became a television property unto itself (Stewart, 2001). Gorgeous George was the perfect visage for this new medium. His ornate wardrobe and brilliant hair jump burst forth from the small black and white screens (Jares, 1974). Throughout the 1940's and 1950's, Gorgeous George became one of the most famous personalities in the United States (Jares, 1974). He gave his celebrity endorsement to many products (Jares, 1974). George was also well-aware of his drawing power and could purportedly command up to half of the gross gate for an event he headlined (Jares, 1974). At his peak, his endorsements and wages from wrestling made him an impressive sum of over \$100,000 per year, which would equate to over \$1.2 million per annum in 2022 dollars (Jares, 1974). Though much of his in-ring offense was limited to his entrance and his patented "flying headlock takedown" Gorgeous George would engage in a number of high profile feuds in his career (Jares, 1974).

While George was the top drawing star of his era, his persona did little to impress the stoic traditionalist Lou Thesz, who was complimentary of George's grappling ability, while openly lamenting his grandiose gimmickry (Thesz et al., 2000). George and Thesz drew massively in their bout against one another (Jares, 1974; Thesz et al., 2000). George would win "world titles" prior to the NWA cartel unifying the title lineages of the national wrestling scene in 1952; however, even without the coveted belt, Gorgeous George was the leading man of the American professional wrestling industry (Jares, 1974). After a 12-year hiatus at the world's most famous arena, Rickard, Mondt and McMahon Sr brought professional wrestling back to Madison Square Garden on 22 February 1949 (Phillips, 2019). The star attraction of that card was Gorgeous George (Phillips, 2019). On 15 October of that same year, George would play himself in the Hollywood crime drama "Alias The Champ" where a fictional version of his character becomes entangled in organized crime and is falsely accused of murder (IMDb, 2022).

George's most famed opponent was the rugged Canadian "Whipper" Billy Watson (Jares, 1974). The two stars engaged in a lengthy rivalry that went on throughout the 1950's (Jares,

1974). Their years-long enmity towards one another reached a climax on 12 March 1959 in Watson's native Ontario, Canada (Jares, 1974). The two would engage in a "hair vs hair" bout at The Maple Leaf Gardens, which was Watson's primary arena (Jares, 1974). Over 20,000 fans flocked to see the local hero take on the American dandy (Jares, 1974). Watson would emerge victorious and shave the most famous hair in professional wrestling history from the head of the top star of the day (Jares, 1974). It can be conjectured with little doubt that George was compensated handsomely to lose his golden curly locks (Jares, 1974). George would retire in 1962 at age 48, after being diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver after years of alcohol abuse (Jares, 1974). The next year he would pass away from a heart attack near his California ranch (Jares, 1974).

Though he passed away, Gorgeous George left an indelible mark on American culture, and professional wrestling. Boxing legend Muhammad Ali cited Gorgeous George as his inspiration in his iconic promos, having met the aging champion during a radio interview in his late teens (McLeod, 2015). Nobel Laureate in Literature Bob Dylan also described his encounter with the wrestling superstar as an "inspiration" and a "life-changing moment" (McLeod, 2015). Music legend James Brown credited much of his fashion style and self-promotion to Gorgeous George (McLeod, 2015). In the 1980's and 1990's professional wrestling legend Randy "The Macho Man" Savage recycled "Pomp and Circumstance" as his entrance music, and never shied from flamboyant garb (Ross, 2013).

Moreover, within the craft of professional wrestling, the contributions of Gorgeous George to the overall presentational norms of the art form cannot be overstated. He was the first professional wrestler to use entrance music. As an actor in the genre innovator of the "arrogant cowardly heel," "effeminate glamour boy," and "wealthy heel" personas, which account for the majority of the sub-groups of heel performers today. He was also a shrewd businessman when it came to his drawing power. Never swayed by worked championships, Gorgeous George was professional wrestling's first crossover pop culture star. George was the first performer to transcend the business and become a true celebrity in his own right. Gorgeous George seldom held major titles in professional wrestling promotions because his drawing power was completely independent from the belt. This points to a rhetorical question often posed in professional wrestling: Does the belt make the man, or does the man make the belt? No fictional championship was needed to make Gorgeous George a draw across the



United States. He was also largely responsible for the success of professional wrestling in early television. George is a member of every notable professional wrestling hall of fame. His 97-year-old first wife Betty accepted his induction into the WWE Hall of Fame in 2010 (Jares, 1974).

Built in the image of Gorgeous George was the next generation of heel champion, “The Nature Boy” Buddy Rogers. Born Herman Rohde in New Jersey in 1921, Rogers would become the top-drawing heel of the 1960’s (WWE, 2022). The son of German immigrants, Rogers would become a local champion in amateur wrestling and long-distance swimming in his youth, Rogers debuted in 1939 and was an immediate success (UPI, 1992). Buddy Rogers would take a break from wrestling to join the US Navy during the Second World War (UPI, 1992). Following the allied victory Rogers resumed his career in the ring, and became a hit with television audiences (Stewart, 2001). Unlike Gorgeous George, Rogers was tall, strapping and handsome. With the look of a matinee idol, he would become a top heel thanks to his blustery promos orotund presentation (WWE, 2022). He would famously strut around the ring mid-match to the delight and chagrin of the onlookers. He also made the fabled “figure-four leg-lock” submission hold famous (WWE, 2022). Like George before him, Rogers became a favorite of CWC and the elder McMahon (WWE, 2022). Also, like George before him, Rogers became a rival of Lou Thesz.

Unlike George, Rogers was a young upstart star and had a mind for claiming the NWA title. In his early 30’s, Rogers was a proven draw and favorite of many promoters. On 30 June 1961, Comiskey Park in Chicago would play host to over 38,000 fans, and an NWA world title match between Rogers and New Zealand’s first world heavyweight champion Pat O’Connor (WWE, 2022). The event was dubbed “The Match of the Century” and set both attendance and gate records that stood for decades (WWE, 2022). Rogers would win the title in split falls over O’Connor in a bout that was featured on the WWE’s “Best of the World Heavyweight Championship” DVD in 2009 (Bee, 2019). Rogers gave a famous promo afterwards to a jeering crowd where he declared, “To a nicer guy, it couldn’ta happened!” (WWE, 2022) Roger’s title reign would be tumultuous, as Thesz openly detested him, midwestern promoters mistrusted him and on at least one occasion Karl Gotch and Bill Miller attacked and intentionally injured Rogers backstage (Hornbaker, 2020). After a series of injuries, the NWA board voted for Rogers to drop the title back to Thesz in 1962 (Hornbaker,

2020). Rogers showed reticence towards the prospect up until the day of the bout, where a famously rumored backstage saw Thesz utter the famous line, “Out there, we can do this the easy way or the hard way” (Thesz et al, 2000; Hornbaker, 2020). Rogers would lose the match to Thesz after considerable political leverage was placed upon him by the NWA board, including a threat to withhold the required \$25,000 bond each new NWA world heavyweight champion would place on the belt upon receiving the title (Thesz et al., 2000; Hornbaker, 2020).

Following the tumultuous run at the top of the NWA, Rogers would return for a successful tag-team run in New York with “Handsome” Johnny Barend that saw them crowned the United States Tag-team champions (WWE, 2022). The elder McMahon, frustrated with the bureaucracy of the NWA and dissatisfied with Thesz’s poor drawing power in the northeastern United States, decided to make a change (Phillips, 2019). With Mondt and Rogers at his side would break away from the NWA (Phillips, 2019). New York had a second triumvirate of professional wrestling. Buddy Rogers would become the first World Champion of the WWWF (WWE, 2022). To this day, the lineage of the WWE Championship is traced to that fictional tournament in Rio De Janeiro where Rogers emerged victorious (Hornbaker, 2020). These phantom tournaments in Rio De Janeiro would become an oft-used origin story for new WWWF titles. Pat Patterson would claim the inaugural Intercontinental championship in another fictitious grueling tournament in Rio (Parsons, 2018).

Unfortunately for Rogers, his reign atop the newly independent New York promotion would be short-lived. Shortly after winning the title, Rogers would suffer a minor heart attack (WWE, 2022). His title reign lasted barely a month before he lost in 48 seconds to Bruno Sammartino, in the first of Bruno’s title runs (WWE, 2022). Rogers would wrestle sporadically throughout the rest of the 1960’s (UPI, 1992). Sammartino would return the favor to Rogers by taking the pin in a 2-out-of-3 fall tag team match that pitted Sammartino and Bono Brazil against Rogers and his longtime tag-partner “Handsome” Johnny Barend (Hornbaker, 2020). He would return for a feud with “The Nature Boy” Ric Flair for Jim Crockett Promotions in 1978 over the “Nature Boy” moniker (WWE, 2022). Flair was the modern embodiment of the heel archetype the Roger and Gorgeous George had made famous. Flair would defeat Rogers in just over three minutes (Flair, 2004). In his autobiography, Flair discussed his admiration for the aging star. Flair said that Rogers

showed him his large diamond ring and said, “There’s only one diamond in this business, kid. And that’s me” (Flair, 2004). Rogers would also work as an interviewer and ringside manager for the WWWF until 1984 (WWE, 2022). Rogers lived to be 71 and passed away in 1992 (UPI, 1992). Rogers was the first man to hold the NWA and WWWF titles in his career (Tanabe et al., 2022). He would be a charter member of the WWF Hall of Fame, joining its inaugural class in 1994 (WWE, 2022).

#### 5.5.d The 1970’s: The Technicolor Legends of Territory Wrestling

The territories era of professional wrestling in the United States arguably reached its peak in the 1970’s. Television had made professional wrestlers stars, though NWA regulations and local syndicated television would keep those stars regional. There were over 20 viable professional wrestling promotions across the United States operating simultaneously. Modern professional wrestling fans tend to have a tertiary understanding of this period. The 1970’s acts as the border time between the familiar characters who would be present during the professional wrestling booms of the 1980’s and 1990’s, and a foggy history filled with myth and exaggeration about characters that only existed on black-and-white film. Color television, which had become popular in the mid-1960’s, was present in the majority of American households by the early 1970’s and its vibrancy would bring this era of professional wrestling to life (Color Revolution, 2018). It would also be the final full decade of the Territory Era (Hornbaker, 2018). During this period, the three poles of professional wrestling power in the United States were. Still in viable competition with one another, operating at an uneasy peace, with business relations periodically shifting based on the political winds within the business.

As it was for most of its history, the AWA in Minnesota had the simplest narrative during this period. Verne Gagne held the world title from 1967-1975, except for a forthright-long sabbatical where the belt landed on Dick “Dr. X” Beyer (Schadler, 2013). In 1975, Gagne would drop the title to his hand-picked successor, Nick Bockwinkel (Schadler, 2013). Bockwinkel was the son of Warren Bockwinkel, a professional wrestling hall of famer. Born in wrestling hub St. Louis in 1934, he would go on to play gridiron football for the famed University of Oklahoma Sooners (Johnson, 2015). After an injury ended his gridiron career, he would transfer to and graduate from the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA)

(Johnson, 2015). Following in his father's footsteps, Bockwinkel would be trained to become a professional wrestler and broke into the business in California (Johnson, 2015). In 1955, the US Congress passed, and President Dwight Eisenhower signed the Reserve Forces Act of 1955 (Johnson, 2015). Bockwinkel was drafted in 1958 and served in the US Army for two years (Johnson, 2015). His military service did not stall his wrestling career, and Bockwinkel regularly wrestled for California promotions throughout his service (Johnson, 2015). Bockwinkel would bounce around territories all across the United States until ultimately landing in the AWA in 1970 (Johnson, 2015). Bockwinkel's skills as a performer landed him at an unlikely nexus of the archetypes of Buddy Rogers and Lou Thesz. Like Rogers, Bockwinkel was a bleached-blond, arrogant heel and like Thesz he was a master mat technician and intelligent promo. Bockwinkel's promo style was an even-toned and infuriatingly smug affair which smoothly progressed throughout the narrative of the storyline. Bockwinkel was also a master of the craft of in-ring storytelling, smoothly progressing through the peaks and valleys of the technical matches which were the bread and butter of the upper Midwest. For most of the remainder of AWA history, Bockwinkel would be the top star, spending 2,990 days as the AWA's primo uomo (Schadler, 2013). With the exception of the 14 days Dr. X spent as champion, Gagne and Bockwinkel held the AWA title for the entire decade (Schadler, 2013).

Meanwhile the NWA would see a decade dominated by luminaries of the era. The Brisco Brothers of Oklahoma would be dominant forces in amateur and professional wrestling. Harley Race would become a professional wrestling folk hero as the tough-as-nails perennial champion of the era. And a wildly disproportionate amount of money would be drawn by the alumni of West Texas State College/University.

West Texas A&M University was known as West Texas State College from 1949-1963, then West Texas State University until 1993 (Staff, 2014). During that time, it produced a mind-boggling number of professional wrestling stars. Alumni of this program include "The American Dream" Dusty Rhodes, Terry Funk, Dory Funk Jr., Tully Blanchard, "The Million Dollar Man" Ted DiBiase, "The Lariat" Stan Hansen, Tito Santana, Bruiser Brody, "The Raging Bull" Manny Fernandez, Dick Murdoch, and Barry Windham (Staff, 2014). Six of those performers would go on to win (or buy) world titles in major promotions, making West

Texas State an unlikely leading institution for educating top stars in professional wrestling (Staff, 2014).

The decade began with Dory Funk Jr holding the top spot in the NWA network. He had taken the title in 1969 from longtime champion Gene Kiniski (Tanabe et al., 2022). The Canadian-born Kiniski had been a successful gridiron footballer in the United States and Canada before a knee injury derailed his playing career (Beck, 2022). Kiniski was then trained by the owner of the Amarillo territory of the Northern Texas panhandle Dory Funk Sr (Beck, 2022). Dory Sr was also the patriarch of the Funk wrestling family, which would see both of his sons reach the top of the industry during this decade (Funk & Williams, 2012). Kiniski worked as a heel most of his career, and defeated Verne Gagne for the AWA world heavyweight title in 1961 (Beck, 2022). Kiniski would also go on to have a high-profile feud with Bruno Sammartino over the WWWF title in the northeastern territory (Beck, 2022). Eventually, Kiniski came into a feud with Lou Thesz in 1966 (Beck, 2022). Kiniski would defeat Thesz and end the vaunted grappler's final reign as NWA world champion (Beck, 2022; Thesz et al., 2000). Though Thesz would capture the major UWA title in Mexico 12 years later and remain active in wrestling through an extended semi-retirement until his final match in 1990 at age 74, this ended his final run atop a major professional wrestling organization in the United States (Tanabe et al., 2022). Kiniski would hold the title for over three years, until he passed it along to the older son of his trainer and mentor in Tampa on 11 February 1969 (Beck, 2022; Funk & Williams, 2012).

Dory Funk Jr. and Terry Funk were the sons of long-time wrestler and Amarillo promoter Dory Funk Sr (Funk & Williams, 2012). Given that the state of Texas has more than double the landmass of Germany and a greater population than Australia, it is no surprise that multiple territorial promotions could co-exist throughout the sprawling southern state (How big is Texas?, 2022; Hornbaker, 2018). Dory Sr had been an amateur wrestling champion in his youth and fought for the United States Navy in the Second World War (Funk & Williams, 2012). Dory Sr would wrestle throughout the territories of the United States, achieving his greatest success by claiming the NWA Junior Heavyweight Championship for 36 days in the summer of 1958 (Funk & Williams, 2012; Tanabe, 2022). Dory Sr eventually founded the Amarillo territory after retiring and successfully promote there for the remainder of his life (Funk & Williams, 2012). Dory Sr was instrumental in recruiting and training the expansive

roster of West Texas State alum as professional wrestlers, as the university is located in Canyon, Texas, only 30 km (20 miles) away from his home base of Amarillo (Funk & Williams, 2012). Dory Sr also maintained a strong working relationship with Shohei “Giant” Baba, the promoter of All Japan Professional Wrestling (Funk & Williams, 2012). His relationship with Baba allowed the elder Funk, and his sons, to create fruitful talent exchanges with the major Japanese promotion throughout the latter 20th Century (Funk & Williams, 2012). The elder Funk passed away at age 54 from a heart attack in 1973, leaving his sons to manage the territory (Funk & Williams, 2012).

Both Dory Jr and Terry Funk would play football and wrestle for West Texas State (Funk & Williams, 2012). Following their collegiate careers, both men went into the family business of professional wrestling (Funk & Williams, 2012). Dory Jr was four years Terry’s senior (Funk & Williams, 2012). Dory would rise quickly through the NWA ranks following his 1963 debut (Funk & Williams, 2012). He demonstrated a hard-hitting style, intermixed with technical submission grappling, and various crowd-pleasing suplex maneuvers (Funk & Williams, 2012). This style made the older Funk a star in various territories across the United States, as well as a luminary in Japan (Funk & Williams, 2012). Dory would top Kiniski via submission in Tampa for the NWA title with his patented spinning toe hold finisher (Funk & Williams, 2012). Dory’s 1,563-day single run as champion is second only to Thesz’s initial 2,300-day run as the leading man of the NWA for the longest reign in the history of the brand (Tanabe et al., 2022). Dory’s reign would be ended by professional wrestling’s legendary tough guy, Harley Race (Funk & Williams, 2012).

Terry Funk would also rise to fame during this decade. Debuting in 1965, he would also rise quickly through the NWA ranks (Funk & Williams, 2012). He and Dory Jr would form a highly successful tag-team which would become one of the most successful and acclaimed tandems in the history of professional wrestling in Japan (Funk & Williams, 2012). Terry would claim his own NWA world title by defeating heavyweight champion Jack Brisco while substituting for Dory Jr for a match in Tampa on 10 December 1975 (Funk & Williams, 2012; Tanabe et al. 2022). The Funks became the first and only brothers (to date) to both claim the top prize of the NWA, and they happened to do so in the same city, and both under the banner of Championship Wrestling from Florida (Funk & Williams, 2012). Terry would

hold the title for over 400 days, before also surrendering the belt to Harley Race (Funk & Williams, 2012; Tanabe et al., 2022).

The other pair of brothers to dominate professional wrestling in the southern United States were the Brisco Brothers. Jack and Gerry Brisco were born in Oklahoma in 1941 and 1946 respectively (WWE, 2022; Benya, 2010). Both are members of the Chickasaw Nation, a Native American tribe (WWE, 2022; Benya, 2010). Brisco's had been an outstanding amateur wrestler at Oklahoma State University, the most successful collegiate wrestling program in American history, prior to their in-ring careers (WWE, 2022; Benya, 2010). Jack had claimed an NCAA national title in 1965, becoming the first-ever Native American to accomplish this feat (Benya, 2010). The older and physically larger of the Brisco's was soon trained by local promoter and fellow Leroy McGuirk (Benya, 2010). Gerald was also an outstanding amateur wrestler and received an athletic scholarship to OSU, where he had considerable success as a freshman (WWE, 2022). Jerry was touring with his brother on spring break in 1968 when he was asked to fill in for Jack's injured tag-team partner (WWE, 2022). The Brisco's tagged together for the first time, and soon after, Jerry would embark on a storied career in professional wrestling (WWE, 2022; Benya, 2010). The Brisco's would also be an acclaimed tag-team, winning titles across the NWA, including the NWA world tag-team titles twice (WWE, 2022; Benya, 2010). Jack would claim his first NWA world title by defeating Harley Race in 1973 and he would hold it for 500 days (Tanabe et al., 2022). Jack would leave the title with Giant Baba in Japan for a week-long sojourn in December 1974, before reclaiming it for another 366 days (Tanabe et al., 2022). The Brisco Brothers would also be shareholders in Georgia Championship Wrestling, prior to its sale to the WWF (WWE, 2022; Benya, 2010).

The states of Texas and Oklahoma have a storied rivalry in sports. This rivalry is particularly acute in northern Texas, which borders Oklahoma. As stalwarts of the Oklahoma and Texas territories, the Brisco's and Funks engaged in a decades-long rivalry, and career-long friendship (Funk & Williams, 2012). This rivalry was a tremendous draw throughout the 1970's and 1980's across the American south (Funk & Williams, 2012). Three of the four men would claim the NWA world heavyweight title, Jerry Brisco would claim his own world singles title by winning the NWA Junior Heavyweight title in 1981 (Tanabe et al., 2022).

Another West Texas State alum who would become a top star in the NWA during this time was Virgil “Dusty Rhodes” Runnels (Rhodes & Brody, 2006). A native of Austin, the Capitol of Texas, Rhodes had been a collegiate baseball and gridiron football player (Rhodes & Brody, 2006). After a brief career in minor league gridiron football, Rhodes entered the wrestling business with help from his contemporaries and friends for West Texas State, the Funk Brothers (Rhodes & Brody, 2006). Rhodes debuted in 1967 and would spend much of his early career in a successful tag-team with fellow West Texas State alum Dick Murdoch as The Texas Outlaws (Rhodes & Brody, 2006). This team would tour the country and emerge as a top act in various promotions. In 1974, Rhodes would begin the first major babyface run of his career (Rhodes & Brody, 2006). A portly star with unbridled charisma, Rhodes rebranded himself as a jive-talking working-class hero nicknamed “The American Dream” (Rhodes & Brody, 2006). The character was a hit and became the top babyface act in Championship Wrestling from Florida (Rhodes & Brody, 2006). Rhodes, like his friends the Funks before him, would claim the world title in Tampa against the incorrigible Harley Race, only to lose the title back to him five days later in neighboring Orlando (Rhodes & Brody, 2006).

The undisputed top wrestler of the 1970’s was Harley Race (Harley Race’s, 2022). Race exists as something of a folk hero in professional wrestling. His gruff voice, vaunted toughness, in-ring acumen, and wild lifestyle combined to create the sage of professional wrestling in his time. During the era, race would often be seen sporting an Afro and mutton chops, along with his brightly colored red, white and blue ring jacket. Race was fortuitously born in northwestern Missouri in 1943 (Harley Race’s, 2022). It was later helpful that his home was at the center of NWA power. Race began training as a teenager with Wladek and Stanislaw Zbyszko, who lived in a neighboring county (Harley Race’s, 2022). The brothers Zbyszko had both been world champions in the quasi-legitimate carnival catch wrestling era after Frank Gotch retired (Zimmerman, 2021). They would also later both claim world titles during the Slam Bang Era (Zimmerman, 2021). They were considered two of the most legitimately skilled grapplers of their era. Their tutelage of the strapping young Race toughened him into an uncompromising force.

However, Race’s journey into professional wrestling history was not a smooth one. His early life was beset by tragedy. As a child, Race would survive a bout with the polio virus (Harley



Race's, 2022). Race was expelled from high school for beating up his principal and decided it was time to pursue a career in professional wrestling (Harley Race's, 2022). Race's first job in the industry was for Nashville promoter Gust Karras and debuted in the ring in 1959 (Harley Race's, 2022). At the age of 18, Race had married Vivian Jones, and the young couple was expecting their first child when an automobile accident took the life of Race's wife (Harley Race's, 2022). Race barely survived the accident and doctor's attempts to amputate his leg were thwarted by Karras's intervention (Harley Race's, 2022). Doctors believed that Race would never walk or wrestle again, though Race endured and returned to the ring (Harley Race's, 2022). Race scored his first major break by joining Dory Funk Sr in the Amarillo territory in 1964 (Harley Race's, 2022). In Amarillo, Race would form a tag-team with Larry "The Ax" Hennig, and the two would move to the AWA together (Harley Race's, 2022). Race and Hennig would be a successful tag-team across the sprawling midwestern territory, thrice claiming its tag-team title (Tanabe et al., 2022). During this run in the AWA, Race would be a mentor to up-and-coming star Bob Backlund (Harley Race's, 2022). Race would spend the next eight years honing his craft and emerged as a top star, legitimately tough and technically sound in the common AWA style (Harley Race's, 2022).

Seeking upward career mobility, Race would return to Amarillo in 1972 and use it as a springboard to embark upon one of the greatest runs in the history of professional wrestling (Harley Race's, 2022). Race dropped the nickname "handsome" from his AWA days and adopted the new moniker of "Mad Dog" Harley Race (Harley Race's, 2022). Race would claim his first world title by relieving Dory Funk Jr of the title in 1973 in Kansas City (Harley Race's, 2022). It was the first of eight reigns as the primo uomo in the NWA for Race, encompassing 1,801 days combined (Tanabe et al., 2022). Interspersed with his world titles, Race would return to his native Missouri and claim the inaugural NWA United States Championship in Kansas City on New Year's Day of 1975 (Harley Race's, 2022). During the 1970's, Race would unseat both Funks, Dusty Rhodes and Giant Baba of the NWA title (Tanabe et al., 2022). Race would finish out the decade as the NWA world's heavyweight champion, holding the title simultaneously with his protege Bob Backlund (Tanabe et al., 2022).

Race also became a shareholder in the St. Louis and Kansas City territories near his home during this period (Harley Race's, 2022). This increased his political leverage near the pole of

NWA power. Race would also become a mainstay of Stu Hart's Stampede Wrestling and of All Japan Pro Wrestling (Billington & Coleman, 1999). Notably in 1979, Race would defend the NWA world heavyweight title against Andre the Giant in Japan, and bodyslam the giant years before the iconic scene from *Wrestlemania III* (Chaoticdays, 2021). Race would become close friends with the Hart family, including sons Bret and Owen, and sons-in-law Davey Boy Smith, Jim "The Anvil" Neidhart, and "Dynamite Kid" Tom Billington (Billington & Coleman, 1999).

Beyond his multiple title reigns, the stories of Race defy description. Most performers, staffers, and people on the periphery of professional wrestling in that era tell stories of Race's wild driving, involving breakneck speeds and the ability to drink a superhuman amount of alcohol while driving (Billington & Coleman, 1999). The stories of Race in street fights are also numerous, legendary, and often too graphic for the decorum of an academic study. One famous incident during the WWF's expansion in the 1980's was Race storming into the WWF locker room in St. Louis, punching Hulk Hogan to the floor and pointing a .38 caliber pistol at the then-top star in the industry (Djeljosevic, 2020). Race also had reputed freakish strength, which led him to being a fear competitor in the ring. Another famous story regarding Race was when Texas wrestler "Lawman" Don Slatton, tried to steal the NWA title from Race during a match, apparently "winning" by accident based on a stipulation, and immediately running off to the locker room (Djeljosevic, 2020). An undaunted Race followed Slatton to the locker room, dragged him back to the ring, and proceeded to defeat the helpless and hapless wrestler legitimately in the ring (Djeljosevic, 2020).

These luminaries of the NWA in the 1970's would go on to continued fame in the decades to come. Race would continue as a top star throughout much of the 1980's in Jim Crockett Promotions and the WWF, and in the 1990's as the manager of then-world champion Big Van Vader (Harley Race's, 2022). Jack and Jerry Brisco would settle in Tampa and found their famous "Brisco Brothers Body Shop" for automotive repair (WWE, 2022; Benya, 2010). Dory Funk Jr would continue to wrestle internationally for decades (Funk & Williams, 2012). Terry Funk would have several career Renaissances, including a memorable feud with Ric Flair in 1989, an innovative deathmatch feud in Japan with Mickey Foley in the mid-1990's, a tag-team run with Foley in the WWF in 1997-1998, and as a mainstay of Extreme Championship Wrestling (Funk & Williams, 2012). Funk would claim the ECW World

heavyweight Championship twice, in 1993 and 1997 respectively for a combined 208 days as champion (Tanabe et al., 2022). Jerry Brisco would become an executive in the WWE and serve for nearly 30 years as a top lieutenant for Vince McMahon until his release in 2020 (WWE, 2022). During that time, Jerry Brisco had a memorable television run as one of Vince McMahon's "stooges" alongside perennial WWF executive Pat Patterson (WWE, 2022). Like Funk, Jerry Brisco would have a run in deathmatch wrestling, winning the WWF Hardcore Championship twice in 2000, before losing it to a betraying Patterson, culminating in a pay-per-view "Hardcore Evening Gown Match" between the two (WWE, 2022). Dusty Rhodes would go on to be a top NWA star throughout the 1980's, followed by notable runs in the WWF (Rhodes & Brody, 2006). Rhodes would then become an acclaimed executive, creating a number of memorable gimmick matches, and being an expert match finish choreographer (Rhodes & Brody, 2006). As an executive, Rhodes would work throughout the 1980's until his passing in 2015 (Rhodes & Brody, 2006; Chappell, 2015).

All of the top NWA stars from the 1970's became influential trainers after retirement. The Funks would create The Funking Conservatory, a professional wrestling school in Florida (Funk & Williams, 2012). Harley Race founded the "Harley Race Wrestling Academy" in Missouri in 2000 (Harley Race's, 2022). Giant Baba operated the acclaimed All Japan Dojo until his passing in 1999 (Leatherland, 2022). Brisco's and Dusty Rhodes would also be instrumental in creating the WWE Developmental System near their Tampa, Florida home (Chappell, 2015). Jack Brisco passed away in 2010 (Benya, 2010). Dusty Rhodes would pass away in 2015. Rhodes' sons Cody and Dustin are mainstays of major professional wrestling promotions in the United States, with Cody following in his footsteps as NWA world heavyweight champion (Tanabe et al., 2022). Today, the WWE hosts the annual "Dusty Rhodes Memorial Tag-Team Tournament" on their NXT brand each year (Tanabe et al., 2022). Race passed away in 2019 (Harley Race's, 2022).

All of the NWA world champions of the 1970's have been inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame (Smackdown Hotel, 2022).

Back in the northeast, 1971 would be a watershed year for the WWWF. Two major events would change the promotion that year. Firstly, The WWWF rejoined the NWA (Phillips, 2019). And secondly, Bruno Sammartino's record 2,803-day reign as champion would come

to an end (Tanabe et al., 2022). That record of spending nearly eight years as the primo uomo of a major American professional wrestling promotion stands to this day. Bruno reigned as the WWF champion from his 48-second triumph over Buddy Rogers in 1963, to his controversial defeat to “The Russian Bear” Ivan Koloff (played by Quebecois performer Oreal Perras) in 1971 (Tanabe et al., 2022). Sammartino and Thesz would never cross paths in the ring during their time at the top, despite considerable negotiations and lobbying from the elder McMahon and Mondt (Thesz et al., 2000). Thesz openly detested and distrusted Mondt, and the match between the two biggest stars of their day never happened (Thesz et al., 2000).

Sammartino was born in the hamlet of Pizzoferrato, Italy in 1935 (Wheeler, 2014). As a child, Bruno and his siblings nearly starved while hiding from the Nazis on a mountain nearby their former home (Wheeler, 2014). During their time as refugees, Bruno’s mother Emilia was forced to steal food in the night and return it to her children (Wheeler, 2014). Sammartino’s father had emigrated to Pittsburgh in 1939, but his wife and children would not be able to join him until 1950 (Wheeler, 2014). Sammartino and his family would become prototypical examples of the American Dream. They arrived in the United States speaking only Italian (Wheeler, 2014). During his adolescence, Bruno would become a star athlete, excelling in wrestling and becoming a weight-lifting champion (Wheeler, 2014). He grew to a purported 186cm (6ft 1in) and 128 kg (281lbs) (Wheeler, 2014). By 1959, Sammartino set a then-world record on the bench press at 256kg (565lb) (Wheeler, 2014). That same year, Sammartino debuted as a professional wrestler (Wheeler, 2014). Sammartino would adopt the bear hug made famous by George Hackenschmidt as his signature maneuver (Wheeler, 2014). Sammartino’s story of hardship and the American Dream serves as a prototype for a heroic babyface (Wheeler, 2014). Beloved by the heavy Italian populations in the urban centers of the American northeast and nearby Canadian metropolises, the hulking Italian became an instant star (Wheeler, 2014). His 1963 title victory over Rogers came less than four years into his professional career (Wheeler, 2014). By the time of his first title loss, Sammartino had spent over 2/3 of his in-ring career as the world’s champion (Tanabe et al., 2022).

Koloff would lose the title exactly three weeks later to Puerto Rican professional wrestling legend Pedro Morales (Sullivan, 2019). Morales would hold the title for nearly three years

and would draw massive crowds as a hero to the Puerto Rican Diaspora of New York (Sullivan, 2019). Morales would take on a who's who of top professional wrestling stars of his day. Morales and Sammartino even faced off in a one-on-one bout for the championship at a Shea Stadium, home of the New York Mets baseball franchise, which was dubbed "The Showdown at Shea" (Renken, 2012). Over 22,000 fans braved the freezing rain to see Morales retain the belt in a 65-minute draw (Renken, 2012). Morales would leave the WWF in 1974, but ultimately return and capture both the tag-team and later intercontinental championships, making him the first "Triple Crown" winner in WWF history (Sullivan, 2019).

Ultimately, Sammartino would regain the title in 1973 (Tanabe et al., 2022). Morales would lose the title in Philadelphia to Canadian wrestler and "master of the heart punch," Stan "The Man" Stasiak, who had a distinguished 9-day fling with the title (Tanabe et al., 2022). Sammartino would defeat Stasiak in New York for the title (Tanabe et al., 2022). Sammartino would return to the top role in the WWF until his historic 1977 feud with "Superstar" Billy Graham (Graham & Greenberg, 2007).

Born Eldridge Coleman, "Superstar" Billy Graham would become an innovative personality in professional wrestling (Graham & Greenberg, 2007). Prior to becoming a professional wrestler, the Arizona-born Coleman had been a champion bodybuilder, a successful strongman, and played professional football in Canada (Graham & Greenberg, 2007). During his time in Canada, Coleman would come under the tutelage of famed Canadian wrestling trainer Stu Hart (Graham & Greenberg, 2007). Graham would get his ring name becoming the kayfabe younger brother of Graham's of Championship Wrestling from Florida (Graham & Greenberg, 2007). Graham's impressive stature of 193 cm and incredible physique, combined with his natural charisma, self-aggrandizing promos, impressive feats of strength, flamboyant style and solid in-ring work, made him an instant star (Graham & Greenberg, 2007). A bleached-blond antithesis of Sammartino, Graham brought his 66cm (22in) prize-winning biceps and his own 125kg frame to match the Italian hero (Graham & Greenberg, 2007). Graham would defeat Sammartino for the title on 30 April 1977 in Baltimore (Graham & Greenberg, 2007; Tanabe et al., 2022). Graham would hold the title for 296 days, making him the longest-reigning heel champion in WWE history until Roman Reign's historic run

from August 2020-*present* (Tanabe et al., 2022). Sammartino would never regain the title in his career (Tanabe et al., 2022).

Graham would lobby heavily to be made into a babyface, but the elder McMahon refused his requests (Graham & Greenberg, 2007). The elder McMahon preferred a role model for his babyface champion and felt that Graham was not one for children to look up to (Graham & Greenberg, 2007). Instead, Vincent J. McMahon decided to anoint fresh-faced, clean-living Bob Backlund as the next champion for his promotion (Graham & Greenberg, 2007). Graham would leave the WWWF for Jim Crockett Promotions soon after (Graham & Greenberg, 2007). Graham would have several more runs with major promotions throughout the 1980's (Graham & Greenberg, 2007). Graham's presentation featuring a chilled physique adjourned with bright, multicolored style would leave a lasting impression on professional wrestling. While the elder McMahon chose Backlund, Graham's prediction that a bright, multi-colored babyface with a bodybuilder's physique would be a tremendous babyface proved prophetic and would soon thereafter become the model of babyface champion (Graham & Greenberg, 2007). Though the wrestler to most notably take this role in the short term was Graham's contemporary in the WWWF Hulk Hogan, other famed performers who credit Graham as an influence their style of presentation or promos includes Jesse "The Body" Ventura, Steve Austin, Triple H, Ric Flair, and "Big Poppa Pump" Scott Steiner (Graham & Greenberg, 2007). During his heel run as the top star in WCW from 1998-2001, Steiner's character and presentation were largely built in Graham's image (Graham & Greenberg, 2007). Graham is also credited with popularizing the use of "brother" as a general term for addressing others during promos (Graham & Greenberg, 2007).

In a business infamous for con-men, carnies, and rampant degeneracy, Bob Backlund stands as a truly unique character. Graham's successor was an avatar of "aw shucks" wholesomeness named Robert "Bob" Backlund. Backlund is seen as a legitimate monument to clean living and physical culture. The Minnesota-born Backlund took All-American athletic honors in secondary school as a gridiron football player and a folkstyle wrestler (Backlund & Miller, 2015). Backlund would go on to win an NCAA wrestling title for North Dakota State University in 1972 and all-American wrestling honors in 1973 (Backlund & Miller, 2015). Backlund would be trained as a professional wrestler by vaunted coach Eddie Sharkey (Backlund & Miller, 2015). Backlund would debut in the AWA in his native

Minnesota and move across major territories prior to landing in the WWWF in 1976 (Backlund & Miller, 2015). Sporting an All-American wrestling pedigree and a legitimately wholesome take on life, Backlund was a prototypical “white-meat babyface” (Backlund & Miller, 2015). Despite the proclivity towards gimmickry and character exaggeration common in professional wrestling, Backlund, by all accounts, is a genuine upstanding individual. Backlund’s authentically cheesy good guy character led to long-time WWWF heel manager Ernie “The Grand Wizard” Roth dubbing him “Howdy Doody” after the televised children’s puppet show by that name from 1947-1960 (Backlund & Miller, 2015). Howdy Doody was a freckled, red-haired cowboy puppet who sent out virtuous messages to innocent children; this closely resembled both Backlund’s look and genuine disposition (Backlund & Miller, 2015). Backlund would defeat Graham for the title in 1977 and hold it until 1982 (Backlund & Miller, 2015). It was during this period that Backlund and his mentor NWA world champion Harley Race engaged in a title vs title match at Madison Square Garden (Backlund & Miller, 2015). The bout ended in a draw, but served to demonstrate equity between the titles. Backlund’s reign would continue through the end of the decade and into the 1980’s as the WWWF’s last champion of the territory era.

### 5.5.e Birth of the Titan

By the end of the 1970’s, the elements that would combine to end the territory era were falling into place.

It was also significant that during this decade, Vincent Kennedy McMahon would enter the professional wrestling scene. McMahon would re-establish contact with his estranged father, Vincent Jess McMahon (Hornbaker, 2015). The younger McMahon was first hired by the Capitol Wrestling Corporation in 1969 (Hornbaker, 2015). McMahon would be made an on-air announcer and was assigned his first territory in Maine, where he would begin his career as a promoter (Hornbaker, 2015). The younger McMahon, known as “Vince Jr.,” by many in the business at the time, became an increasingly powerful and successful executive in CWC during that time (Hornbaker, 2015). He purportedly increased the CWC television syndication in the northeastern region by over 200% (Hornbaker, 2015). Much of this decade, McMahon was mentored in Toots Mondt’s theories about the business, including a character-centric product and exclusive contracts for performers (Hornbaker, 2015). Mondt had left his position as the promoter of Madison Square Garden to take a position as an executive of the

elder McMahon in 1965 (Hornbaker, 2015). Mondt would work with CWC for the remainder of his life (Hornbaker, 2015). While Mondt understood the narrative art of professional wrestling, he lacked expertise on television, which the younger McMahon had (Hornbaker, 2015). Mondt would pass away in 1976, just 15 days before McMahon would promote the first major closed-circuit pay-per-view (Hornbaker, 2015). The younger McMahon had his first major hit as the promoter of the Ali vs Inoki closed-circuit pay-per-view bout in 1976 (Hornbaker, 2015). After seeing the potential for national and international business, along with his growing expertise in television syndication expansion, and his wife's expertise in intellectual property rights, McMahon would begin to create the apparatus which would lead him to dominating the national wrestling scene for decades to come (Hornbaker, 2015).

Vince and Linda McMahon would buy the Cape Cod Colosseum of South Yarmouth, Massachusetts in 1979, and there would be the original headquarters of their company Titan Sports (Hornbaker, 2015). The McMahons would own and operate the Colosseum, as an event center and minor league hockey arena until 1984 (Hornbaker, 2015). In the ensuing years, the McMahons would guide Titan Sports to becoming the most successful professional wrestling promotion in history, characterized by some as a pioneering multi-media conglomerate, and by others as an industrial leviathan that would engulf the entire territory system (Hornbaker, 2015; Hornbaker, 2018).

It could have been argued that culturally, the unflappably virtuous Bob Backlund was already a throwback to an early time in American culture by the late-1970's. With the changing culture of the United States and changing technology in television, the younger McMahon did not see Backlund as the prime star for his new vision for professional wrestling (Hornbaker, 2015). Another major factor in the changing of the guard of professional wrestling was that the elder McMahon fell ill with pancreatic cancer (Hornbaker, 2015). He would sell the Capitol Wrestling Corporation to his son in 1982, after years of grooming the younger McMahon to lead the promotion (Hornbaker, 2015). The elder McMahon would eventually pass away in 1984 (Hornbaker, 2015).

The last element to fall into place would be the top star of the next two decades of professional wrestling. On his first day of professional wrestling training, Floridian body-building enthusiast and guitar player Terry Bollea had his leg broken by Hiro Matsuda



(Hogan & Dagostino, 2011). He would return upon heeling and become a star, bouncing around several territories. With a massive physique, palpable charisma, and an imposing 2m (6ft 8in) height on his 140kg (300lb) frame, the man called “Terry Bolder” or “Hulk Bolder” or “Sterling Golden” had the makings of a star (Hogan & Dagostino, 2011). In 1979, the elder McMahon would first hire the hulking Floridian but sought to perpetuate the WWF tradition of having ethnicity-based characters (Hogan & Dagostino, 2011). Vince Sr would give him the ring name “Hulk Hogan” and ask him to dye his thinning blonde hair red (Hogan & Dagostino, 2011). Hogan accepted the name and rejected the hair dye (Hogan & Dagostino, 2011). Hogan would be a heel for the company, feuding with perennial babyface attraction Andre the Giant, unsuccessfully challenging Pedro Morales for the Intercontinental championship, and even securing a count out victory over babyface world champion Bob Backlund (Hornbaker, 2015).

In the decade to come, the alliance of Hogan and McMahon would prove to be the most successful promotional collaboration in the history of professional wrestling and forever revolutionize the business of the professional wrestling business.

## 5.6 A Brief Overview of Top Territories

While the AWA and WWWF were individual promotions, the NWA represented a network of promotions across the country. That network served to cultivate professional wrestling around the United States and North America. Several of the promotions individually would warrant dissertations of their own because of the creative, production, and narrative innovations they made during this period of professional wrestling history. While this study does not have room for that, those contributions caused evolutions in the theatrical medium which should not be ignored.

### 5.6.a The World Wrestling Council - Puerto Rico

The World Wrestling Council is a Puerto Rican professional wrestling promotion (Slagle, 2020). The promotion was founded as Capital Sports Promotions and was purportedly founded and led to prominence by a combination of five men: Victor Jovica, Robert “Gorilla Monsoon” Marella, Victor Quinones, Thomas Collado, and Carlos Colon (Slagle, 2020). Jovica is a Croatian-Yugoslavian transplant to Puerto Rico (Flair, 2004). In the mid-1970’s he would shoot to fame in his adoptive home and become the biggest star in the Caribbean professional wrestling scene (Flair, 2004). By 1983, Jovica would become so beloved by fans that in consecutive world heavyweight title matches against Ric Flair, fans began rioting when Flair cheated in the matches, leading Flair to give Jovica an unscheduled title win to protect his own safety (Flair, 2004). This feel-good moment for local fans was undone by a ruling on a technicality by the NWA board some days later (Flair, 2004). Gorilla Monsoon was a main event wrestler for the WWWF. During his wrestling career, he was a foil for the likes of Bruno Sammartino (McClead, 2019). After his in-ring days ended, he would simultaneously become a beloved commentator and television character on WWF television, and long-time top executive for Titan Sports (McClead, 2019). Quinones was a Puerto Rican promoter and kayfabe manager (Rosado, 2018). He is considered an influential figure in the proliferation of the deathmatch subgenre of professional wrestling (Rosado, 2018).

Carlos Colon would go on to become the biggest in-ring star in Puerto Rican professional wrestling (Slagle, 2020). He feuded with fellow hardcore legend Abdullah The Butcher for over 20 years. Colon would defeat then-NWA world champion Ric Flair in a cage match to be crown the “champion of the universe” (Slagle, 2020). This led to the creation of the top

title in Puerto Rico, the WWC Universal Heavyweight Championship, a style of branding copied by the WWE in 2016 (Tanabe et al., 2022). Colon is now a WWE Hall of Farmer (Slagle, 2020). His two sons Carly and Eddie Colon, along with his nephew Orlando, were WWE mainstays (Slagle, 2020). Every weekday, the promotion broadcast its flagship television “Super Estellars de Lucha Libre” on a local television station which helpfully reached the entire island of Puerto Rico (Slagle, 2020). The promotion would become a favorite destination of wrestlers within the NWA network because of the big crowds, limited travel, good pay and nice weather (Flair, 2004). The violent, bloody feuds throughout the territory would see it become an early hotbed for “hardcore” or “deathmatch” wrestling (Slagle, 2020). The promotion would maintain NWA membership until 1988 (Slagle, 2020). The WWC has also had partnerships with the WWF, thanks to Marella, ECW, IWA Japan, and various other Caribbean, Latin American and Mexican promotions and has operated steadily for nearly 50 years (Slagle, 2020).

#### 5.6.b The Many Legends of Mid-South Wrestling

The territory of Mid-south wrestling was a hotbed for talents under the guidance of legendary promoter “Cowboy” Bill Watts. This influential territory elevated a number of top stars to national prominence. Originally founded as NWA: Tri-State by Leroy McGuirk and Sam Avey (Hornbaker, 2007). Avey had been a protege of Billy Sandow and local promoter of Sandow’s Gold Dust Trio stablemate Ed “Strangler” Lewis in Oklahoma (Hornbaker, 2007). He would eventually become a promoter throughout eastern Oklahoma. McGuirk was a two-weight NCAA national wrestling champion who went on to a distinguished professional wrestling career as a world Junior Heavyweight titlist (Chapman, 2009). Following a car accident where McGuirk sustained career-ending injuries, Avey and McGuirk would go into business together and became board members of the NWA, serving as Treasurer and Vice President respectively (Hornbaker, 2007).

McGuirk was followed as world junior heavyweight champion by venerated Oklahoma native Danny Hodge (Tanabe et al., 2022). Hodge was one of the most accomplished athletes in professional wrestling history, and one of its most respected and feared competitors. Hodge alone could warrant a dissertation. Hodge was a collegiate wrestler at the University of Oklahoma, where he won three consecutive national titles, posted an undefeated 46-0 record over his three seasons, and was never taken down in his collegiate career (Chapman,

2009). Hodge was twice an American Olympic freestyle wrestler in 1952 and 1956, placing 5th in the 1952 Helsinki games and winning silver in the 1956 Melbourne games (Chapman, 2009). Not content with only being a wrestling champion, Hodge would go on to become an amateur boxer, winning the prestigious Chicago Golden Gloves tournament in 1958, and claiming an ad hoc national amateur boxing title by defeating the winner of the New York Golden Gloves tournament in his weight class at a boxing dual meet between the champions of the respective events later that year (Chapman, 2009). Hodge would decide against making a third run at the Olympics and become a professional boxer until entering the professional wrestling business in 1959 (Chapman, 2009). Hodge would be trained as a professional by McGuirk and Lewis, adding debilitating catch wrestling submissions to his arsenal of skills (Chapman, 2009). Hodge as a feat of strength, Hodge would routinely legitimately crush apples or break pliers with his bare hands (Chapman, 2009). McGuirk would become Hodge's agent and primary booker (Chapman, 2009). Hodge would hold the title a record seven times and for a record 4,134 days (Tanabe et al., 2022). Hodge would win his final title by defeating Hiro Matsuda in 1976 (Tanabe et al., 2022). Days after winning the title for the final time in 1976, Hodge suffered a harrowing single-vehicle car crash when he fell asleep at the wheel and crashed into a lake; despite breaking his neck, Hodge punched his way free of the sinking car and swam to shore (Chapman, 2009). Hodge would retire from the ring and thereafter make only one known comeback match in 1983 (Chapman, 2009). Hodge would go on to become the Chairman of the Oklahoma Professional Boxing Commission, where he oversaw all professional wrestling, boxing and MMA in the Sooner State (Chapman, 2009). In 1995, the NCAA created Hodge's namesake "Danny Hodge Trophy" which is given to the top NCAA wrestler each year (Chapman, 2009). Hodge lived to the age of 88, passing away in late 2020 (Oliver, 2020).

McGuirk would partner with rising star "Cowboy" Bill Watts in the 1970's (Hornbaker, 2007; Watts & Williams, 2006). Watts had been a collegiate American football player for the University of Oklahoma, which brought considerable fame in the region (Watts & Williams, 2006). Watts would go on to prominent top feuds, challenging AWA, NWA and WWWF world champions (Watts & Williams, 2006). Watts would become the primary booker for McGuirk throughout the decade. Watts would buy out McGuirk in 1979 (Watts & Williams, 2006).

Watts would move the promotional headquarters to Shreveport, Louisiana (Watts & Williams, 2006). During Watts time, he would use local television to build storylines, using shows at the massive Superdome in New Orleans to blow off feuds and re-set thereafter (Ross, 2017). Watts was infamous for his policies regarding “protecting the business” (Ross, 2017). Watts also required strict kayfabe, barring heels and babyfaces to be seen with one another outside of the ring (Ross, 2017). Watts also had a long-standing policy that if any performer lost a bar fight with a civilian, that they would be immediately fired (Ross, 2017). Mid-South also had famously long driving hours (Ross, 2017).

Watts territory was also attractive to talents hoping to hone their in-ring craft by working daily and following through on long-term episodic storylines. Using episodic television to build a major live show blow off was at the core of Watt’s business model. Throughout the early 1980’s, the regional territories of professional wrestling began to die off due to changes in television technology and the pursuit of conglomeration by national wrestling promotions. Watts attempted to elevate Mid-South to a national profile, and it would take up a secondary time slot on Ted Turner’s Superstation TBS network (Watts & Williams, 2006). In 1984, Vince McMahon’s WWF bought the Georgia Championship Wrestling Saturday nighttime slot on Ted Turner’s Atlanta-based national station WTBS (Hornbaker, 2018). Turner had been unsatisfied with the partnership with the WWF, so Midsouth was added as an alternative (Hornbaker, 2018). The program featured many performers familiar to NWA fans and was a top-rated show nationally (Hornbaker, 2018). Watts sought to push the WWF off the network, however in 1985, Jim Barnett would negotiate a deal where Jim Crockett Promotions would buy the Saturday nighttime slot for the WWF, as well as exclusive broadcasting rights for professional wrestling on TBS (Watts & Williams, 2006). Mid-South would again attempt to become a national program by re-branding in 1986 as the Universal Wrestling Federation or UWF (Hornbaker, 2018). The UWF would continue through 1987 and crown Terry Gordie, Ray “Big Bubba Rogers/The Big Bossman” Trailer, the One Man Gang and “Dr. Death” Steve Williams as its world champions (Tanabe et al., 2022). In 1987, Watts would sell the business to Jim Crockett Promotions, which by then had emerged as the NWA’s only national rival for the WWF (Hornbaker, 2018). The deal selling the UWF to Crockett was reportedly in the low-seven figures (Hornbaker, 2018).

This territory became the home base and proving ground for many future international stars. These names included “Dr. Death” Steve Williams, Ted DiBiase, and Steve “Sting” Borden (O, 2012). Perhaps Watts’ most beloved disciple was commentator and executive Jim Ross (Ross, 2017).

A proud Oklahoma native, Ross broke into the wrestling business in Watt’s Mid-South territory (Ross, 2017). Ross would go on to be an executive and commentator at WCW for several years (Ross, 2017). In 1993, Ross would join the WWF as a commentator (Ross, 2017). Ross would eventually don a black cowboy hat and become an on-air play-by-play announcer dubbed “Good Ol JR” (Ross, 2017). Ross’s down home sensibilities, infectious enthusiasm for the characters, and passionate calls made him the ethical Polaris for wrestling fans tuning in to the WWF in the late 1990’s. The commentary package of the strait-laced, ethical, BBQ loving Ross, partnered with the sleazy, amoral pronouncements of retired Memphis wrestling hero Jerry “The King” Lawler is considered by many fans to be the top commentary team in professional wrestling history (Ross, 2017). Ross would also be elevated to the Head of Talent Relations for the WWF at this time (Ross, 2017). As an executive, he would recruit, sign, and maintain the most talent-rich and top-drawing roster of professional wrestlers in history. Ross’s theories on talent management include the theory that “cash and creative” and “the money and the miles,” dictate most of the decisions made by performers, and that locker room problems “can be either solved or eliminated” (O’Brien & Ross, 2021)

Watt’s work as an executive is widely acclaimed. Watts would be given a second chance to run a national promotion when Turner’s World Championship Wrestling promotion hired him as the head of WCW in 1992 (Cowboy, 2022). This came to an end later that year (Cowboy, 2022). Thanks to friction between Watts’ treatment of a new generation of talent, Watt’s insistence on a more traditional approach to in-ring wrestling (Cowboy, 2022). Watts did little to ingratiate himself to the roster, deciding to cut wrestler’s contracted pay across the board upon arrival and adopting a constantly confrontational attitude (Ross, 2017). His time as the head of the national promotion came to an end when Watt made racially insensitive comments, causing a row with Turner executive and then-Home Run king of Major League Baseball Hank Aaron (Ross, 2017). The characterization of Watts as a racist was challenged by many in the professional wrestling industry, as Watts had been instrumental in pushing African-American wrestlers as top stars, including having The

Junkyard Dog as his top babyface in the Deep South and elevating Ron Simmons as the first ever black world heavyweight champion of a national promotion in the history of American professional wrestling (Ross, 2017).

Watts would again be brought in as an executive for the WWF in 1995 (Ross, 2017). Soon after arriving, Watts came into conflict with the power structure of the WWF (Ross, 2017). While Watts was officially a booker, all booking decisions required the final approval of Vince McMahon himself (Ross, 2017). Watts' time there only lasted a few days (Ross, 2017). The WWF would, however, induct Watts into their Hall of Fame in 2009 (WWE Hall of Fame, 2022).

### 5.6.c The Von Erich's present World Class Championship Wrestling

Fritz Von Erich was the founder and patriarch of one of the most prominent professional wrestling dynasties of the mid-20th Century (Zarka, 2022). The Von Erich's would be the top stars of the famed Dallas professional wrestling territory, the World Class Championship Wrestling. The promotion can interchangeably be dubbed World Class or the shorthand WCCW, and later the World Class Wrestling Association (O, 2012). Von Erich founded the promotion in 1960 as a member of the NWA (Hornbaker, 2022). Fritz was trained by Stu Hart and had major success in Japan during the 1960's (Hornbaker, 2022). Jack Adkisson was a born and raised Texan who adopted the "Fritz Von Erich" in-ring character was an "evil German" with nazi affectation (Hornbaker, 2022). Though Fritz eventually abandoned the goose-stepping affectations, the surname his family's brand was attached to was now Von Erich, a top star for the promotion. He would win Verne Gagne's AWA World heavyweight championship once and choose himself to carry the WCCW World title twenty times (Hornbaker, 2022). As Fritz aged, he began to transition his sons into top positions in the promotion in the late-1970's (Zarka, 2022). They would become major stars across the state of Texas.

Fritz had a total of six sons, though only his second son Kevin would outlive him (Zarka, 2022). The first-born son of Fritz passed away by an accident in 1959 (Zarka, 2022). Fritz's next four sons would all go on to be successful professional wrestlers in World Class (Dananay, 2022). Kevin Von Erich would be the older living Von Erich, famed for wrestling barefoot and throughout his career (Zarka, 2022). The next oldest son was "The Yellow Rose

of Texas” David Von Erich (Vice, 2019). David was believed to be the best in-ring performer of the family (Vice, 2019). It is widely reported that David had been in line to claim the NWA world title from Ric Flair in the near future (Vice, 2019). Unfortunately, David was the first of the clan to pass away, when he was reportedly lost to acute enteritis in Tokyo in 1984, though there is rampant speculation that his death was drug-related (Zarka, 2022).

“The Modern Day Warrior” Kerry Von Erich was the third and most successful of the Von Erichs (Vice, 2019). With an incredible physique and long brown hair, he was a prototypical babyface for the 1980’s. In the aftermath of David’s passing, Kerry would defeat Ric Flair for the NWA World Heavyweight Championship in front of over 50,000 fans at the sold out Texas Stadium (Dananay, 2022). Kerry would lose the title back to Flair just three weeks later.

Tragedy would again strike World Class when rising star Gino Hernandez died suddenly in Dallas (Mullick, 2022). Hernandez had carried on his own feud with the Von Erichs. His highest profile match in WCCW was a “hair vs hair” match, where he gambled and lost his mane against Kerry Von Erich and was forcibly shaved bald by the Brothers Von Erich in front of a massive crowd at the Cotton Bowl Stadium in Dallas. His death was reported to be an accidental cocaine overdose (Dananay, 2022).

Mike Von Erich, Fritz’s third son to enter the wrestling business, would take up his brother’s place in the feud with the Freebirds (Vice, 2019). Prior to Kerry’s triumph in the title match main event, the semi-main event of the David Von Erich Memorial Parade of Champions pitted Fritz, Kevin and Mike against the Freebirds, in that bout, the Von Erichs triumphed (Dananay, 2022). Mike would compete for World Class throughout the rest of his life. Mike would pass away due to an accidental tranquilizer overdose (Vice, 2019).

Fritz’s youngest son Chris Von Erich was a referee and manager in professional wrestling (Vice, 2019). Chris would continue to be involved in the promotion after the buyout of WCCW by the Jarrett’s in 1989 (Vice, 2019). In the USWA, Chris would be a babyface manager and feud with Percy Pringle, who would go on to play “Paul Bearer” in the WWF (Dananay, 2022). Chris’s would also struggle with substance abuse and passed away by suicide in 1991 (Vice, 2019).



In 1986, Kerry would lose his right foot in a motorcycle accident (Vice, 2019). Undaunted, Kerry would keep his amputation a secret, never removing his wrestling boots while at the arena, and wearing long tassels to cover the boots (Vice, 2019). After the sale of World Class, Kerry would eventually join the WWF as “The Texas Tornado” and even hold the prestigious intercontinental title (Vice, 2019). Kerry’s long-standing struggles with substance abuse persisted and he passed away by suicide in 1992 (Vice, 2019).

The Dallas territory was famed for its innovative approaches to television, high-profile feuds, and dedicated fan base (Dananay, 2022). WCCW would tape weekly television shows at the Dallas Sportatorium, regularly selling out its 4,500-seat capacity (Dananay, 2022). The promotion peaked between 1981 and 1986 before a series of untimely deaths of performers hampered the promotion’s viability (Vice, 2019). Still, during its heyday, WCCW was a prime promotion to get television exposure and live-crowd experience across the largest state in the contiguous United States (Vice, 2019).

Texas was and is a hotbed for professional wrestling talent. Texas native Gino Hernandez and Jose Lothario would also become top stars for the promotion (Dananay, 2022). Lothario would become the promoter of the San Antonio territory in southern Texas (Rickard, 2019). The Monterey-born Lothario would go on to a memorable run in the WWF in 1996, as the manager of his San Antonio-native trainee, “The Heart Break Kid” Shawn Michaels during his initial run as WWF Champion (Rickard, 2019). The promotion would also hire British judo Olympian “Gentleman” Chris Adams as its trainer, with his most famous trainee being modern Texas professional wrestling icon “Stone Cold/Stunning” Steve Austin (Dananay, 2022; A&E, 2021).

The Von Erich family famously feuded with the Fabulous Freebirds (Vice, 2019). This feud pitted the Von Erich clan versus the team of Michael “P.S.” Hayes, Terry “Bam Bam” Gordy, and Buddy Roberts (Vice, 2019). The Freebirds claimed to represent Georgia and professed their rock and roll lifestyle, juxtaposed to the traditional Texas moral decency of the Von Erichs (Vice, 2019). The Freebirds would carry the then-state flag of Georgia, while the Von Erichs prominently displayed the Texas flag (Dananay, 2022). Their feud drew large audiences across the south, leading to a series of matches featuring six or more performers.

The Freebirds created the “Freebird Rule,” which allows a stable of three or more wrestlers to hold the two-person tag team championship as a group and defend it with interchangeable members (Vice, 2019). This rule is used in most major professional wrestling companies today. The formatting of the Freebirds is also commonly replicated in future stables, with Hayes as the promo-giving front man, Gordy as the overpowering enforcer, and Roberts as the troublesome today (Vice, 2019).

Fritz sold the promotion to the Jarrett’s of Memphis in 1989 (O, 2012). The WCWA world title lineage was folded into the USWA Unified World Heavyweight Championship (Tanabe et al., 2022). Former WCCW commentator Joe Pedicino and former USWA commissioner Max Andrews came together in 1991 to try to form a new promotion to fill the void the closure of WCCW left in the Dallas-Fort Worth region (Global Wrestling Federation, 2022). They founded the Global Wrestling Federation which would originate from the Dallas Sportatorium with a number of former World Class personnel (Global Wrestling Federation, 2022). The small promotion would have a respectable run from 1991-1994, with half-hour daily wrestling programs airing nationally on ESPN (Global Wrestling Federation, 2022).

Fritz passed away from lung cancer in 1997, he is survived by Kevin and four grandchildren (Vice, 2019). The Von Erich family was inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame in 2009 (Vice, 2019). The last living member of the Fabulous Freebirds, Michael Hayes, presented the award to Kevin, the last living Von Erich brother (Vice, 2019). A third generation of Von Erichs have joined professional wrestling. Kerry’s youngest daughter Lacey Von Erich performed for TNA/Impact Wrestling where she was a women’s world tag team champion prior to her retirement in 2010 (Vice, 2019). Kevin’s sons Ross and Marshall Von Erich also performed for TNA/Impact Wrestling (Vice, 2019). A feature film about the Von Erich family titled *The Iron Claw* starring Zac Efron and current AEW star Maxwell Friedman is set for release in 2023 (IMDb, 2022).

#### 5.6.d Championship Wrestling from Florida

Championship wrestling from Florida was a long-time promotion based in Tampa, Florida. The location was a favorite among performers because of the warm weather and enthusiastic fan base. The promotion was originally founded by “Cowboy” Clarence Luttrall in 1949 (Phillips, 2022). Luttrell had been a professional wrestler, though his most historically

prominent match was an exhibition boxing bout, where a professional wrestler was finally able to get in the ring against (by then long-retired) former heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey (Cowboy Luttrall, 2022). Luttrall would promote professional wrestling throughout Florida for over twenty years, before selling his majority stake in the promotion to Eddie Graham in 1971 (Phillips, 2022).

Graham would run the promotion from 1971-1985. Graham would serve as NWA President twice during this time, allowing him considerable booking power by bringing top stars into his promotion (Phillips, 2022). The promotion would peak in the 1970's, as a favored territory of many of the top stars of the era. Jack and Jerry Brisco, known collectively as "The Brisco Brothers" would be top stars for the promotion throughout the 1970's (Benya, 2010). They would claim both singles and tag team championships throughout their time in the promotion (Benya, 2010). Graham's top singles star was Dusty Rhodes, who would go on to thrice become the NWA world heavyweight champion (Phillips, 2022). The wildly charismatic Rhodes was known as the "American Dream," the portly, jive-talking son of a plumber who represented the Everyman in professional wrestling (Rhodes & Brody, 2006). The top heel in the promotion over many years was "The Taskmaster" Kevin Sullivan, who famously used occult iconography and magical brainwashing tactics in storylines to gain advantage over beloved babyfaces and assemble his "Army of Darkness" stable (Phillips, 2022). Sullivan's kayfabe use of Satanic rituals and dark magic created a satanic panic among Floridian wrestling fans (Phillips, 2022). Sullivan's heat and Rhodes's pops in Florida have become fabled professional wrestling lore of the territory era.

The promotion was also the American home of famed professional wrestler and trainer Hiro Matsuda (Ojst, 2022). Matsuda had been an NWA Junior Heavyweight Champion and rival of Danny Hodge in the 1970's (Ojst, 2022). Matsuda would eventually settle in Florida. Matsuda and his tag-team partner, Los Angeles-born Japanese-American wrestler Martin "Duke Keomuka" Tanaka, bought into Luttrall's promotion in the 1960's (Ojst, 2022). Matsuda would become a famed trainer in the Tampa area. His students include some of the top drawing and most influential professional wrestlers of all time. Matsuda is credited with training Scott Hall, Ron Simmons, "Mr. Wonderful" Paul Orndorf, Lex Luger, The Great Muta, and Hulk Hogan (Ojst, 2022). Championship Wrestling from Florida also discovered a heretofore unknown local stock car racing announcer named Jonard Sjoblom in 1960

(Phillips, 2022). Sjoblom would go on to be a beloved ring announcer for CWF, the NWA and WCW under his stage name Gordon Solie (Phillips, 2022).

Following Graham's suicide in 1985, Matsuda would inherit the promotion (Phillips, 2022). Matsuda and Tanaka would own and run the promotion until 1987 (Phillips, 2022). With the WWF and Jim Crockett Promotions both dominating the national wrestling scene, they decided to sell the promotion (Phillips, 2022). Championship Wrestling from Florida was bought by Jim Crockett Promotions in 1987 (Phillips, 2022). Matsuda would be inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame in 2018 (Phillips, 2022) Dusty Rhodes would continue his career as a successful wrestler for a few more years before retiring to become an acclaimed backstage creative executive (Rhodes & Brody, 2006). Sullivan would go on to work consistently as a wrestler through much of the 1990's, while transitioning into becoming one of the most respected producers in the professional wrestling industry (Phillips, 2022).

Florida itself would become an increasingly important part of the professional wrestling industry. Tampa remains a favored home of many professional wrestlers today. Throughout the years, several top professional wrestling promotions have operated their television tapings from Florida. The amusement park and television production studios in the central Florida city of Orlando made for easy tapings with canned audiences of 1000-1400 patrons filling the arenas for the wrestling shows (Trama, 2015). WCW had tapings for their various syndicated and international television programs at television production studios in the attraction/production parks of Orlando, Florida, first from Disney Hollywood Studios from 1993-1997, and then from Universal Studios Florida from 1997-2000 (Trama, 2015). Impact Wrestling would also produce its weekly television shows from Universal Studios Florida in Orlando (Morris, 2009). Impact dubbed their studio "The Impact Zone" and produced their shows from 2004-2018 (Morris, 2009).

In 2007, the WWE created "Florida Championship Wrestling," as a company-owned and operated development territory for honing the skills of new and young stars (Leatherland, 2022). The promotion would train new wrestlers and hone the skills of established wrestlers. The promotion would have a weekly television program and boasts a list of alumni that comprises most of the top stars in American professional wrestling today (Leatherland, 2022). In 2012, the development territory was rebranded as NXT and placed under the

operational and creative control of Paul “Triple H” Levesque (Sidgwick, 2017). NXT created a residency partnership with Full Sail University, which lasted until the WWE moved their operations to their Tampa-based Performance Center in 2020 (Sidgwick, 2017). During this time, NXT would rise from being a regional development territory based in Florida, to its own co-equal national wrestling brand based out of Florida (Sidgwick, 2017). NXT would feature weekly streaming television programs on the WWE Network, until they were elevated to a live broadcast on the USA Network in 2019 (Chiari, 2019).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Florida became the epicenter of the professional wrestling industry. The Florida state government decided that professional wrestling was an essential business (Allen, 2020). This led to the WWE broadcasting from their Performance Center in Tampa, before eventually moving to creating the “Thunderdome” digital arena which maintained residency at various Florida arenas as “The Capitol Wrestling Center” (Okafor, 2021) The then-recent upstart All Elite Wrestling promotion produced their events from Daily’s Place, a large amphitheater attached to TIAA Bank Field, a stadium that is home to the Jacksonville Jaguars in Jacksonville, Florida (Doyle, 2021). The NFL’s Jacksonville franchise is owned by billionaire industrialist Shahid Khan, the father and financial benefactor of AEW promoter Tony Khan (Doyle, 2021). The two largest American wrestling promotions would operate in and broadcast exclusively from Florida until the pandemic began to subside in mid-2021 (Okafor, 2021; Doyle, 2021).

#### 5.6.e Georgia Championship Wrestling

Despite its regional affectation, Georgia Championship Wrestling (GCW) somehow sat at a historical nexus of the American professional wrestling industry. In 1944, a local promoter named Paul Jones (not to be confused with widely known NWA wrestler and manager Paul Frederick who performed under the name “Paul Jones”), founded the promotion which would eventually become GCW (O, 2012). The promotion was headquartered in Atlanta (O, 2012). Jones would retire after 26 years at the helm and passed ownership to Ray Gunkel (O, 2012). Gunkel had twice been an AAU national amateur heavyweight champion and once been the NCAA Division I runner-up before becoming a professional (Johnson, 2008). In 1971, Gunkel began presenting a weekly television wrestling program to advertise the action available at live shows (Johnson, 2008). The program was broadcast then-local Atlanta television station WTBS (O, 2012). Gunkel would pass away after an in-ring mishap led to a

cardiac episode in 1972 (Johnson, 2008). Control of the promotion would eventually pass to Jim Barnett, who had been promoting an Australia promotion named “World Championship Wrestling” since the mid-1960’s (O, 2012).

WTBS was owned by rising television mogul Ted Turner whose namesake media empire was headquartered in Atlanta (O, 2012). This development would eventually and permanently change professional wrestling. Turner’s business model was to conglomerate unified content on his ever-growing constellation of television stations (Robert Edward Turner, 2022). He would acquire the broadcast rights to rerun classic television shows, a massive collection of classic Hollywood films, the live broadcasting rights of major Atlanta-based sports club franchises, and professional wrestling (Robert Edward Turner, 2022).

In 1976, Turner was permitted by the FCC to broadcast WTBS nationally as a “super-station” which ran 24 hours of live and archived content (Robert Edward Turner, 2022). In 1976 the Georgia Championship Wrestling was officially renamed from “Mid-South Sports” (O, 2012). With WTBS broadcasting nationally, the regionally branded GCW was now the first-ever professional wrestling company with a national television footprint, despite having their territorial promotional rights limited to Georgia and southern Ohio (O, 2012). Barnett also had a relationship with American President Jimmy Carter, who would serve as president from 1977-1981, and named Barnett to the executive board for the National Endowment for the Arts in 1980 (Hall, 1980).

This violated the norms of the NWA, though the organization was allowed to continue as they were now the national showcase for all NWA talent. That talent could also raise their national profile and promote their own upcoming performances on the WTBS program. Seeking to appeal to a broader audience, in 1982, Barnett would recycle the brand from his Australian promotion and dub the program “World Championship Wrestling” (O, 2012) An internal power struggle broke out in 1983 between Barnett and promotional shareholders Ole Anderson and the original Brisco Brothers (O, 2012).

Barnett, however, still owned the rights to the television contract and a majority stake in the promotion (O, 2012). 1984 was a pivotal year in professional wrestling history. On 23 January 1984, Hulk Hogan defeated The Iron Sheik for the WWF Championship in Madison

Square Garden. Fueled by the ensuing national “Hulkamania” craze, began the massive national takeover of the American professional wrestling industry by Vince McMahon and the WWF (Hornbaker, 2015). That same year, Barnett sold his share of the promotion and the television rights to broadcast nationally on WTBS to McMahon (Mahmood, 2021). This meant that the television program “World Championship Wrestling” would now go from being a showcase of NWA and GCW talent, to being yet another television property of the WWF (Mahmood, 2021). This was viewed by many to be a potential mortal blow to the territory system. This incident came to be known as “Black Saturday” (Mahmood, 2021). Though it will sound like a fever dream to professional wrestling fans from the 1990’s, for a time, the World Wrestling Federation was broadcast nationally on World Championship Wrestling, and Vince McMahon and Ted Turner were in business together (Mahmood, 2021).

However, this business partnership between McMahon and Turner would be short lived. Conflicts arose about content ownership rights, and the program underperformed as most professional wrestling on WTBS were acclimated to and invested in GCW and NWA stars performing in the action-heavy southern style, but now those viewers were left with only unfamiliar characters performing in the caricature- heavy northeastern style (Mahmood, 2021). By 1985, McMahon would sell the time slot to Jim Crockett Promotions, which had now emerged as the epicenter of the NWA (Mahmood, 2021).

#### 5.6.f The Upstanding Don Owen and Portland Wrestling

The Portland-based Pacific Northwest Wrestling was an understated hotbed for talent throughout the territory era (Molinaro, 1999). The promotion was owned by respected promoter Don Owen (Molinaro, 1999). Owen had a reputation for being a capable and respected promoter across the northwestern United States in Oregon and Washington (Molinaro, 1999). The organization was founded as a boxing and wrestling promotion by Herb Owen (O, 2012). After 17 years of promoting the organization, Herb passed away in 1942, and control of the promotion was passed to his son Don (O, 2012). Don Owen had been working for the promotion since his childhood in the 1930’s, and he would lead the promotion until its closing in 1992 (O, 2012). The promotion is interchangeably known as “Portland Wrestling” because of its base of operations in Oregon’s largest city (O, 2012).

Pacific Northwest Wrestling became one of the earliest members of the NWA (Molinaro, 1999). The promotion became a favorite of many wrestlers because of Owen's management style (Molinaro, 1999). In an industry where promoters are infamous for mistreatment of their contracted performers, Owen was a major outlier. Owen was known for being among the best and most trustworthy promoters in the industry. Owen was known for strong payoffs, fair treatment of wrestlers, and integrity of his word (Molinaro, 1999). Top stars would flock to the Pacific Northwest because of Owen's trustworthiness, skill at promoting and ample payoffs (Molinaro, 1999).

In 1952, Owen would strike an historic deal with KPTV, the local television station in Portland (O, 2012). As an early television adopter, Owen was ahead of his time. The television program "Portland Wrestling" ran continuously weekly until 1991 (O, 2012). The television program was consistently one of the top-rated programs in the region.

Thanks to ample television presence and Owen's reputation, luminaries of the Territory Era who would tour Portland Wrestling. Portland was also the first promotion to feature women's wrestling prominently and consistently (O, 2012). Owen was also known for being receptive to young wrestlers honing their crafts and personae. It was in Portland Wrestling that legendary characters like "Gorgeous" George Wagner and "Rowdy" Roddy Piper first emerged. This list of stars who honed and practiced their craft in the Portland Territory includes Curt Hennig, Mad Dog Vachon, Nick Bockwinkel, Jimmy "Superfly" Snuka, Stan "The Man" Stasiak, "Gentleman" Chris Adams, Matt "Doink The Clown" Bourne, Lou Thesz, Gene Kiniski, Gory Guerrero and Jesse "The Body" Ventura (O, 2012).

Portland Wrestling began to decline in the 1980's as public interest in regional wrestling was eroded by the steady stream of national wrestling promotions (O, 2012). The promotion would also face mounting legal challenges from the Oregon State Athletic Commission, which increasingly sought to regulate the biggest purveyor of the performance art in the state (Molinaro, 1999). Owen's promotion would survive into the early 1990's (Molinaro, 1999) Owen sold the promotion in 1992, ending a 67-year run for the promotion (O, 2012). Owen would pass away in 2002 (Molinaro, 1999). He is remembered as one of the most respected promoters of his era, whose ethics put him head and shoulder above many of his peers.



### 5.6.g Stampede Wrestling and the Hart Dynasty

The first family of Canadian professional wrestling is the Hart Dynasty. Patriarch Stu Hart staked the family's claim in professional wrestling by establishing a long-respected promotion in Calgary, Alberta (Hart, 2010). Stu Hart grew up in extreme poverty, living with his family in a tent in the sub-Arctic prairies of his native Saskatchewan (Hart, 2010). Hart's family would eventually relocate to Edmonton, Alberta, where he joined the YMCA (Hart, 2010). While a young athlete there, Stu would train in both wrestling and weightlifting (Hart, 2010). He would win multiple amateur wrestling championships at city, provincial and national competitions (Hart, 2010). Hart would qualify for both the 1938 Empire Games and the 1940 Olympic Games in Freestyle wrestling but would be unable to attend due to lack of funding and World War II respectively (Hart, 2010). Hart would go on to serve for the Allies in the Second World War and coach wrestling at the University of Alberta (Hart, 2010).

Hart would become a professional in 1943, and by 1946 he would find his way to the New York territory where he was an immediate hit with fans (Hart, 2010). A handsome young man, Hart was a natural babyface. This combined with his catch and shoot wrestling acumen, helped him to advance quickly in the business, becoming a popular technical wrestler. Hart would meet and marry Helen Smith, a New York City born beauty queen and the daughter of American Olympic marathoner Harry Smith (Hart, 2010).

Stu and Helen would relocate back to Calgary where they would have 12 children (Hart, 2010). The seven boys all became professional wrestlers or referees, while all of the five daughters married professional wrestlers including Davey Boy Smith, "The Dynamite Kid" Tom Billington, and Jim "The Anvil" Neidhart (Billington & Coleman, 1999). The most famous of the sons of Stu and Helen Hart were Canadian wrestling icon Bret "The Hitman" Hart, and their youngest son Owen Hart (Hart, 2010). There have been at least fourteen high profile professional wrestlers in the next three generations of the Hart Family.

In 1948, Stu would establish his first wrestling territory in Calgary, which would eventually evolve into Stampede Wrestling (O, 2012). Stu would become a prodigious trainer and one of the most respected teachers of the technical catch wrestling style in North America (Hart, 2010). In addition to training all of his own sons, he would go on to train and mentor dozens

of other top tier talents. Hart would famously train students in the basement of the family mansion in Calgary, where the screams of pain from trainees being stretched and twisted by him would earn it the moniker “The Dungeon” from his young sons (Hart, 2010).

The style of wrestling popularized in the Stampede territory was influenced largely by Stu’s son-in-law, “The Dynamite Kid” Tom Billington (Billington & Coleman, 1999). The fast-paced, hard-hitting, technical style would separate the territory from much of the standard fare in North American professional wrestling at the time. The style gained mainstream traction in the United States in the 1980’s while Bret and brother-in-law Jim “The Anvil” Neidhart and Hart sons-in-law Billington and Davey Boy Smith became top tag-team attractions during the Rock n’ Wrestling Era and traded the WWF World tag-team titles (Billington & Coleman, 1999; Hart, 2010). This style was further popularized by Bret and Owen becoming the top stars of the WWF in the mid-1990’s (Hart, 2010). Bret would go on to collect seven world titles between the WWF and WCW, while Owen was viewed by many as the most talented wrestler in the world, prior to his tragic passing during an accidentally botched stunt entrance at a WWF event in 1999 (Hart, 2010). At the time of this writing, The Owen Hart Foundation sponsors a prestigious tournament in Owen’s name for AEW wrestling (Taylor, 2022).

Stu would promote throughout Calgary and Saskatchewan in Canada, expanding into Montana and the Dakotas in the United States. Stampede was a member of the NWA from 1948-1982 (O, 2012). In 1986, Stu sold the territory to the WWF during the initial national push by McMahon (Hart, 2010). At the behest of several of the Hart sons, the promotion was revived in 1985, before eventually going out of business in 1989 (Billington & Coleman, 1999).

The Hart Family remains a significant presence in the top tier of professional wrestling. In the 1980’s and 1990’s several iterations of “The Hart Foundation” tag-team and stable were top attractions in the WWF (Hart, 2010). Stu and Helen became familiar sights at ringside during this era when kayfabe family issues within their clan were often major points in storylines. At Survivor Series 1993, four of the Hart brothers (Bret, Owen, Keith and Bruce) formed a tag-team to take on American wrestler Shawn Michaels and his Knights (Greg Valentine, Jeff Gaylord, and Barry Horowitz) with Stu and Helen at ringside (Hart, 2010). Owen would turn

heel at the end of the match and enter into a years-long feud with Bret that included a famed steel cage match for the WWF world heavyweight championship at SummerSlam 1994 (Hart, 2010).

Today, the most prominent member of the Hart wrestling dynasty is Natalya Neidhart (Sportskeeda, 2022). She is a multi-time WWE women's champion and women's tag-team champion (Sportskeeda, 2022). She currently holds Guinness World Records for the most matches, most pay-per-view appearances, and the most wins by any woman in WWE history (Wolstanholme, 2022). Backstage, she is considered a leader and mentor of the women's revolution in the WWE. She is currently married to TJ Wilson, who is himself a WWE producer and former WWE tag-team champion with David Hart Smith, the son of Davey Boy Smith (Sportskeeda, 2022). Wilson, Smith and Neidhart were a WWE stable in the 2000's nicknamed "The Hart Dynasty" (Sportskeeda, 2022).

#### 5.6.h Memphis - The Jarrett Clan, the King and the Last Territory

The Jarrett Family has now been promoting professional wrestling in the state of Tennessee for three generations. Christine "Teeny" Jarrett is the matriarch of the Jarrett clan (Nation, 2006). She began her career as a ticket seller for NWA Mid-America in the 1940's (Nation, 2006). The single mother would work her way up the promotional business ladder until she was made a co-promoter in two states by promotional heads Nick Gulas and Roy Welch (Nation, 2006). In the early 1970's her son Jerry Jarrett became a professional wrestler in the territory (Nation, 2006). Eventually the Jarrett's would break away from NWA Mid-America and found the Continental Wrestling Association in 1977 (O, 2012).

Jarrett would broadcast weekly shows on local television, building local stars in memorable studio wrestling segments. Jarrett and his creative team members became known for their Memphis-style booking which constantly built and added on to stories each week (Cornette, 2021). The success of their storyline booking model would keep the promotion operational locally for twenty years (Cornette, 2021). Attendance at local shows remained high, with major events regularly selling out Memphis's largest arena, the Mid-South Coliseum (Cornette, 2021). Despite the high attendance, Jarrett was famous among wrestlers for poor payoffs (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). The Memphis territory became a double-edged sword for many talents, while they could wrestle every day in front of raucous crowds to gain

seasoning, they would also have to contend with relatively poor pay (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). Memphis would also become known for its intricately woven in-ring storytelling style (Cornette, 2021). It is considered by many to be the epitome of Southern Wrestling, which is largely defined by being character-driven, heavy on interconnected in-ring narrative, and unashamed embracing of any wild gimmick to continue to fulfill the weekly episodic television model (Cornette, 2021).

During this time local wrestler Jerry Lawler would become the promotions top star (O, 2012). Lawler would explode to national fame in a kayfabe feud with comedian Andy Kauffman (Chiari, 2012). In 1979, Kauffman became the hottest heel in professional wrestling by declaring himself the “Inter-gender Wrestling Champion of the World” and defeating a series of women wrestlers (Chiari, 2012). Upon a Kauffman promo in Memphis, Lawler would confront the comedian and hit him with a pile driver (Chiari, 2012). This would cause a kayfabe neck break for Kauffman and create the context for their infamous 1982 confrontation on *The Late Show* (Chiari, 2012). Lawler would continue to be Memphis’s top star, often challenging for, but never successfully capturing an NWA world title (Wrestling Bios, 2021). Eventually Lawler was nicknamed “The King of Memphis Wrestling” and coming to the ring with royal garb atop his wrestling gear (Wrestling Bios, 2021). Later this moniker would be shortened to “The King” as an homage to fellow Memphis legend Elvis Presley. Lawler would become a promotional partner of Jarrett during this time (Wrestling Bios, 2021).

In the waning days of the territory system, promoter Jerry Jarrett would leave the NWA and try to piece together a patchwork national brand for the Continental Wrestling Association by cobbling together the equity of formerly prominent promotions (O, 2012). Jarrett would first absorb the Dallas-based World Class Wrestling Association from the Von Erich’s, along with its television footprint across the south in 1989 (O, 2012). Jarrett’s range for television presence stretched through the central United States from Texas to the Great Lakes (O, 2012). Jarrett would rebrand his promotion the United States Wrestling Association (O, 2012). In 1988, longtime Memphis champion Jerry “The King” Lawler would finally win his world title by defeating Curt Hennig to unify the USWA title with the AWA world title (Wrestling Bios, 2021). This composite championship combined the lineages of several once-top territories and was dubbed the USWA Unified World Heavyweight Championship (Tanabe et

al., 2022). In the late 1980's, the USWA would become a farm promotion for the WWF by training, seasoning and elevating prospective talents until they were ready for the bright lights and big payoffs of national prime time television (Phillips, 2022). The promotion's prominence would erode throughout the 1990's, though it would crown several outstanding wrestlers as its top champion like Scott "Razor Ramon" Hall, Owen Hart, Jimmy Valiant, Kamala, Butch Reed, The Junkyard Dog, Ricky Morton, Randy Savage, Mark "The Undertaker" Callaway and Dutch Mantel (Tanabe et al., 2022).

With the attention of the national professional wrestling audience firmly enthralled in the professional wrestling boom of the late 1990's, interest in the southern promotion would wane until it was eventually sold and shut down in 1997 (Phillips, 2022). Lawler would begin working for the WWF in 1993, eventually joining Jim Ross in their famed broadcast team (Wrestling Bios, 2021). Lawler would be the wise-cracking rapsallion color commentator, while Ross would play the straight-laced play-by-play announcer (Wrestling Bios, 2021). Jarrett would eventually join his son Jeff Jarrett in founding Total Nonstop Action Wrestling in 2002 (Jarrett, 2004). In the wake of the WWF's purchase of WCW in 2001, the Jarrett's would again align with the NWA to create "NWA-TNA" (Jarrett, 2004). The original business concept was to create a weekly pay-per-view wrestling showcase which would adopt the titles of the NWA, which had been reorganized as a collection of comparatively small independent wrestling promotions around the United States (Jarrett, 2004). However, because the NWA titles still held historical equity with fans, NWA-TNA would again elevate the world heavyweight and tag team titles to national prominence and global recognition as top championships (Jarrett, 2004). The pay-per-view only model failed at the time (Jarrett, 2004). The promotion would continue on creating weekly television and pay-per-view events to the time of this writing in 2022, as the rebranded Impact Wrestling (Jarrett, 2004; Taylor, 2021). The promotion would end its partnership with the NWA in 2007 (Mac, 2017).

### 5.6.i Pacific and International Territories

The NWA network was also an instrumental partner in the expansion of professional wrestling internationally. This global artistic presence planted the seeds that would become the roots of global fandom which professional wrestling commands today. EMLL, later CMLL, was founded by Gory Guerrero (O, 2012). Guerrero was the patriarch of the massively successful and beloved Guerrero wrestling dynasty (Gurrero & Krugman, 2006).

EMLL would become the largest promotion in Mexico and would partner with the NWA in the mid-1970's (O, 2012). This would lead to the newly rebranded CMLL adopting several NWA weight class world titles as top prizes in their promotion (Tanabe et al., 2022). Though the affiliation with the NWA has long-ceased, the physical belts used for these titles remain in use as "heritage" world championships (Tanabe et al., 2022).

Rikidozan's Japan Pro Wrestling Association landed the flag of professional wrestling in Japan (Ojst, 2021). All of Japanese professional wrestling today descended directly from that origin point (Ojst, 2021). The NWA International Heavyweight Championship was created at the behest of recently dominant NWA World Heavyweight Champion Lou Thesz, so that he could drop that title to Rikidozan (Ojst, 2021). The lineage of that title in Japan continues to this day (Tanabe et al., 2022). The Japan Pro Wrestling Association would be an NWA member until it dissolved in 1972 (O, 2012). When Inoki founded New Japan Professional Wrestling in 1972, he would align NJPW with the NWA for until 1986 (O, 2012).

There were also several professional wrestling territories operating in the South Pacific. After a stint promoting in Indianapolis and Detroit, American promoter Jim Barnett would found the original World Championship Wrestling in Sydney, Australia (O, 2012). Barnett and his partner Johnny Doyle would operate the promotions from 1964-1974 in Australia, New Zealand, and throughout the South Pacific (O, 2012). Barnett would sell the promotion to Tony Kolonie in 1974 (Tanabe et al., 2022). While Hawaii is a part of the United States, its geographic remoteness led to its being regarded as a separate territory. Russian-born promoter Al Karasick founded the first Hawaii-based professional wrestling organization of historical note, when he created Mid-Pacific Promotions in 1936 (Hornbaker, 2007). Karasick would join the NWA in 1949 and promote the official territory until selling the promotion in "Gentleman" Ed Francis in 1961 (Hornbaker, 2007). Francis would dub the territory, "50th State Big Time Wrestling" which is interchangeably called NWA Hawaii and Mid-Pacific Promotions, was a professional wrestling promotion based in Honolulu (Hornbaker, 2007). The Hawaiian promotion was a favored destination of wrestlers touring the Pacific rim, as it is a stopover point between the West Coast of the United States and Mexico, and Japan and Australia on the eastern side.

The tropical archipelago, unironically nicknamed “paradise,” was viewed as a “working vacation” by many top stars. Top stars for the promotion included Hawaiian stars Curtis Iaukea and Sammy Steamboat, alongside Samoan professional wrestling pioneer “High Chief” Peter Maivia (Ohira, 2005; Lyons, 2022)). Maivia would go on to become a top star in the WWF, and eventually a world tag team champion alongside the Nova Scotia-born Rocky Johnson. Rocky Johnson would marry Maivia’s daughter Ata and their son, Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson would debut in the WWF under the ring name “Rocky Maivia” in 1996 (Lyons, 2022). By 1979, Francis would sell the promotion to Pacific wrestling pioneer Steve Rickard (Lyons, 2022). The New Zealand-born Rickard had performed as a professional wrestler and promoted professional wrestling all over the Pacific since the early 1960’s (Lyons, 2022). Ricard would sell the promotion to Maivia in 1982, shortly before Maivia’s passing (Lyons, 2022). After his passing, wife Ofelia “Lia” Maivia would become a rare female promoter of a major territory (Lyons, 2022). Maivia would be promoted around the South Pacific until 1988 (Lyons, 2022).

Through the “blood brother” relationship between Peter Maivia and fellow famed Samoan wrestler Elder Reverend Amituana’i Anoa’i, the Maivia-Anoa’i Professional wrestling dynasty is considered one of the great professional wrestling families in history (Lyons, 2022). This dynasty is the most prominent and visible showcase of Samoan culture in popular culture worldwide. This dynasty, by blood and by marriage, can boast of more than 20 prominent performers and promoters in professional wrestling, including Solofa “Rikishi” Fatu Jr., tag team wrestling legends turned famed trainers “The Wild Samoans Afa and Siki Anoa’i, “The Usos” Jonathan and Joshua Fatu, Rodney “Yokozuna” Anoa’i, Mathew “Rosey” Anoa’i, Edward “Umaga” Fatu, the (aforementioned) Rock, and Leati “Roman Reigns” Anoa’i (Lyons, 2022). Roman Reigns is, at the time of this writing, the top star of the WWE and is currently on the longest heel championship reign in the history of the WWE (Lyons, 2022). Alongside Advocate Paul Heyman and his lackey-enforcer cousins the Jey Uso, Jimmy Uso, and Solo Sikoa; “The Tribal Chief” Roman Reigns honors his Samoan heritage with a traditional necklace and has been the centerpiece of WWE creative programming since 2015 (Lyons, 2022).

## 5.6.j Missouri - The Home of Champions

During the heyday of the NWA, the state of Missouri would be the home of many of the power brokers and top promoters of the organization. Missouri is home to the cities of St. Louis and Kansas City (O, 2012). These two cities combined to make this territory politically vital to the inner workings of the NWA. Thanks to these factors and its central location in the American Midwest, this became a de facto capital of territory wrestling.

Missouri was also the home of the NWA President and long-time St. Louis promoter Sam Muchnick (O, 2012). Muchnick founded the St. Louis Wrestling Club in 1959 and continuously promoted professional wrestling in St. Louis from until 1985 (O, 2012). Notably, Muchnick would take on top NWA star Harley Race as a business partner (O, 2012). This partnership also reinforced the mutually advantageous political connection between the NWA President and its then-perennial world heavyweight champion.

The Central States wrestling territory has a notably unique history. The promotions were founded by the original NWA champion Orville Brown following his career-ending accident in 1948 (O, 2012). Brown would sell the promotion to wrestler-turned-promoter Bob Geigel and then-reigning NWA world champion Pat O'Connor in 1958 (Hornbaker, 2007). Geigel would eventually become the president of the NWA in 1970 (Hornbaker, 2007). In 1973, Geigel would take on a new promotional partner in then-reigning NWA World Heavyweight Champion Harley Race, who was now a minority owner of both of the Missouri territories and business partners with both of the Presidents of the NWA in the 1970's (Hornbaker, 2007).

During the 1980's, many territory promotions were starved out of the market by the dominance of the WWF and the national prominence of Jim Crockett Promotions (JCP) (Hornbaker, 2018). Muchnick would sell his territory to Geigel in 1982 (Hornbaker, 2018). Geigel would in turn sell the territory to Crockett in 1986 (Hornbaker, 2018). The purported six-figure sale of the territory to Crockett was controversial, as the territory had failed to draw for a number of years (Hornbaker, 2018).



## 5.6.k Jim Crockett Promotions - The Mid-Atlantic Epicenter of Territory Wrestling

Jim Crockett Promotions, also interchangeably called “Crockett” or “JCP” for short, was the last surviving major professional wrestling territory of the era. The promotion had been founded in 1931 by Jim Crockett Sr (O, 2012). In addition to professional wrestling, the promotion would promote other sports like baseball and hockey, as well as live entertainment like music concerts and theatre (O, 2012). Crockett owned minor league baseball and hockey teams in the region (Bourne, 2021). Crockett Sr. Began operating “Eastern States Championship Wrestling” as a part of Jack Curley’s national professional wrestling trust in 1935 (Crockett & Thompson, 2021). Crockett Sr. Would promote professional wrestling throughout the “Mid-Atlantic” region of the United States (Crockett & Thompson, 2021). This region included the Carolinas and Virginia, three large states in the central Atlantic seaboard of the United States. This territory would remain the heart of the promotion for over 50 years. The promotion’s professional wrestling operational and production would be headquartered in Charlotte, North Carolina for that entire span as well (Crockett & Thompson, 2021). The promotion would join the NWA in 1952 (Hornbaker, 2007). While most territories highlighted their top men’s single’s title as their primary attraction, JCP would also specialize in tag-team wrestling, making it a top destination for top teams and regularly being a home base for the NWA world tag-team championship and the NWA world six-man tag team championship (Crockett & Thompson, 2021). Jim Crockett Sr would lead the promotion until his death in 1973 at age 63 (Chappell & Bourne, 2022).

JCP was taken over by his sons Jim Crockett Jr and David Crockett (Crockett & Thompson, 2021). Jim would take over the responsibilities as owner of the promotion, while David would be a shareholder, broadcaster and production tsar (Crockett & Thompson, 2021). The promotion would become a major force in the NWA during the 1970’s (Crockett & Thompson, 2021). It became a familiar stomping ground for top stars like Wahoo McDaniel, Harley Race, Dusty Rhodes, Johnny Valentine, and the Andersons (Chappell & Bourne, 2022). However, the performer most closely associated with the success of JCP in this era was “The Nature Boy” Ric Flair.

A baby named Fred Phillips was born in Tennessee and quickly adopted by a well-to-do couple in Minneapolis, Minnesota (Flair, 2004). Richard and Kathleen Fliehr renamed their child Richard Morgan Fliehr (Flair, 2004). Flair's adoptive father was an obstetrician-gynecologist, and his mother was a journalist (Flair, 2004). The two were co-founders and board members of the American Community Theatre Association (Flair, 2004). Flair became a somewhat troubled youth and was sent to boarding school at age 15, where he became a state champion wrestler and three-sport letterman in wrestling, football and track (Flair, 2004). Flair would attend the University of Minnesota on an athletic scholarship but spectacularly fail out in his first year (Flair, 2004). A successful amateur wrestler, raised in an affluent theatre-loving household, Flair would eventually join up with the first of Verne Gagne's infamous training camps (Flair, 2004). Flair's training classmates in that 6-week camp in the Minnesota winter of 1971 included Gagne's son Greg, American Olympic weightlifter Ken Patera, and Iranian Olympic wrestler Hussein "The Iron Sheik" Vaziri (Flair, 2004). After the brutal camp, Flair would join the AWA roster and begin learning the business (Flair, 2004). During his time in the AWA, Flair would become acquainted with and eventually mentored in wrestling by Dusty Rhodes (Flair, 2004). Flair would perform for the AWA until 1974, when he moved to Charlotte and joined JCP (Flair, 2004). Flair would be a steadily rising singles wrestler weighing nearly 300lbs, until a fatal plane crash on 4 October 1975 which broke Flair's back and paralyzed top star Johnny Valentine (Flair, 2004). Flair would return from his injury with drastically reduced weight (Flair, 2004). Flair would adopt a dapper dressing style and build his character around his wealth, fashion sense and hard-partying lifestyle, all being financed by his competitive prowess (Flair, 2004). His charismatic exuberance was encapsulated in his globally recognizable catchphrase, "Woo!" (Flair, 2004) Flair's fashion and promos made him a pop culture icon, and the "godfather of swagger" (The Nature Boy, 2017). He dubbed himself:

"I'm Ric Flair! The stylin', profilin', limousine ridin', jet flying wheelin' n' dealin' son of a gun!" - Ric Flair

Flair would win his first world title by defeating his mentor Dusty Rhodes in Kansas City in 1981 (Flair, 2004). Flair's run as the top star of the NWA would encompass the rest of the decade. He would eventually be the NWA world champion between 8 and 13 times depending on which title wins and losses one chooses to recognize (Tanabe et al., 2022). In

1986, Flair would replace the NWA's iconic "10 pounds of gold/domed globe" title belt with his own custom "Big Gold" belt (Flair, 2004). This belt would be in use as a world heavyweight title in the NWA, WCW, and WWE until it was retired in 2014; the NWA brought back the "10 pounds of gold" in 1993, and it remains in use to the time of this writing (Tanabe et al., 2022). Flair also became famed for his conditioning and in-ring technical skill and storytelling. Flair would famously wrestle his opponents in 60-minute time-limit draws, commonly called "60-minute Broadways" seven days a week, twice on Saturdays and twice on Sundays (Flair, 2004). The ability to perform nine one-hour matches per week is a feat that few professional wrestlers in American history can match. These epics were widely acclaimed by performers, fans and critics (The Nature Boy, 2017). With the combination of in-ring charisma, unparalleled cardio conditioning, technical wrestling prowess, and crowd-pleasing theatrical presentation, Flair is known as one of the greatest in-ring performers of all-time; his iconic look, incredibly engaging and charismatic promos, and proven drawing power across the world and generations leads many performers, critics, and fans to regard Flair as the best all-around professional wrestler of all-time (The Nature Boy, 2017). After his run in JCP, Flair would be a top star in WCW and the WWF, accumulating the generally accepted record 16 major modern world championships during his career, accumulating 3,116 days as a world's champion (Flair, 2004; Tanabe et al., 2022).

Jim Jr would also serve three terms as NWA President throughout 1980's (Crockett & Thompson, 2021). This gave him considerable political leverage in the organization. He was instrumental in keeping the NWA's world titles, and therefore the top stars in the network, working in the Mid-Atlantic territory. Boosted by Flair's reliability Crockett began his own national expansion (Flair, 2004). Crockett would eventually win six NWA territories, and Mid-Atlantic would become the de facto NWA promotion (Crockett & Thompson, 2021). By unifying once major territories like Mid-South Wrestling/UWF, Central States Wrestling, and Championship Wrestling from Florida, Crockett was able to create an umbrella of top stars familiar to various regions (Crockett & Thompson, 2021). During this period, the style of wrestling favored by Crockett and southern fans also began to spread nationally. This style of wrestling had a fast, more athletic pace than the character-driven style of the competing WWF (Flair, 2004). In 1985, JCP acquired the TBS Saturday nighttime slot from the WWF (O, 2012). Jim Barnett brokered the deal that put JCP and the NWA back in the professional wrestling mainstream as a national competitor to the WWF (Crockett & Thompson, 2021).

JCP entered its golden era in 1985. During the next three years, JCP would see a major explosion of drawing power across the country (Chappell & Bourne, 2022). The promotion assembled what is possibly the top-drawing tag-team division in the history of professional wrestling. It included The Rock n' Roll Express (Ricky Morton and Robert Gibson), The Midnight Express ("Beautiful" Bobby Eaton with manager Jim Cornette and either "Loverboy" Dennis Condry or "Sweet" Stan Lane), The Road Warriors (Hawk and Animal), The Minnesota Wrecking Crew (a combination of Gene, Ole and Arn Anderson), The Fantastics (Bobby Fulton and Tommy Rogers), The Varsity Club (any combination of Kevin Sullivan, Dr. Death Steve Williams and Mike Rotundo), Ricky Steamboat and Jay Youngblood, the Brisco Brothers, The Shepherders (aka "The Bushwhackers"), the Russians (Ivan and Nikita Koloff), the Fabulous Freebirds, and many more (Chappell & Bourne, 2022). From 1985-1988, the NWA hosted "The Jim Crockett Sr Memorial Cup" tag-team tournament and was able to create three tiers of active tag-team championships in the region for the "World," "United States," and "Mid-Atlantic" tag-team championships (Tanabe et al., 2022). Flair would be joined by wrestlers Tully Blanchard, Ole Anderson and "The Enforcer" Arn Anderson and manager JJ Dillon in the infamous "Four Horsemen" stable. This stable would feud with top single and tag-team babyfaces in the territory. During this era, they would feud with Dusty Rhodes, "Rugged" Ronny Garvin, Barry Windham, Sting, Lex Luger, Magnum TA, and Ricky Steamboat (Chappell & Bourne, 2022).

JCP would peak in 1986 amidst a boom in national interest (Crockett & Thompson, 2021). The company would begin to lose money in 1987, based on eroding live draws, and a bloated operational budget (Crockett & Thompson, 2021). The WWF was also increasingly entering the pay-per-view market and forcing providers to choose between carrying NWA or WWF events (Hornbaker, 2018). After the ascending monumental successes of Wrestlemanias 1-3, the WWF created the annual Survivor Series event to force pay-per-view and would only allow companies to distribute it with exclusive programming that would disrupt Starrcade's Thanksgiving tradition (Crockett & Thompson, 2021). Starrcade was forced to be moved to December 1987 in what proved to be a financial disaster for JCP (Crockett & Thompson, 2021). The promotion would eventually fall into debt (Crockett & Thompson, 2021). The promotion and all of its collected libraries of intellectual property from across the territories was sold to Ted Turner in 1988 (Crockett & Thompson, 2021). The promotion was rebranded

as “World Championship Wrestling” or WCW (Flair, 2004). This purchase may have effectively ended the territory system in professional wrestling. David Crockett remained onboard as a producer with what was once his grandfather’s company and saw it, for a time, become the world’s top professional wrestling promotion.

At the end of the territory era, professional wrestling had become a two-horse race. Vince McMahon’s WWF had been very successful in its national expansion. The popularity of Hulkamania, national television syndication, three rosters of performers touring simultaneously across the country, a ceaseless barrage of licensed merchandise integration, and pop culture tie-ins gaining mainstream publicity, all combined to create a national craze (Hornbaker, 2015). Meanwhile, Jim Crockett Promotions had begun a conglomeration push of its own by buying up other promotions in the NWA network (Crockett & Thompson, 2021). This also solidified a binary debate about professional wrestling in the United States which persists in the industry today. The WWF’s style of presentation is often described as “cartoonish” by critics, as it focuses on merchandisable caricatures in its presentation, with in-ring action for its own sake being of secondary concern. The competing philosophy argues that the execution of choreographed stage combat is more important to the art form than the action of characters. To be executed well, professional wrestling requires some amount of both. The ratio of character melodrama to athletic stage combat in the art form remains a topic of hot debate.

JCP and the WWF became the primary national professional wrestling brands during this time. They would compete across the growing field of cable television. With Turner’s success and national syndication, the competition between the two major professional wrestling brands became heated and palpable. The first Starrcade was broadcast in November 1983 and saw Ric Flair defeat perennial champion Harley Race in a Steel Cage match for the NWA world heavyweight championship (Flair, 2004). Starrcade would also be broadcast on closed circuit thereafter. The WWF would broadcast its first Wrestlemania pay-per-view event in 1985, to over one million viewers (Hornbaker, 2015).

As professional wrestling is primarily a commercial enterprise among profit-seeking entities, it appears that the WWF’s presentation was more able to accomplish the goal of objective financial success. McMahon disrupted the industrial market, and most territories were unable

or unwilling to adapt to the new state of play. This binary is further reinforced by a persistent narrative among some critics and performers that the national expansion of the WWF killed both the territory system and professional wrestling (Hornbaker, 2015; Hornbaker, 2018). The WWF's method of horizontal economic integration by eliminating regional competition remains controversial. However, professional wrestling is a capitalist enterprise seeking commercial profit, and as such, the territory era competitors failed to reap that in the evolving marketplace.

## 5.7 Legacies of the Territory Era

One of the most prominent legacies of the territory era is reflected in how different regions of the United States have differing preferences of how they prefer professional wrestling to be presented. These differences in American subcultures are not confined to professional wrestling. The regional geographic subcultures of the United States often correspond directly with the appeal of certain sub-genres and presentational philosophies in professional wrestling. Below is a side-by-side map of the peak Territory Wrestling Era in the United States, and the division of the 11 sub-cultural “nations of the United States (Kiersz & Ward, 2020).

The prevailing sub-cultural make-up of a region is related to the macro-causation of this phenomenon. Because professional wrestling is legacy entertainment, the styles of professional wrestling that the parents and grandparents of modern fans watched and enjoyed, is often passed down to succeeding generations. While the New York region, and later its nationally brand was a territory is built around hero babyfaces defining eras against a litany of heels in a family-friendly atmosphere, whereas some areas became a “blood and guts” territory after years of wildly violent and bloody matches like in Puerto Rico of the Philadelphia metropolitan area. Much of the American Midwest still prefers the clean cut technical wrestler built in the image of Lou Thesz or Verne Gagne as a central figure. The Appalachian region, outside of major markets, uses Ric Flair as their model of a top star. Verily this legacy and sub-cultural conflict is made more challenging in the commercial industry because the national brands struggle to appeal to all of the necessary demographic preferences simultaneously. There is also concern by some in the industry regarding the homogenization of in-ring style, particularly with the WWE as the dominant national brand.

Combatting the increasing homogenization of the national wrestling industry, the modern niche wrestling market is booming with sub-culturally targeted and demo-specific programming being distributed internationally through premium subscription streaming. This model has generated the highest number of commercially viable professional wrestling companies in the United States since the collapse of the territory system.

Significantly, most of the major professional wrestling territories have sold their tape libraries and intellectual property rights to the WWE. The WWE archived this footage and used it to create their subscription streaming platform, the WWE Network. Subscribers to the network can watch the archived episodes of the territories television broadcasts at any time. This streaming network is available in nearly 200 countries (Hayes, 2022). There were over 1.5 million monthly subscribers to the WWE Network worldwide in 2021, prior to a streaming deal with NBC-Universal's Peacock streaming network United States which leased the WWE's archived programming to the upstart streaming service in a 5-year, \$1 billion licensing deal (Hayes, 2022). It was reported that after the first year of the partnership, over 3.5 million subscribers had access to WWE Network content on Peacock (Hayes, 2022).

The NWA would remain a major professional wrestling organization in the 1980's, however from the founding of Titan Sports onward, the territory system was under siege. In the subsequent chapter, the consolidation of wrestling territories by national promotions would spell the end for the era. McMahon's mission and vision from his company's incorporation in 1980 was to conglomerate professional wrestling in the United States. Most steps taken by territorial wrestling promoters in the 1980's and 1990's were reactive to this mission.

Many historians view the Territory Era as a golden age for professional wrestling. Early heroes and villains established the prototypes and archetypes of our modern lexicon of professional wrestling characters. Some lament the conglomeration as taking jobs away from wrestlers. After all, with fewer viable promotions to work for, the national work force of professional wrestling shrank considerably. This is tantamount to if viable touring regional theatres across the country were shut down in lieu of a single national tour with a small fraction of the workers. Likewise, fans from those regions feel that their preferences and history are ignored by the larger companies. This period of transition took over a decade to complete, with the final territories dying in the early 1990's. A few regional upstart territories

would pop up in the 1990's, but they would almost invariably become feeder leagues for the national brands. The days of viable regional promotions were over.

Of course, many of the problematic aspects of professional wrestling in the territory era were limited severely. The NWA did, at times, act as an illegal cartel and is known widely to have repeatedly broken the terms of their 1958 deal with the federal government banning tactics such as blacklisting performers, coordinated physical assaults on wrestlers and promoters, and monopolistic tactics (US v NWA, 1958). The political nature of the NWA also limited the innovation available to individual promoters. The number of unscrupulous promoters across the country dwindled. For every top paying Don Owen, there were dozens of Jerry Jarrett's skimping on the payoffs for the performers.

The system also reinforced several problematic aspects of professional wrestling subculture among performers. The insular nature of the kayfabe conspiracy prevented adequate oversight of actions taken by performers or promoters. Exploitative tactics by promoters went unaddressed. The pervasive industry norm of performers, promoters and staffers engaging in various degrees of blatantly illegal activities was ignored and perpetuated throughout.

The rise of cable television, closed-circuit broadcast, and the forthcoming advent of cable pay-per-view dictated that being "regional" was going to become less viable. NWA member Georgia Championship Wrestling would be the first promotion to broadcast nationally (O, 2012). GCW's place on the national stage immediately started a rush by performers to join that promotion and for promoters to follow suit in expanding the presence of their television. Local television syndication would also erode in the 1980's until it was ostensibly a collection of local news stations featuring an assortment of game shows and conglomerate network-specific programming.

It is impossible to tell the story of professional wrestling in the United States without a thorough examination of the Territory Era. The peak of this era was from roughly 1933-1983 (Hornbaker, 2007; Hornbaker, 2018). For fifty years, this was the commercial structure for delivering the art form to its fans. Many of the debates about the stylistic differences in the presentation of the art form were crystallized in this period. Many performers and observers look back nostalgically at this period and lament its passing. How the system could have



lasted despite changing technology and culture remains a hyperbolic debate. Some look back to the content itself and yearn for a time when American media was more morally simplistic and presented a wholesome image that reflected cultural ideals, though very seldom their reality.

The influences of many of these figures on the artistic style of professional wrestling is palpable. There is also significant room for scholarship about the evolution of professional wrestling in emerging media. Moreover, the cultural influence of particular individuals, promotions, and artistic trends discussed herein are significant and relevant to the history of popular culture.

## 5.8 The Many Feuds of the Real American Era

Vince McMahon. WWF. Hulk Hogan. Wrestlemania. Sports Entertainment. Superstars.

As the proverb says, history is written by the winner. One version of the modern history of professional wrestling trumpets the triumph of McMahon's vision of a national wrestling empire conquering the fiefdoms of territorial promoters, propelled by the cultural phenomenon of Hulkamania. The alternate perspective on this era of artistic history contends that the rise of Titan Sports (now the WWE) as the top promotion in professional wrestling history was fueled by betrayal, cut-throat business tactics, cheap toys, subpar artistry, and the utter evisceration of tradition. The exact facts are usually shared through oral histories from unreliable narrators. What is known without dispute, is that McMahon won.

The foundations of American professional wrestling as it exists today were laid throughout the 1980's. This decade saw the end of the Territory system, the end of the kayfabe conspiracy, and the rise of the largest professional wrestling company in history. Taken alone, any one of these events alone would have been a seismic shift in the art form. Taken together, these changes created a market disruption so severe that it changed the entire way that the business of the commercial stage combat performance was and is handled. To this day many performers, executives, and fans from that era will insist that the events of the 1980's killed the wrestling business. This refers less to the global \$5 billion industry of professional wrestling today, and more to the traditions of the performance art established over the previous century (Sportskeeda, 2022). To this day some figures of the era are reviled by their contemporaries, while heralded as visionaries by others. While some of the changes in this era were fueled by ambition, many were also changed by shifting attitudes and technologies. This era saw the end of regional promotional fiefdoms, and entry of the vaudeville cardinal attraction into modern corporate America. The time from the 1980's-the present in professional wrestling is referred to by the WWE as "The Modern Era." This section of the report will examine the industrial, artistic, and technological factors that created this massive permanent shift in American professional wrestling.

Since the late 1940's, the national NWA network had dominated professional wrestling in the United States (Hornbaker, 2007). Offshoots from that network that competed as co-equal

within their respective regions were the AWA of the Midwest, and the WWWF of the Northeast. However, by 1980 the elements were in place to put an end to the old way of doing business. Professional wrestling had culturally tip-toed the line between performance and sport since at least the 1870's in the United States. The kayfabe conspiracy kept the secret of the performance art nature of professional wrestling for most of that span. This secret was closely guarded from outsiders for decades, while the amount of realism appropriate within the artistic presentation of the industry remained (and remains) up for debate by those working in the industry. This argument of apparent realism and the traditions of what made for an appropriate champion/leading actor would be forever cast into doubt by the commercial trends of this decade. It was in this era that the assumption that audiences would not pay to see the performance unless it were a legitimate combative bout, and the hypothesis that public interest was dictated more by character narrative in this violent *commedia dell'arte* was proven true.

While there are many figures who played a significant role in this evolution, there are two names whose partnership was. At the core of these shifts: Vincent Kennedy McMahon and Terry "Hulk Hogan" Bollea. By 1980, McMahon had established Titan Sports Inc as a sporting event and entertainment promotion out of Cape Cod Colosseum (Hornbaker, 2015). Also, by this point the wrestler known as Hulk Hogan had established himself as a rising star throughout the United States and the world. McMahon had an innovative strategy to create the first viable national professional wrestling promotion in the history of the United States. However, he needed a wrestling star to carry the torch as the star attraction for the greatest show on canvas. For that, he had the charismatic Floridian Hulk Hogan.

Vincent Kennedy McMahon was the second son of Vincent Jess McMahon (Hornbaker, 2015). The younger McMahon grew up in a mobile home in rural North Carolina (Hornbaker, 2015). The elder McMahon took his older son Rod and left his young namesake and his mother as a baby, and did not see his son again until the younger McMahon was 12 (Hornbaker, 2015). The younger McMahon endured a troubled childhood, growing up in poverty, surviving physically from his step-father, and overcoming dyslexia (Hornbaker, 2015). After becoming prone to street fights in his adolescence, McMahon would eventually be sent to the prestigious Fishburn Military School, graduating in 1964 (Hornbaker, 2015). While at Fishburn, McMahon would meet Linda Edwards, the future Linda McMahon

(Hornbaker, 2015). The Edwards household became a place of stability and reprieve for the younger McMahon throughout his adolescence and young adulthood (Hornbaker, 2015). Both Vince and Linda would attend East Carolina University and graduate in 1968, with bachelor's degrees in business and French respectively (Hornbaker, 2015). That next year, McMahon would take a position in Capitol Wrestling Corporation (Hornbaker, 2015). The elder McMahon gave his namesake son a position as an on-screen announcer (Hornbaker, 2015). Despite his ever-growing corporate responsibilities, the younger McMahon would maintain a position as an on-screen announcer for almost 30 years (Hornbaker, 2015).

During the 1970's McMahon would study promoting events. The younger McMahon slowly became an integral cog in the elder McMahon's promotional machine. During the 1970's the younger McMahon increased the television syndication of CWC/WWWF three-fold (Hornbaker, 2015). In 1976 the younger McMahon scored his first massive victory as a promoter with the Ali vs Inoki mixed rules fight (Hornbaker, 2015). Much like early American settlers, the younger McMahon would strive to build his empire from New England westward. His father assigned him a small promotion in Maine, and the younger McMahon would establish Titan Sports with Linda McMahon as co-Chief in 1979 (Hornbaker, 2015). The younger McMahon's expertise in television, closed-circuit pay-per-view, and creative spectacle, he decided to upend the territory system (Hornbaker, 2015).

It was also during this time that cable television was becoming an ever-more prominent phenomenon. With the success of Home Box Office (HBO) and Ted Turner's WTBS Superstation, and the FCC loosening restrictions on national cable broadcasts, television was about to change forever (CCTA). During this time period, satellite television became a viable industry, first emerging in the late-1970's. With cable television and satellite broadcasting expanding, the days of local television stations dominating programming consumption appeared to be numbered. This was significant to the professional wrestling industry, as the regulations of the NWA dictated that one promotion could not broadcast into the geographic territory of another promotion. This was easy enough to maintain when local stations with limited reach defined American television, but with the advent of national networks this business model became obsolete.

Another factor affecting this was McMahon realizing that the NWA had relatively soft enforcement power for their regulations. Despite the cartel's agreement with the federal government to abandon their monopolistic practices in the 1950's, the NWA had long used blacklisting and intimidation tactics to drive "outlaw" promotions out of business. By blacklisting talent that worked for non-member promotions, the NWA could freeze them out of business by blocking appearances by marketable stars. However, in order for this approach to be effective, it required that a promotion not have stars bankable enough to draw in that region. Since the 1920's, the New York/New England territory had been the wealthiest in the country (Hornbaker, 2015). Using the northeastern population centers as a base, along with New York City's position as America's financial, media, and cultural capital, whoever ruled the northeast was almost always the top individual promoter in the United States. This had been the case in the Slam Bang Era with the Gold Dust Trio and had remained so throughout the run of the Capitol Wrestling Corporation. The younger McMahon decided to use the wealth accrued from CWC's decades as the top drawing promotion in the country to put together an exclusive, all-star roster that was so well-paid that the performers would work despite threats of blacklisting from regional promoters. This strategy also saw McMahon target the top stars in many regions so that their market equity with fans could be used to draw fans in their old regions. McMahon decided that the charismatic Hulk Hogan would serve as the primo uomo at the top of this roster and would propel the young star to the top draw in the industry for two decades.

Terry Bollea was born in Georgia and grew up in southern Florida (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). As a high schooler, the towering Bollea was scouted by major league teams prior to an arm injury that derailed his baseball dreams (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Bollea would then become a bass player in various local bands in south Florida (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Bollea was a fan of Championship Wrestling from Florida and took up weightlifting to emulate the physique of wrestling innovator "Superstar" Billy Graham (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). While Hogan was playing guitar in his band, the Brisco Brothers happened to attend the Imperial Room, a Tampa-area nightclub, and discover the hulking civilian (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). They, manager Oliver Humperdink, and promotional staffer Mike Graham recruited him to study under legendary trainer Yasuhiro Kojima, known by his ring name of "Hiro Matsuda" (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010) Matsuda was both a share-holder in the Florida promotion and a trainer of prospective grappling artists for the territory (Ojst, 2022).

Unfortunately for Hogan, like many Japanese professional wrestlers, Matsuda was a student of catch wrestling and his gym carried the “Snake Pit” moniker (Ojst, 2022). Hogan claims that Matsuda broke his leg with a submission hold on his first day of training, putting him in a cast for ten weeks (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Hogan also recalls the brutal training routines which included heavy calisthenics workouts, palpable conditioning exercises, submission holds, the stiff versions of the allowable strikes of professional wrestling and drilling the protocols on how to land until they became second nature (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). After healing his leg, Hogan would complete Matsuda’s camp and be inducted into the kayfabe conspiracy by Florida wrestler and promoter Eddie Graham (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Hogan would debut as “Terry Bolder” and go through a series of ring names before being discovered by the elder McMahon in 1979 (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). His character iterations included “The Super Destroyer,” “Hulk Bolder,” and “Sterling Golden” (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). The elder McMahon dubbed the chiseled 2m (6ft 8in), 140kg (300lb) grappler “Hulk Hogan” (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010).

Hogan would emerge as a top star across the United States and internationally throughout the late-1970’s and early-1980’s (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). His immense physique and charisma were first widely used as a heel persona. This led to feuds with top stars including Andre the Giant and WWF Champion Bob Backlund (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Because of his connection with Matsuda, Hogan also became a frequent featured competitor in Japan. While Hogan’s character-driven in-ring style was often criticized during his run as the top star in the United States, in Japan he would always adopt a high-impact, technical approach so as to reflect well on Matsuda (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Hogan would become a top star in Japan in the early 1980’s as well (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). By 1981, Hogan had joined Verne Gagne’s AWA and was honing his character as a charismatic superhero babyface (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). It was also in 1981 that Hogan’s fame would explode when he performed in the classic feature film *Rocky III* (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010).

Hogan landed the supporting role of champion professional wrestler, “Thunderlips, the Ultimate Male” in the Stallone classic (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Harkening to the long-pursued matches between top wrestlers and boxers, the fictitious exhibition professional wrestling bout pitted the titular Rocky Balboa against Hogan hulking heel visage. The wild

scene of the brawl between Stallone and Hogan was a hit with audiences and became an instant classic. Hogan's fame exploded as the film debuted at #1 in the North American box office and went on to make over \$127 million in American theatres and a total of over \$270 million worldwide (over \$808 million adjusted for inflation) (IMDb, 2022). The film was nominated for an Oscar for Best Original Song for "Eye of the Tiger," which went on to win a Grammy and becoming the #1 hit popular music song in the world (IMDb, 2022). Rocky III finished the year as third-to-top grossing film of 1982 behind only classic mega-hits ET the Extra-Terrestrial and Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Arc (IMDb, 2022). Hogan's fame from the film propelled him as a pop culture figure. This film also costarred 1980's pop culture icon Laurence "Mr. T" Tureaud as the primary antagonist (IMDb, 2022). Through his association with Hogan, Mr. T would become a pivotal figure in the professional wrestling boom of the 1980's.

While Hogan was becoming a star in cinema, Vince McMahon was initiating his own rise to the new leader of his father's empire. The elder McMahon was in his late 60's and after a wildly successful career as a territorial promoter, decided to retire (Hornbaker, 2015). His son Vincent Kennedy McMahon had been groomed as a top executive for some time, and had gained his father's confidence as a capable leader of the promotion (Hornbaker, 2015). In 1982, the elder McMahon would sell controlling interest in the Capitol Wrestling Corporation to his son (Hornbaker, 2015). CWC and the WWWF were absorbed under the Titan Sports banner (Hornbaker, 2015). It is widely discussed that the elder McMahon's health was a factor in his decision to retire and sell the company, as he passed away from prostate cancer less than two years later (Hornbaker, 2015). The younger McMahon (hereafter referenced only as "McMahon" or "Vince McMahon") was now in control of the largest and richest promotional territory in the United States (Hornbaker, 2015). McMahon would swiftly rebrand the World Wide Wrestling Federation as the World Wrestling Federation or "WWF" (Hornbaker, 2015).

Hogan's popularity exploded and he became a major babyface attraction around the United States. This put his home promotion, the AWA in prime position to cash in on his newfound fame. His position in the AWA as a top contender to knock off long-time champion Nick Bockwinkel was basically assured. However, promoter Verne Gagne had severe reservations about promoting Hogan as the leading figure of his brand (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Gagne

was an avid traditionalist and Olympic wrestler (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Despite Hogan's drawing power, charisma, massive physique, and training pedigree under Matsuda, Gagne did not want a champion who was not a seasoned amateur wrestler (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). The debate over whether or not a dearth of amateur wrestling credentials disqualified a performer from consideration as the primo uomo of a professional wrestling company would rage throughout Hogan's initial run in the 1980's.

Hogan claims that Gagne offered him the AWA title, only if Hogan would agree to a "perpetuity agreement" (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). The "perpetuity agreement" was a long-standing tactic of professional wrestling trainers and promoters where young performers would agree to send a recent age of all subsequent earnings to their trainer or promoter (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). This exploitative tactic was common throughout entertainment and combat sports during the mid-20th century. Hogan claims to have rejected this offer outright (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Hogan would defeat Bockwinkel for an unofficial AWA title in 1982, only to have the kayfabe decision reversed 6 days later (Tanabe et al., 2022). Hogan would then leave the Minneapolis-based territory permanently and pursue his fortunes in Japan and Vince McMahon's WWF (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010; Hornbaker, 2015).

While Gagne's traditionalist trepidation blocked Hogan's ascension in the Midwest, Hogan first found his foothold as a world champion in the Far East. It is a little-discussed historical fact of professional wrestling that Hulk Hogan's first world championship was the IWGP World Heavyweight championship in New Japan Professional Wrestling (Tanabe et al., 2022). To the shock and chagrin of some modern fans and critics, Hulk Hogan was the inaugural champion of the "International Wrestling Grand Prix," a tournament held in 1983 (Tanabe et al., 2022). Prior to 1983, the annual round-robin tournament in Japan had gone by other names, but the 1983 version was the first iteration of the IWGP brand (Tanabe et al., 2022). The branding of "IWGP" would eventually transition from a Grand Prix title to a lineal title, and still marks the top lineal titles in NJPW to the time of this writing (Tanabe et al., 2022). Hogan faced off against 6-time winner of the prior iterations of the annual tournament Antonio Inoki in the final on 2 June 1983, defeating the Japanese icon via knockout in a nearly 22 minute match (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). In addition to being a star in a wildly successful Hollywood film, Hogan was now also a world champion in arguably



the physically toughest and most technical promotion in the world. The 1983 IWGP League tournament was a star-studded affair featuring Mexico's heavyweight champion El Canek, Europe's longtime titleholder Otto Wanz, Big John Studd, RINGS MMA/pro wrestling promoter Akita Maeda, and Andre the Giant were among the all-star group of performers featured. Hogan would return to his home promotion, the WWF in late 1983 as a top babyface (Tanabe et al., 2022).

McMahon had chosen Hogan to be his top star during his national expansion. McMahon echoed Toots Mondt's school of thought that the leading actor of a professional wrestling program did not have to have a considerable amateur wrestling pedigree to be the champion (Hornbaker, 2015). This sentiment was not shared by then WWF champion Bob Backlund (Hornbaker, 2015). Backlund was a national collegiate champion wrestler who had joined the business through Verne Gagne and Eddie Sharkey programs in the early 1970's (Hornbaker, 2015). Backlund outright refused to lose the title to Hogan on principle, rejecting the princely sum offered by McMahon (Hornbaker, 2015). To diffuse this situation, McMahon acquired the services of "The Iron Sheikh" Hussein Khosrow Ali Vaziri (Hornbaker, 2015).

Vaziri had been an Olympian in Greco-Roman wrestling in his native Iran (Hecht, 2014). After immigrating to the United States in the late 1960's, he would twice claim the AAU American national title in Greco-Roman wrestling in 1970 and 1971 respectively (Hecht, 2014). He would also become an assistant coach of the American Olympic Greco-Roman wrestling team (Hecht, 2014). In 1973, Vaziri would join the ranks of professional wrestling through Verne Gagne's camp alongside Ric Flair and others (Hecht, 2014). After the Iran Hostage Crisis, where over 50 Americans were held hostage in the US embassy in Tehran for 444 days by Iranian revolutionaries, Vaziri became the Iron Sheik (Hecht, 2014). Despite his opposition to the fundamentalist Islamic revolution in Iran and having been a personal friend and bodyguard of the Shah of Iran, Vaziri embraced the character (Hecht, 2014). Indeed, despite having an American wife and children and a genuine pursuit of the American Dream, Vaziri would tap into persistent xenophobia and islamophobia in the United States throughout his career as a foreign heel (Hecht, 2014). With Iran's anti-American sentiment still well-within the public consciousness, McMahon saw Vaziri as the ideal heel to transition between the CWC and WWF Era (Hornbaker, 2015). The Iron Sheikh would go on a tear through the WWF ranks, defeating many opponents with his "Camel Clutch" submission hold (Hecht,

2014). This would build towards a match with Backlund in December 1983 (Hecht, 2014). The Iron Sheikh kayfabe injured Backlund during a demonstration of the Sheik's famous "Persian Clubs" shield-casting workout (Hornbaker, 2015). The injured Backlund gave a valiant effort but succumbed to the Camel Clutch on 26 December 1983 in Madison Square Garden (Hecht, 2014). The Iranian invasion of the WWF had claimed the world champions of professional wrestling.

Hogan would re-debut for the WWF on 4 January 1984 (Hornbaker, 2015). Hogan arrived as a babyface in what would become his signature red and yellow ring gear, saving Backlund from an assault by "The Wild Samoans" Afa and Sika Anoa'i (Hornbaker, 2015). In a subsequent promo, Backlund co-signed Hogan as a babyface (Hornbaker, 2015). With Hogan now firmly positioned all that was left to launch him and the promotion was a bout with the Iron Sheikh. However, before this bout could happen, Verne Gagne tried to stage a daring double-cross that would have stopped Hogan and McMahon's empire before it even began. Gagne reportedly offered Vaziri a \$100,000 bounty and the AWA world title to betray McMahon and break Hogan's leg in the ring (Hecht, 2014). This offer was similar to the famous incident with Stanislas Zbyszko in the 1920's (Zimmerman, 2021). However, despite his dastardly on-screen character and his relationship with his former mentor, Vaziri refused to betray McMahon (Hecht, 2014). While those familiar with the folk stories of the professional wrestling industry may be surprised to hear it, the Iron Sheikh's professionalism and artistic integrity saved the WWF.

28 January 1984 was a watershed moment in the history of professional wrestling (Hornbaker, 2015). As far as professional wrestling in its modern form and the WWE's own narratives on its own history, this date is essentially the division of BCE and CE in the context of professional wrestling. Hulk Hogan faced off against the Iron Sheikh at Madison Square Garden (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). The Iron Sheik was flanked by longtime heel manager "Classy" Freddie Blassie (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). The match had been billed as a rematch of Backlund and the Iron Sheik, but Hogan was inserted as a kayfabe late replacement (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Hogan came out in red and yellow, performing his iconic shirt rip and the match commenced (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). The Iron Sheik would have Hogan in the seemingly unbearable Camel Clutch (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Apparently fueled by the growing roar of the crowd, Hogan escaped the submission hold,

performed his signature leg drop, and pinned the Iron Sheik (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Hogan's title win was greeted with a colossal pop from a capacity crowd at Madison Square Garden (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Commentator Gorilla Monsoon gave the iconic line as Hogan was handed the title belt, "Hulkamania has arrived!" (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010) McMahon would schedule Hogan's first run as world champion in the United States would last 1,474 days (Tanabe et al., 2022). With Hogan as his marquee attraction, and an innovative multi-tiered revenue structure bolstered by a bold horizontal economic integration strategy, McMahon would forever change professional wrestling.

### 5.8.a A New Way of Doing Business

McMahon's strategy to take over the professional wrestling industry was a multi-stage, multi-tiered, multimedia assault on the old system of professional wrestling distribution and monetization across the United States. The market was so thoroughly disrupted that competing promotions would spend decades trying, and typically failing to replicate the WWF/WWE's model. This was made more difficult by the massive market share that Titan Sports was able to corner in this era. As with most innovative and infamous industrialists, McMahon was heralded as a genius by some and a pariah by others. This subsection will examine the various strategies made by McMahon during this era that led to the WWF's meteoric rise.

Professional wrestling is and has always been very much a "top-down" business, where the appeal of the top stars is the major driving force behind the success of a promotion. McMahon's choice of Hogan was largely strategic because of a number of factors. Firstly, the massively muscular and 2m (6ft 8in) tall star passed the famous "airport test" (Hornbaker, 2015). Aside from his massive stature and physique, Hogan was a mainstream star after his appearance in Rocky III. Hogan also had palpable charisma in the ring and on the microphone. Hogan would be the updated model of the "white meat babyface" for the New York company that had always bet big on heroes as long-term champions. What Bruno Sammartino had reflected in the culture of New York and the northeastern United States in the 1960's & 1970's, Hogan reflected on American culture in the 1980's. This era of American history was defined by Reagan Era conservative values, colorful pop culture, catchy guitar riffs in popular music, late-stage Cold War patriotism, and over-the-top heroism by emerging characters in fictional stories.

McMahon's business strategy targeted the creative product towards children (Hornbaker, 2015). This strategy was successful for both aesthetic and economic reasons. In terms of aesthetics, McMahon championed colorful caricature in his squared-circle commedia dell'arte, because children were more likely to engage with brightly colored characters engaging in mythic combat. However, unlike GI Joe or the Amazing Spider-Man, kids could go and watch the heroes and villains of the WWF live in person (Hornbaker, 2015). McMahon also made sure to present a family-friendly product and broadcast that product on Saturday mornings scheduled around "Saturday morning cartoon" programming blocks, which are a ubiquitous part of American media culture (Hornbaker, 2015). McMahon would also invest heavily into production quality, creating state-of-the-art editing labs, exponentially increasing the number of cameras, buying the top quality television cameras available, and using top quality sound and lighting equipment (Hornbaker, 2015). The WWF/WWE was and is the gold standard in professional wrestling for television production (Hornbaker, 2015). Since this time, they have kept their production methods on the cutting edge of television and multimedia presentation (Hornbaker, 2015).

This targeting the product towards children and families was due to the second part of the strategy which was based on the marketing assumption that the children who were fans of professional wrestling would spend their parents' money on the products and events (Hornbaker, 2015). This was an era where marketing to children was a major part of mass media. This approach was pioneered by Japanese and American toy companies who would reverse-engineer the marketing process, by first creating toys and then creating cartoon shows targeted at children to sell those toys (Hornbaker, 2015). Examples of this in the 1980's included He-Man, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, GI Joe, the Care Bears, Transformers, and dozens (if not hundreds) more. While many adult fans and critics lamented the "cartoonish" product that the WWF put out, in lieu of a sport-based adult-oriented approach to the performance art, the strategy was the most financially successful marketing push in the history of the industry to that point (Hornbaker, 2015). McMahon used that strategy to unleash a tsunami of licensed merchandising products for the WWF, Hogan and the other "Superstars" of the promotion (Hornbaker, 2015). These products included toys, t-shirts, ice-cream bars, videos, and ostensibly any physical item upon which a logo could be affixed (Hornbaker, 2015).

This merchandising strategy also created massive amounts of passive income for wrestlers (Hornbaker, 2015). To that point in the history of professional wrestling, wrestlers were only paid to perform (Hornbaker, 2015). Now, with the licensing of their likenesses and images, wrestlers would receive quarterly checks for merchandising sales that were in the 5- or 6-figures (Hornbaker, 2015). The stories of these massive payments spread like wildfire among the insular fraternity of professional wrestlers and caused a recruiting boom among them (Hornbaker, 2015).

Hogan's specific branding was also targeted directly at children in the American family (Hornbaker, 2015). The entrance song "Real American" blasting its signature guitar riff across packed arenas of screaming fans while Hogan struts down to the ring in red and yellow gear, is an iconic image of Americana. In promos, Hogan-isms and catchphrases would be prouder into the audience's subconscious to a degree where most fans from the era can recite a verbatim amalgam of a Hogan promo to this day. These promos would, of course, reference the key brands: Hulkamania, the Hulkamaniacs, and the World Wrestling Federation (Hornbaker, 2015). "Hulkamania" was the term Hogan and the WWF used to refer to the national sensation of his popularity (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). The use of the name "Hulk" led to legal issues and a complex licensing agreement between the WWF, Hogan, McMahon, Marvel Comics and later Turner Broadcasting, as the name is shared and predated by Marvel character "The Incredible Hulk" (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). The "Hulkamaniacs" were Hogan's legions of fans (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Hogan would always preach his "Three (later Four) Demandments: drink your milk, take your vitamins, say your prayers" (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). This would later be amended to include "Believe in yourself" (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). And despite the torrent of seemingly insurmountable adversaries that would emerge from the New York heel factory during the era, Hogan would swear that he and his Hulkamaniacs would overcome them (Hornbaker, 2015). Hogan would also refer to literally every person during these promos by the apparent pronoun "Brother" (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). And at the end of each promo, Hogan would pose the rhetorical challenge to the enemies of Hulkamania, "What cha gonna do, Brother, when Hulkamania runs wild on you?!" (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010) In the world of the play, they would lose in shock and shame; in real life, they would collect astronomical paychecks for having been run wild upon.

One of the most important factors that McMahon took on was his approach to talent acquisition. During the Territory Era, most professional wrestlers worked as independent contractors on semi-formal agreements with promoters (Hornbaker, 2018). Wrestlers would tour through territories for indeterminate lengths of time, varying from only a week for top champions, to months or even several years (Hornbaker, 2018). This approach was designed to keep talent fresh in various regions within the NWA network (Hornbaker, 2018). It was very common for performers in the Territory Era to have gone through independent iterations of their characters while touring periodically with dozens of different promotions (Hornbaker, 2018). McMahon challenged this notion by reviving the Gold Dust Trio tactic from the 1920's of signing performers to exclusive contracts (Hornbaker, 2015). This policy has remained in place to this day (Hornbaker, 2015). The seemingly incongruous status of WWE performers being somehow both exclusively tied to the now-Connecticut-based professional wrestling juggernaut while legally being classified as "independent contractors" is a matter of considerable public and political debate.

McMahon would initiate a four-pronged strategy of horizontal economic integration to corner the American professional wrestling market. A crucial factor in this process was McMahon demonstrating that if black-listing or intimidation tactics by NWA loyalists were ineffective, the NWA had no legal authority to enforce their regulations upon non-members (Hornbaker, 2018). In 1983, McMahon would remove the WWWF/WWF from the NWA for the final time (Hornbaker, 2015). McMahon would then initiate a massive recruitment drive of top wrestling stars from around the country (Hornbaker, 2018). This controversial move has been characterized by some in the wrestling media as "the Great Raid," wherein McMahon raided the rosters of various promotions (Hornbaker, 2018). While it defied norms of the Territory Era, the WWF was offering wrestlers national exposure and big money payments (Hornbaker, 2015). In this era, there were no guaranteed-money contracts in the WWF (Hornbaker, 2015). All payoffs were given at the promoter's discretion; however, in defiance of industry norms, these non-guaranteed payoffs exceeded the expectations of the performers (Hornbaker, 2018). It remains an undisputed fact that no promoter in history has compensated performers in the seven-figures and beyond than Vince McMahon (Hornbaker, 2015).

McMahon was able to assemble the most star-studded, talent-rich, roster in the history of professional wrestling. This was the first prong of the strategy of horizontal integration.

Acquiring these talents gave the WWF two edges over wrestling territories, firstly, it depleted the drawing power of the various regional territories by taking their best performers (Hornbaker, 2018). This was part of the vitriolic response by Verne Gagne to Hulk Hogan leaving the AWA. This also made the WWF live events a bigger draw in those regions because fans could see the familiar stars who had built brand equity in the geographic area.

The second prong of the Titan Sports method of horizontal integration was to acquire the television rights for professional wrestling in different territories (Hornbaker, 2015; Hornbaker, 2018). In prior eras, a wrestling promotion would provide content to a local television station and be compensated with ad revenue (Hornbaker, 2018). This method of agreement was used throughout the United States for decades. McMahon turned this strategy on its ear by instead offering to buy the time slots for professional wrestling programming under exclusive agreements with those same stations. Rather than paying for content, local television stations would *receive* money for hosting content. McMahon used these time slots and the already familiar local stars to build interest for WWF live shows in the area (Hornbaker, 2015). This model of syndicated content distribution was a precursor to the infomercial. The local promoters did not have the financial backing to match the wealthy New York promotion, and lost hundreds of local television deals (Hornbaker, 2018). Without local television, public interest in regional professional wrestling and thereby the draw of the live events dwindled (Hornbaker, 2018). This put most regional promotions in dire financial straits.

Promoting those live events in the geographic territories of rival promotions was the third prong of this national strategy. The WWF would have two or three simultaneously touring rosters. The WWF also had three championship titles to use as marquee match-ups for this strategy. The largest markets (the “a-towns”) would be headlined by the WWF World Heavyweight Championship, the intermediate markets (“b-towns”) and even occasionally small markets (“c-towns”) would be headlined by the WWF World Tag-Team Champions or the WWF Intercontinental Heavyweight Champion, respectively and intermittently (Hornbaker, 2015). Wrestlers in the WWF were performing more than 300 days per year following wild and incongruous routing (Hornbaker, 2015). Even more daunting was Hogan’s travel schedule, which regularly saw him hopping from one city to the next via private jet to perform on two or even three rosters per day (Hornbaker, 2015). This move was

perhaps the most controversial, as it caused a number of threats of violence. There is a famous story of the WWF running a live show in St. Louis, and Harley Race barging into the dressing room and allegedly punching Hulk Hogan to the floor before brandishing a pistol (Djeljosevic, 2020). There were also dozens of more threats of violence from desperate promoters, along with alleged bounties on various wrestlers and McMahon himself.

The final prong of the horizontal integration strategy was acquisition of competition. As local promotions would lose market-share and revenues would shrink, McMahon would eventually offer to buy the promotion, its intellectual property, and its tape-library (Hornbaker, 2015). Most local promoters took this opportunity to get a handsome pay-off and move on from their promotions (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Some other promoters, resentful of the WWF's integration strategies, would negotiate to be acquired by NWA affiliates (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). By the end of the 1980's virtually all of the territorial promotions in the United States would be acquired by the WWF or Jim Crockett Promotions (Hornbaker, 2018). The notable exception of the Memphis territory, which through partnerships with the shells of former major promotions clung to life (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

Of course, once the local competitor was either bought up or out of business, McMahon would renegotiate his deal with the local television stations (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). As the WWF was now the only professional wrestling organization in the region, McMahon threatened to remove Titan Sports's content from the network (Hornbaker, 2015). Instead of the WWF paying the network for the time slots, now the WWF would return to the previous model of receiving ad revenue from the local station (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This method of syndication is reminiscent of the Standard Oil horizontal economic integration strategy used by John D. Rockefeller in the late-19th and early-20th Centuries (Ayling, 2016).

The final prong of McMahon's master plan was and is as wildly successful as it is infuriating to traditionalists. McMahon openly sought and recruited mainstream media attention (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This often included bringing in figures from mainstream sports and pop culture to be part of the show (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Prior to McMahon's strategy, the interactions of mainstream celebrities had mostly been incidental with attendance or fandom being acknowledged. A considerable portion of the public was



largely aware that professional wrestling was, at least to some degree, performance art for decades. Existing in the hinterlands of public interest in a heretofore unexplored area of intersection between art and sport, professional wrestling was seldom covered in mainstream media. McMahon would actively recruit celebrities and celebrity athletes into the make-believe realm of kayfabe, both because those celebrities would attract free advertising through print and television media (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). McMahon would also constantly seek out opportunities for performers to appear in mainstream media (Thompson & Prichard, 2016; Thompson & Ross, 2019). By expanding the visibility of professional wrestling in the mainstream media, McMahon believed new fans would watch the nationally syndicated television programs or attend live events (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

This method of fan acquisition has proven to be incredibly successful from then until now (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Many critics would prefer the performance art be branded and presented as pure sport however it is not because it is not. The WWE has even created a “Celebrity Wing” to its Hall of Fame to honor those celebrities who chose to be a part of its history (WWE Hall of Fame, 2022). Inductees to this wing include comedic actor Drew Carrey, football legend William “The Refrigerator” Perry, musician Kid Rock, rapper Snoop Dogg, rock legend Ozzy Osborne, famed baseball announcer Bob Uecker, baseball great Pete Rose, legendary actor William Shatner, actor-turned-governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, then-future now-former disgraced President Donald Trump, boxer Mike Tyson, and actor-boxer Mr. T (WWE Hall of Fame, 2022). In recent years, celebrities have begun having matches at WWE pay-per-views (Hayes, 2022). One prominent example includes *Arrow*-star Steve Amell wrestling Cody “Stardust” Rhodes at SummerSlam 2015, the first of several matches for Amell, who would go on to star in the professional wrestling-based television series *Heels* (Hayes, 2022). Recording artist Bad Bunny and YouTuber Logan Paul competed in tag-team matches alongside Damien Priest and Mike “The Miz” Mizanin respectively in tag-team matches at Wrestlemania 2021 and 2022 respectively (Hayes, 2022). At Wrestlemania 2022, the entire cast of *Jackass* took on wrestler Sammy Zayn (Chiari, 2022). These are a few among dozens of notable examples of these types of crossovers.

Mr. T and Tyson are largely acknowledged as the two of most significant figures from this category of celebrity as related to their influence on professional wrestling in the United States, while Trump’s appearances had perhaps the largest influence on American history.

However, largely under-discussed in their influence on bringing professional wrestling into mainstream entertainment is recording artist Cindy Lauper (Hayes, 2022). The Tyson events will be covered in detail in section 5.10.g *The Monday Night Wars* (Hayes, 2022). The Trump saga will appear in section 3.2 *Professional Wrestling & American Politics*. In this era, Mr. T would be the centerpiece of McMahon's wildly ambitious foray into professional wrestling pay-per-view (Hayes, 2022).

### 5.8.b LIVE on Pay-Per-View

The “pay-per-view” is a vitally important and often evolving concept in professional wrestling since the early 1980's. In this context, “pay-per-view” is also a catch-all term used to describe several technologies that functioned to live-broadcast special televised events directly to paying customers (Dilbert, 2014). The earliest iteration of that was the “closed circuit” broadcast (Dilbert, 2014). This type of broadcast would show a major sporting event on a cinema screen in various locations around the country (Dilbert, 2014). This form of “theater television” was used to great success by McMahon in the Ali-Inoki bout in 1976 (Dilbert, 2014). It was Jim Crockett Promotions who broke the closed-circuit barrier with the “Starrcade” event on Thanksgiving 1983 (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). On 24 November 1983, JCP broadcast “A Flare for the Gold” where Ric Flair would claim his second NWA world heavyweight title by defeating Harley Race in a steel cage match refereed by former champion Gene Kiniski (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017; Flair, 2004). The closed-circuit broadcast was distributed widely across the American South and was a tremendous financial success for Crockett (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). JCP would also stage the second event of this kind the following year on Thanksgiving with Starrcade '84 (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Indeed, the Starrcade franchise would eventually be nicknamed “The Granddaddy of Them All” and serve as the annual tent pole event for JCP, and later WCW, before eventually being revived by the WWE as a part of the NXT brand (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). The event would draw over 15,000 fans to the Greensboro Coliseum and over 30,000 on closed-circuit broadcast theaters across the South (Flair, 2004).

Appreciating Crockett's success with the Starrcade events and drawing from his own experience with the Ali-Inoki bout, McMahon devised a daring move to use celebrity attractions alongside a star-studded professional wrestling card on national closed-circuit

theater broadcasts. The event would be called *Wrestlemania*<sup>50</sup>, and it would create a seismic shift in how professional wrestling was structured. The first *Wrestlemania* event was also an early climax in McMahon's "Rock 'n Wrestling" marketing strategy (Hornbaker, 2015). This would see a number of celebrity interactions with wrestlers and wrestling personalities. McMahon implemented a strategy of aggressive cross-promotion between the WWF and MTV throughout the build-up to the first *Wrestlemania* event (Hornbaker, 2015).

"Rock n' Wrestling" was ostensibly kicked off by recording artist Cindy Lauper and long-time professional wrestling manager "Captain" Lou Albano (Dilbert, 2017). Lauper's star also exploded in 1983 when her classic hit song "Girl Just Want to Have Fun" burst into the American consciousness (Dilbert, 2017). At this point in American history, most of the "cool" factor in American television was monopolized by cable network MTV (Dilbert, 2017). MTV would be the cultural center point for teenagers and young adults from the early 1980's to the early 2000's (Dilbert, 2017). Lauper produced an MTV award-winning music video for her song, which prominently featured Albano as her father (Dilbert, 2017). Lauper would make several appearances on WWF television to promote her albums (Dilbert, 2017). She engaged in a storyline where she hit back against Albano's sexist remarks (Dilbert, 2017). Lauper and Albano would openly chide one-another on WWF television (Dilbert, 2017). This feud would also come to encompass the WWF Women's Championship (Dilbert, 2017).

On 23 July 1983, the WWF would host "The Brawl to End It All" from Madison Square Garden in front of over 23,000 fans (Hornbaker, 2015). This event would include an all-star card at the World's Most Famous Arena. All four of the WWF's domestic championships would be defended at the event, including Hogan successfully defending his title against Greg "The Hammer" Valentine (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). The event would also feature Antonio Inoki successfully defending the WWF's Japan-based World Martial Arts Heavyweight Championship (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). The main event of the card pitted longtime Women's world champion Mary "The Fabulous Moolah" Ellison with Albano in her corner

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<sup>50</sup> The global phenomenon of *Wrestlemania* could warrant several full studies on its history, cultural importance, and economic impact. The first *Wrestlemania* could also warrant considerable academic study as well.

against upstart women's wrestling star Wendy Richter who was cornered by Lauper (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001).

Moolah was, for all intents and purposes, the prima donna of women's wrestling in the United States throughout the latter 20th century. Moolah was the primary booking agent of women's wrestling talent in the United States (Greer, 2018). She also owned a women's professional wrestling school where aspiring female wrestlers were trained by either Moolah or her staff, depending on the accounts given (Greer, 2018). During this era, Moolah ostensibly monopolized women's professional wrestling in the United States and has been accused by some of unseemly and exploitative practices in her treatment of female talent (Greer, 2018). Nevertheless, Moolah enjoyed what is officially the longest uninterrupted championship reign in American professional wrestling history, holding the world women's title for nearly 28 years (Tanabe et al., 2022). There were three women who non-canonically took that title from Moolah for a combined 41 days during that span (Tanabe et al., 2022). Moolah owned the rights to the world women championship of professional wrestling and held the title under the auspices of the NWA, until selling the rights to the WWF and McMahon in the early 1980's (Tanabe et al., 2022).

Moolah was in her 60's at the time of this event in 1984 (Dilbert, 2017). She had little drawing power in the brightly-colored world of 1980's professional wrestling in the WWF (Dilbert, 2017). As an appeal to young fans, McMahon set her foil as Wendy Richter, a 23-year-old wrestler with an impressive physique and palpable charisma (Dilbert, 2017). Richter dubbed herself "150lbs of twisted steel and sex appeal" (Dilbert, 2017). Lauper would align herself with Richter (Dilbert, 2017). This women's title bout was an historic moment, as it was billed as the main event of the "Brawl to End It All" (Dilbert, 2017). Indeed, it was the only nationally televised match from the card, as MTV carried it (Dilbert, 2017; Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). With Lauper at her side, Richter ended Moolah's official 10,170 consecutive days as champion and became the new prima donna of women's professional wrestling (Tanabe et al., 2022). Following the match, Lauper and Albano would reconcile (Dilbert, 2017). Headlines of Lauper's involvement in professional wrestling continued to attract new fans (Hornbaker, 2015).

Meanwhile, Hogan was embroiled in a feud with “Rowdy” Roddy Piper<sup>51</sup>. Piper was and is known as one of the best promos in the history of professional wrestling (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Nicknamed “Hot Rod,” Piper would whip crowds into a frenzy with his clever, high energy promos (Toombs & Toombs, 2016). Piper had become Hogan’s greatest foil to date (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Piper hosted his famous “Piper’s Pit” interview segment on WWF programming (Toombs & Toombs, 2016). In this segment, Piper would antagonize babyface talents, and encourage heels (Toombs & Toombs, 2016). It is considered the gold standard by which all recurring heel interview segments are judged (Toombs & Toombs, 2016). Piper openly lamented the “Rock n’ Wrestling Connection” which Lauper, Richter and Hogan were a part of. Piper also insinuated himself into world championship contention (Hornbaker, 2015).

In early 1985, the WWF would have the second leg of this three-act promotional race. This event would be called “The War to Settle the Score” (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). The event drew an estimated 22,000 fans to Madison Square Garden (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). On the undercard, Lauper would again corner WWF Women’s Champion Wendy Richter, this time against Patty “Leilani Kai” Seymour, who was being cornered by Moolah (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). Kai would take the title from Richter by nefarious means (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). Once again, MTV would only air the final match, Hulk Hogan vs Roddy Piper for the WWF championship (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). Hogan would have Lauper and Albano in his corner, while Piper would be flanked by his bodyguard “Cowboy” Bob Orton (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Hogan’s *Rocky III* co-star, Mr. T was also seated at ringside (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). The match saw Hogan win via disqualification when Orton and Piper’s new henchman “Mr. Wonderful” Paul Orndorff attacked Hogan (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). After a prolonged beating, Lauper threw herself onto Hogan’s body to protect him (Dilber, 2014). Piper then made one of the most famous heel moves in the history of professional wrestling and kicked Cindy Lauper in the head to knock her off of Hogan (Dilber, 2014). This intended both the crowd and Mr. T. T charged the ring, only to be beaten down next to Hogan (Dilber, 2014).

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<sup>51</sup> The life, adventures, exploits, and influence of Roddy Piper could warrant their own long-form academic study.

Headlines of this wild incident where WWF wrestlers assaulted multiple celebrities live on MTV became national news. The alliance of Piper, Orton and Orndorff instantly became one of the most detested stables in professional wrestling history (Toombs & Toombs, 2016). McMahon would then announce that Act III of the story would take place at the first Wrestlemania event (Hornbaker, 2015). Wrestlemania would be broadcast nationally through theater television. There are two matches on the card of vital significance. to the “Rock n’ Wrestling” campaign (Hornbaker, 2015). The first was the semi-main event title rematch of Richter challenging for the women’s title with Lauper in her corner against Kai who was managed by Moolah (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). The second would be the show’s main event, which saw the wrestler-and-celebrity tag-team of Hulk Hogan and Mr. T taking on “Rowdy” Roddy Piper and “Mr. Wonderful” Paul Orndorff, flanked by their ringside second “Cowboy” Bob Orton (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). These bouts would be the climax of a 10-month storyline involving several wrestlers, celebrities and special broadcasts.

In the lead-up to the event, Hogan and Mr. T would push the event across all media platforms, making a number of televised interview appearances side-by-side (Hornbaker, 2015). This included co-hosting American sketch-comedy institution *Saturday Night Live* (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). This publicity tour also included an infamous incident on *Hot Properties* where Hogan acquiesced to host Richard Belzer’s request to be placed in a wrestling hold and choked the comedian unconscious (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Hogan would apologize, Belzer sue Hogan, settle out of court, and use the settlement to buy a farmhouse near the French Mediterranean city of Nice and rename it “Chez Hogan” (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010).

Nevertheless, the paradigm of professional wrestling shifted forever on 31 March 1985. The first *Wrestlemania*, (thereafter often referred to as “Wrestlemania I”) took place in front of a sold-out crowd of over 19,000 fans at Madison Square Garden (Hornbaker, 2015). A tertiary main event saw Andre the Giant defeat fellow 7-foot giant Big John Studd in a “\$15,000 Bodyslam Challenge.” Andre would celebrate by tossing handfuls of the match’s \$15,000 bounty into the crowd (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001; Hornbaker, 2015). Studd was managed for the match by Bobby “The Brain” Heenan (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). Heenan would become the pivotal heel force in the WWF in the years to come (Hornbaker, 2015). The semi-main event saw Richter regain the WWF Women’s title from Kai (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001).

Midway through the match, Moolah attacked Richter, only to be tackled and beaten by Cindy Lauper to the delight of the New York crowd.

The main event match is a surreal cacophony of mainstream star power and sports luminaries played out over a backdrop of professional wrestling. For the bout, nearly every tertiary performance role was performed by a celebrity or either sports or entertainment. Flamboyant icon Liberace was tapped to be the guest time-keeper for the match, tasked with ringing the bell to start and end the proceedings (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). He was accompanied by the famed Rockettes dancing company from New York's Radio City Music Hall (Hornbaker, 2015). Long-time WWF collaborator and transcendent boxing star Muhammad Ali served as a secondary referee outside of the ring (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). The primary referee in the ring was hall of fame wrestler, long-time WWF executive, and widely renowned artistic mind of professional wrestling Pat Patterson (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). The ring announced for the bout was then-New York Yankees manager Billy Martin, who had guided the local "Bronx Bombers" to the World Series Championship in Major League Baseball in 1977 (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Piper, Orndorff and Orton would enter, led by a band of kill-clan bagpipers lining the aisle to the ring (Toombs & Toombs, 2016). Hogan and Mr. T would enter to the sounds of Eye of the Tiger by Survivor, the theme song of *Rocky III*, which had made them both famous and begun their partnership (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Hogan was joined at ringside by Lauper and legendary Fijian wrestler "Superfly" Jimmy Snuka (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Snuka had been a top star in the WWWF and WWF who, in the lead up to this bout appeared on the most famous/infamous Piper's Pit segment wherein the Scotch Canadian broke a coconut on Snuka's head. Snuka was meant to counteract Orton's presence (Toombs & Toombs, 2016).

With the stage set, the teams performed their match. The bout was a largely successful tag-team match. Mr. T and Piper's shared boxing background and overwhelming live charisma set the Garden crowd ablaze with enthusiasm. Hogan and Orndorff's dueling physiques were a tremendous photographic representation of the body models of men in action-entertainment in the era. Mr. T's limited training was largely masked by the skilled and experienced wrestlers. As would be the case in later celebrity Wrestlemania main event matches, much of T's accelerated training regimen was guided by Patterson, who would referee the match and give commands to him throughout. In the end, Hogan and Mr. T would triumph to the delight

of the live crowd. Lauper, Hogan, Mr. T, the collective of sports and entertainment figures, and the thousands of live fans celebrated the victory (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010).

There was much for them to celebrate. The event was a colossal financial gamble for Titan Sports, and it turned out to be a smashing success. The national closed circuit broadcast sold over one million theater tickets to view the broadcast live (Hornbaker, 2015). While the main event match itself was not an artistic success by most critics' metrics of technical wizardry, it was an unqualified success by the metrics of fan interest and drawing power. Having had his multi-pronged business strategy implemented to shockingly successful effect, McMahon had effectively remade the professional wrestling business in his own image.

The event proved to be a watershed moment in the history of professional wrestling. After the first Wrestlemania, the WWF was the undisputed national brand name in professional wrestling. Those territories which had survived the initial expansion of Titan Sports in 1984 had now seen the NWA supplanted permanently as the name brand of professional wrestling in the United States and the world. Regional territories have not since taken hold as successful long-term brands; while several national brands have emerged and faded in the decades since. The significance of this event in the public memory of professional wrestling in American culture can be described as a literal shift in ages. In context, this means that professional wrestling history is split in the public's mind to "Before Wrestlemania" and "After Wrestlemania." In the WWE's own branding, the period after the debut of Wrestlemania is often termed as "the Modern Era." This is an apt term, as since that time the artistic and economic norms of the industry have been significantly changed. The "Rock n' Wrestling" campaign had been a massive success. From then to the time of this writing, Wrestlemania as a standalone brand is the biggest annual event in professional wrestling. The 2022 edition of Wrestlemania (also commonly called Wrestlemania 38) drew a total of 2,200,000,000 impressions and references with over 1.1 billion video views among them across all social media platforms (McDaniel, 2022). The multimedia juggernaut is an annual tradition with a larger global media footprint than the NFL's Super Bowl or the Oscars (McDaniel, 2022).

The Age of Wrestlemania had begun. However, the artistic and industrial evolution of professional wrestling would continue to evolve throughout the changing corporate media



landscape of the late-20th and early-21st centuries. The WWF's status as the top media brand in the United States granted it de facto status as the global brand of professional wrestling. While regional United States territories died off, the worldwide professional wrestling industry would evolve in its shadow. The WWF in this era would also begin the evolution into the next phases of premium television.

## 5.9 The Nationally Televised Demise of Territory Wrestling

Since the beginning of television in the United States, professional wrestling has been a staple programming. Its genre-bending presentation of melodramatic stage combat has been a welcome presence on television stations across the country for the entire span of television history. There is a simple reason for this: professional wrestling has a dedicated fan base who will show up to watch it most of the time. Episodic weekly television shows would serve as extended narrative advertisements for upcoming live events where fans could see the wrestling stars of the small screen perform in-person. This model would persist in the 1980's, and though the rules of this game would change wildly. In the prior era, the NWA rules had prevented affiliates from broadcasting on television or hosting live events in one-another's designated regions. McMahon's national expansion and promotion of live performances in every different part of the country would blow these regulations to pieces. Television supported the live gate revenue stream, and also gave some revenue from ad sales. National broadcasts made these ad sales a much more attractive feature.

During McMahon's initial expansion in 1984-1985, many smaller promotions were either bought out or driven out of business (Hornbaker, 2018). Several of the larger and more established promotions would limp along for the latter half of the 1980's, however, after the first Wrestlemania, it became clear that the industry of professional wrestling had changed. Many promoters attempted to adjust their business model to compete in the new media marketplace.

One of the hardest hit promotions in the early days of the WWF expansion was the AWA (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Verne Gagne's promotion had long been the dominant force in the midwestern United States (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Gagne lost Hogan and Richter to the WWF, as well as venerable announcer "Mean" Gene Okerlund,

wrestler/commentator/cinema actor/future governor Jesse “The Body” Ventura, and wrestlers Ken Patera, “Dr. Death” David Schultz, and all-time great manager Bobby “The Brain” Heenan (Hornbaker, 2018). While the colorful programming of the New York-based promotion certainly left an impression, Gagne had decades worth of cultural equity in the region (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). After failing to capitalize on Hogan’s ascension to superstardom, the AWA recalibrated their approach (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). In the early 1980’s they faced the challenge of employing an aging roster, with many of their top active stars being over 40 years of age (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The promotion did see some considerable reinvigoration with the arrival of the homegrown “Road Warriors” tag-team of Mike “Hawk” Hegstrand and Joe “Animal” Laurinaitis (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The mohawked, face-painted, massively muscled duo clad in spiked American football shoulder pads are easily one of the most familiar icons of professional wrestling in the world. AWA would also secure a national television deal with ESPN in 1985 (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). ESPN was, is and has been the top sports network in the United States since the 1980’s . ESPN would broadcast “AWA Championship Wrestling,” completing television tapings at the Showboat Casino in Las Vegas (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Gagne’s eye for talent also saw a movement towards a new generation of stars, ultimately ending up as the big break for future top stars. Two other tag-teams to explode into popularity during this period for Gagne were “The Midnight Rockers” (Shawn Michaels and Marty Jannetty) and “The Nasty Boys” (Jerry Sags and Brian Knobbs) (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). This time period also saw young singles stars who would become household names like Rick Martel, Curt Hennig, “Big” Scott Hall, “Bull Power” Leon White, Larry “Zbyszko” Whistler and Deborah “Madusa” Miceli (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The AWA would also leverage its working relationships with Japanese promotions to draw in American talent interested in international work, as well as international talent looking to make their way into the American market (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Gagne also inked a merchandising deal with Remco Industries, which made several series of action figures of then-AWA wrestlers, and distributed videos of previous AWA shows (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). With merchandise manufacturing, international partnerships, cultural capital in their region, national television distribution on the top sporting network and a roster of hungry young talent; the AWA seemed to have a shot.

Meanwhile, the NWA spent the early 1980's shifting its axis from Missouri, towards the Mid-Atlantic, a region along the central east coast of the United States, and the southeast. While Harley Race's prime years in the 1970's had kept the focus of the promotional cartel in the American Heartland, the combined influence of Jim Crockett Promotions, Georgia Championship Wrestling, and Championship Wrestling from Florida, made the culturally homogenous southeastern United States (colloquially called "the Old South" or "the South") the focus of the NWA's promotional efforts for the decade (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Harley Race began the decade as the leading man of the promotion, carrying the "Ten Pounds of Gold" title belt that he made famous (Tanabe et al., 2022). He would drop that title to Giant Baba for 5 days in 1980 and "Wildfire" Tommy Rich for 4 days in 1981, simply to pop local crowds in Japan and Georgia respectively (Tanabe et al., 2022). Race would finally pass the title on to wildly popular babyface Dusty Rhodes in Gainesville Georgia in the spring of 1981 (Tanabe et al., 2022). Only 88 days later, Rhodes would anoint "The Nature Boy" Ric Flair as the new primo uomo of the NWA (Tanabe et al., 2022). Ric Flair would remain the top heel attraction in the professional wrestling business throughout the decade (Flair, 2004). Flair is still widely regarded as the best all-around performer in professional wrestling history, and the 1980's was his greatest run. Throughout the entirety of Hogan's rise, Flair would be on an almost non-stop world tour, trading the NWA title (officially or unofficially) with Dusty Rhodes, Jack Venero, Carlos Colon, Victor Jovica, Ron Gavin, Harley Race, Ricky "The Dragon" Steamboat and Kerry Von Erich (Tanabe et al., 2022). All of those performers would combine to hold the title for 349 days, and each of them would lose the title directly back to Flair. Flair combined for 2,679 days as the top man in the NWA during the 1980's across 7 official (and four unofficial) reigns as champion (Tanabe et al., 2022).

Flair's home promotion, Jim Crockett Promotions, would become the centerpiece of the NWA during this time (Flair, 2004). Flair had made his family home in Charlotte, North Carolina and would become an icon of the region (Flair, 2004). As the decade wore on, and NWA territories dwindled, JCP would acquire and amalgamate them (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). JCP would become synonymous with the NWA and its traditional brand of wrestling (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). This brand and style commanded considerable equity throughout the American South and Midwest. Flair would also use his position as a traveling champion to scout talent from different territories and become a de facto recruiter for Crockett (Flair, 2004). As the decade wore on and smaller territories began to fall in

succession, JCP would become the last, best destination for NWA talents in the United States.

As JCP conglomerated many NWA promotions and the AWA remodeled their business, the schism between these groups seemed to wane out of the necessity for survival. Both Crockett and Gagne knew that individually, there was little chance to stem the tide of the WWF's expansion. The promotions began to cooperate more readily, even co-promoting several events. Jerry Jarrett of Memphis would also serve as a de facto nexus of dying territories (Thompson & Jarrett, 2019). Memphis existed as its own ostensibly polis of professional wrestling, seemingly immune from the winds of national professional wrestling trends. Behind top stars and promotional shareholders, Jarrett and Memphis would withstand the siege of national wrestling companies until the late-1990's (Thompson & Jarrett, 2019). The remaining territories were now on the defensive against McMahon in what the industry calls a "promotional war." The chosen battlefield for this fight for commercial performance art supremacy would be cable television and pay-per-view (Hornbaker, 2018).

Seeing the shared existential threat of the WWF's rapid expansion, a collection of territorial promoters joined forces in the summer of 1985 to promote the first *SuperClash* event. Promoters from the NWA aligned with Fritz Von Erich of WCCW under the leadership of Verne Gagne to promote the event (Thompson & Jarrett, 2019). The event featured a star-studded line-up of top wrestlers from around the world. The event also featured a card of eleven championship bouts. This included titles from the NWA, AWA, WCCW, All Japan Pro Wrestling and the International Wrestling Association from Cleveland (Thompson & Jarrett, 2019). Though lightly-regarded within the United States, the IWA heavily featured Mexican talent, and had Lucha Libre wrestling legend Mil Mascaras as their champion at the time who would often defend the title across Mexico (Tanabe et al., 2022; Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). On 28 September of 1985, "SuperClash '85 - The Night of Champions" took place before over 20,000 at Chicago's Comiskey Park baseball stadium (Thompson & Jarrett, 2019). Despite international star power, many of the top wrestlers from the American territories at the peak of their powers, and a massive crowd, the event proved to be ineffective. Disputes swiftly arose regarding gate receipts, management, and profit sharing. Also, while *Wrestlemania* had been broadcast across the country to over a million ticket-holders, *SuperClash* would be taped and segmented up for later broadcast on ESPN

(Thompson & Jarrett, 2019). The unfortunate reality of attempted co-promotions in this era was that the individual promoters from their territories each had their own visions of how to move forward, and these divergent visions failed to co-exist. This was antithetical to McMahon's complete control of Titan Sports and his singular vision guiding it forward. However, the massive success of Wrestlemania I, the debut of SuperClash and the debut of professional wrestling on home television pay-per-view with WWF's broadcast of The Wrestling Classic (Hornbaker, 2015). 1985 showed that premium events on paid and cable television would be a new metric whereby the success and relevance of a professional wrestling company would be judged.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, broadcasting on Ted Turner's WTBS became a coveted prize among promoters. Georgia Championship Wrestling created the fabled "World Championship Wrestling" Saturday nighttime slot (Hornbaker, 2015). McMahon had already begun broadcasting nationally on the USA Network, which would remain the WWF/WWE's home on American cable television until now (Hornbaker, 2015). GCW promotional stakeholder Jim Barnett sold the slot to McMahon in July 1984, in an incident called "Black Saturday" by some within the professional wrestling industry (Hornbaker, 2015). However, personality clashes between McMahon and Turner seemed to doom the collaboration. Bill Watts Mid-South Wrestling, later rebranded as the Universal Wrestling Federation, would also be featured on the network, before their promotion was bought out by Crockett in 1987 (Hornbaker, 2018). The competition between McMahon's WWF on USA Network, Gagne's AWA on ESPN and (for all intents and purposes) Crockett's NWA on TBS, would provide wrestling fans with a wide variety of competing presentations and flavors of professional wrestling through the second half of the 1980's. Each of the room options would also produce nationally syndicated programs distributed through an internally-cultivated collection of local television stations across various markets. With the success of the Rock n' Wrestling Connection, McMahon and the WWF had jumped out to a seemingly insurmountable lead in the promotional race. But after decades of brand equity among regional fans and widely differing taste in wrestling presentation among consumers, the victory of Titan Sports was far from assured. In the late-1980's home broadcasts of paid premium professional wrestling would emerge as one of the major revenue pillars of the industry.

While the closed-circuit model used for Ali vs Inoki and WrestleMania I was wildly successful, the technology for in-home distribution of pay-per-view on-demand video through cable and satellite providers was in its infancy. Home television pay-per-view technology had existed since the 1950's, however it had been denied permission to be commercially applied by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) until 1972 (Ivanov, 2019). With specialty premium services like HBO emerging with cable television in the late-1970's, the demand for single-broadcast events was growing (Ivanov, 2019). Throughout the 1970's, boxing would experiment with pay-per-view promotion of fights (Nash, 2017). The first ever cable pay-per-view broadcast came when TelePrompTer allowed customers to watch Floyd Patterson regain the world's heavyweight boxing title from Ingemar Johansson in 1960 for the princely sum of \$2 (Nash, 2017). Roughly 25,000 subscribers viewed the bout, and the next year over 100,000 subscribers watched their heavyweight title rubber match. Cassius Clay/Muhammad Ali would be an early draw for the experimental pay-per-view market, including his 1963 bout with Doug Jones (Nash, 2017). The rematch between Ali and former heavyweight champion Sonny Liston was the first bout to break the 250,000 buys barrier in 1964 (Nash, 2017). Ali would also be one the marquis for the breaking of the 500,000 buy barrier with his 1975 title rubber match against longtime rival "Smokin" Joe Frazier in their classic "Thrilla in Manila" (Nash, 2017). The first true blockbuster for in-home pay-per-view was the 1981 bout where "Sugar" Ray Leonard defeated Thomas "The Hitman" Hearns for the unified welterweight boxing championship of the world (Nash, 2017). The success of their bout would prove to be its own watershed moment in sports history, as cable giant Viacom had seen more than half of their subscribers buy the right to view the event live (Nash, 2017). This market ostensibly rang the dinner bell for major cable companies in the United States that customers were willing to pay for premium, one-time content.

The first professional wrestling pay-per-view to take place under the WWF banner was The Wrestling Classic in 1985 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This event would feature a 16-man tournament and a WWF title match between Hogan and Piper. The tournament saw Sylvester "The Junkyard Dog" Ritter defeat "The Macho Man" Randy Savage for the tournament title, and Hogan once again defeat Piper by disqualification (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The event itself sold over 47,000 home television pay-per-views (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). While the event was a qualified success, the next major WWF event would be Wrestlemania

2, which broadcast on both pay-per-view and closed circuit theater television (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

Wrestlemania 2 would be a major experimental undertaking for the WWF. Hoping to somehow top the spectacle of its predecessor, McMahon rolled the dice on a creative broadcasting strategy. Rather than televising a single card from a central location, this event would be simultaneously broadcast from three separate arenas in major markets across the United States (Taylor, 2010). The WWF tapped Nassau Coliseum on the outskirts of New York City, The Rosemont Horizon in Chicago, and the Los Angeles Memorial Sports Arena in Los Angeles (Taylor, 2010). Each of the locations would broadcast four matches for the televised event, a unique main event for each location. New York would see Roddy Piper and Mr. T in a worked boxing match, where T would prevail in the via 4th round disqualification following a bodyslam by a frustrated Piper (Taylor, 2010). The Chicago main event would feature a 20-man battle royal featuring 6 gridiron football players from the NFL taking on 14 of the WWF's Superstars (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). This match notably included former heavyweight champions from the WWF/CWC Era like Bruno Sammartino, Pedro Morales and The Iron Sheik (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). All of the members of the NFL contingent were all-pro players and/or Super Bowl champions (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). This match played to local Chicago fans by heavily featuring a wildly popular member of the local Super Bowl champion 1985 Chicago Bears, William "The Refrigerator" Perry in a featured role (Taylor, 2010). At the conclusion of the match, Andre the Giant would eliminate both members of the Hart Foundation tag-team to win the battle royal (Taylor, 2010). In Los Angeles, Hulk Hogan would successfully defend his world heavyweight championship against 200+kg (440+lb) King Kong Buddy in a steel cage match (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001).

The broadcast strategy proved somewhat cumbersome, as it required three different teams of commentators, three production staffs and complex coordination to keep the show continuous. Complicating matters was the fact that the events were taking place across three different time zones in the United States, with a three-hour difference between the East Coast and West Coast portions of the broadcasts. The event was a flop with critics, largely because the creative gamble with the tri-city simulcast proved to be a clunky presentation with an uneven feel (Taylor, 2010). All subsequent Wrestlemania events have taken place from a single location. Despite the production struggles, the event would again prove to be a

resounding success. These locations would draw a combined live attendance of just over 40,000 (Taylor, 2010). The event sold over 382,000 buys for \$10 on home broadcast pay-per-view and another 319,000 closed-circuit theatre tickets sold to boot (Bixenspan, 2019). With nearly 3/4 of a million viewers tuning in live, this event served to cement the status of the WWF as a premium television entity.

1986 proved to be a banner year for competing wrestling companies as well. Fans, critics, and box office receipts all contend that this year was the peak for Jim Crockett Promotions (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). This was largely driven by interlocking feuds between an impressive roster of established and emerging babyfaces and the rise of the heel stable called “The Four Horsemen” (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). The original Four Horsemen consisted of Ric Flair, Arn Anderson, Ole Anderson, Tully Blanchard and their manager JJ Dillon (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). The four wrestlers in the group would consistently all hold top champions simultaneously and were each renowned for both promos and in-ring wrestling (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). This group is considered the gold standard for professional wrestling stables and was inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame in 2012, with later member Barry Windham replacing Ole Anderson (Thompson & Anderson, 2019). While some iteration of the stable would exist until the late-1990’s with 11 additional wrestlers eventually cycling through its membership, this original group was noted for proverbially “setting the territory on fire” and drawing massive live gates starting with their run in 1986 (Thompson & Anderson, 2019; Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). In opposition to these flamboyant heels were rising babyface stars like Magnum TA and “Rugged” Ronnie Garvin, alongside the promotion’s booker, creative leader and perennial top babyface Dusty Rhodes (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). This year was also the peak for the Mid-Atlantic tag-team division, led by feuds between the tag The Rock n’ Roll Express, The Midnight Express (with their manager James E. Cornette), The Road Warriors, The Russians (Don Kernodle, Ivan Koloff, Krusher Khrushchev, and Nikita Koloff), and several combinations of two out of the Four Horsemen (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). The Crockett tag-team division would see a massive boon with the creation of the “*Jim Crockett Sr Memorial Cup*” a massive 24-team tag-team tournament with a fictitious prize of \$1,000,000 at stake (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). The tournament featured teams from all over the American NWA network, as well as international promotions (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). The finals saw The Road Warriors defeat Magnum TA and “Rugged” Ron Garvin in front of a



sold out crowd at the Superdome in New Orleans (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). JCP also boasted of a solid undercard carried by charismatic stars like “Pistol” Pez Whatley, “The Boogie Woogie Man” Jimmy Valiant, Brad Armstrong, Baron Von Raschke, Sam Houston, “Juicy” Jimmy Garvin, Patricia “Precious” Williams, and Big Bubba Rogers, among many others (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017).

This year would see the debut of a special touring series of live events under Crockett called “The Great American Bash” (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). The 14-city tour included Flair making 13 successful title defenses, prior to dropping the NWA world title to Dusty Rhodes in the climactic match, though the title would be returned to Flair a fortnight thereafter (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017; Tanabe et al., 2022). The year’s top match was scheduled to be Magnum TA defeating Ric Flair for the NWA World Heavyweight Title at Starrcade ‘86, but a career-ending car accident just months beforehand derailed those plans (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Instead, Flair would fight to a draw with Magnum TA’s former rival Nikita Koloff (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Starrcade ‘86 followed suit with *Wrestlemania 2* and broadcast from multiple locations: North Carolina’s Greensboro Coliseum and the Omni arena in Atlanta (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). The four-hour 12-match card featured five tag-team matches, including the mega-popular Rock n’ Roll Express defeating The Minnesota Wrecking Crew (Arn and Ole Anderson of the Four Horsemen) in a world tag-team title match (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). The event would be titled *Starrcade ‘86: Night of the Skywalkers* as the main event at one location would feature hated heel tag-team The Midnight Express (“Loverboy” Dennis Condrey and “Beautiful” Bobby Eaton) take on the Road Warriors in a “Skywalkers Match” (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). The match was won by the Road Warriors and hated manager Jim Cornette was thrown from the scaffold to the ring below, genuinely breaking both of his ankles (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017).

The year would also see a special event offering from the AWA with *WrestleRock ‘86*. The event would sell over 22,000 tickets to the Hubert H. Humphrey Metrodome in Minneapolis on 20 April 1986 for a gross of around \$300,000 (Allen, 2017). It would also feature many of the familiar names from territorial co-promotional events in this era. Unfortunately, despite providing the sport-adjacent style of technical wrestling which Gagne championed, again failed to capture momentum from the fans, as an aging Bockwinkel was unable to attract new

fans. The event ended with a trio of consecutive steel cage matches: the first saw Gagne's son Greg team with "Superfly" Jimmy Snuka defeat The Barbarian and King Kong Bundy (fresh off his post-Wrestlemania 2 release from the WWF) (Allen, 2017).; The second saw a 60-year-old Verne Gagne himself take on Iraqi-born wrestler "Sheikh" Adnan Al-Kaissie (Allen, 2017). This heavy featuring of himself and his son reinforced the criticism of Gagne's self-aggrandizement and nepotism at the price of more marketable stars that had lingered for decades. The event's final match would see the Road Warriors defeat an iteration of The Fabulous Freebirds (Michael Hayes and Jimmy Garvin) (Allen, 2017).

It was also in 1986 that Gagne would once again reinforce his reputation for being an eye for talent, when he hired a young entrepreneur named Eric Bischoff as a television syndication sales representative for the AWA (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Gagne had no way of knowing that he had hired the only man who would, for a time, supplant the WWF as the top promotion in the professional wrestling world. Bischoff had been a former professional kickboxer and model, the Detroit-born Bischoff had been a life-long wrestling fan (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). During an advertising pitch at the AWA office with longtime business associate Sonny Ohno for their "Ninja Star Wars" toy product, Gagne was impressed with Bischoff and hired him to sell AWA syndicated programming to untapped markets in the US (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The following year, Bischoff would become an on-air announcer, and eventually a backstage producer (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Bischoff would become an integral part of the AWA until 1990, when Gagne gave him his blessing to leave the struggling promotion and join Ted Turner's WCW (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). In WCW, Bischoff would change professional wrestling again and usher in its most culturally successful era.

Perhaps the most pivotal year of this era was 1987. This year would see the effective end of successful opposition to the WWF's growing empire by the remaining territories. The AWA and NWA would continue to promote special events throughout 1987, with many considerable creative successes. However, their national television contracts with ESPN and TBS, along with rosters of future hall of fames, innovative matches and cultural equity in their territories all failed to overcome the cultural momentum of the WWF's mega-feud between their heroic superstar Hulk Hogan, and a seemingly invincible hero-turned-villain Andre the Giant.

There is no more venerated figure in the history of professional wrestling than Andre the Giant<sup>52</sup>. The behemoth Frenchman is spoken of as a living folk hero the world over. Nicknamed “The Eighth Wonder of the World,” he is generally regarded as the greatest single draw of the Territory Era and is known to have drawn in fans across the world (Hébert & Laprade, 2020). Despite declining health with his advancing age, in 1987, Andre would enter into his biggest drawing and most iconic feud and cement the new era of professional wrestling history (Hébert & Laprade, 2020).

Andre Rene Roussimoff was born in the farming hamlet of Coulommiers in the French countryside outside of Paris in 1946 (Hébert & Laprade, 2020). At birth, Andre was already 6kg, and throughout his childhood showed signs of gigantism, caused by a pituitary condition called acromegaly, which causes the body to produce excess growth hormone (Hébert & Laprade, 2020). Andre was also acquainted with Irish playwright Samuel Beckett in his youth, as the famed writer lived nearby and would often ferry the Roussimoff children to school in his truck (Hébert & Laprade, 2020). Roussimoff was also a competitive rugby player in his youth and finished his public education at age 14 (Hébert & Laprade, 2020). After working as a farmhand for his father and in several labor-based jobs, a 211 cm and over 165 kg Roussimoff was discovered on a trip to Paris by Parisian professional wrestling promoter Robert Lageat (Hébert & Laprade, 2020). Lageat trained the shockingly athletic Roussimoff to wrestle, discovering that the giant teenager could perform flips and was impossibly light on his feet (Hébert & Laprade, 2020). Lageat would name Andre “Geant Ferre” after a giant in French folklore; this pronating proved prophetic as Andre would fittingly become a folk hero of professional wrestling (Hébert & Laprade, 2020).

With the help of Quebecois professional wrestling promoter Frank Valois, Andre began touring the world (Hébert & Laprade, 2020). His massive size and athleticism made him a draw all over the world. He would relocate to Montreal in 1971 and remain based in North America for the rest of his life (Hébert & Laprade, 2020). Andre would split his time between Japan, Montreal, the AWA, and various international tours during this time (Hébert &

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<sup>52</sup> The life, adventures, influence, and exploits of Andre the Giant have become folklore and warrant considerable scholarly study.

Laprade, 2020). It was in 1973 that the elder McMahon discovered the giant and became his primary booking agent (Hébert & Laprade, 2020).

The elder McMahon was responsible for much of Andre's enduring brand, including giving him the name "Andre the Giant" and dubbing him "The 8th Wonder of the World" (Hébert & Laprade, 2020). It was also the elder McMahon who discouraged Andre from performing acrobatic moves, and instead wrestling like "an immovable object" (Hébert & Laprade, 2020). This nickname in reference to Andre would be immortalized on WWF commentary by Gorilla Monsoon in the lead-up to Wrestlemania III (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). The elder McMahon booked Andre on an almost constant touring schedule around the world, keeping him moving so as not to erode the novelty of his presence as an attraction (Hébert & Laprade, 2020). This strategy was an immediate success, as shortly thereafter Andre was listed in the 1974 edition of the Guinness Book of World Records as the then-highest paid professional wrestler in history, making over a reported \$400,000 that year (over \$2,600,000 adjusted for inflation to 2022) (Hébert & Laprade, 2020). Andre's drawing power was proven everywhere in the world throughout the 1970's (Hébert & Laprade, 2020).

He is reputed to be the undisputed greatest draw of the Territory Era. Though he seldom won or held the fictitious championships that denoted the position of top star in a single company, his ability to sell tickets anywhere in the world, record-breaking pay, and mythic strength made him the leading man of the entire business (Hébert & Laprade, 2020). Andre was referred to as "The Boss" by everyone, including the promoters who employed him, and interestingly he also referred to everyone else as "boss" (Flair, 2004). Andre was also one of the most protected characters in wrestling history, and he was almost never booked to lose in any decisive fashion (Hébert & Laprade, 2020). In the 1970's and 1980's, Andre was only pinned, knocked out, or made to submit by seven men: "The Mormon Giant" Don Leo Jonathan, Canek, Antonio Inoki, Jerry Lawler, Strong Kobayashi, "Rugged" Ronnie Garvin, and Sheikh Adnan Al-Kaissie (Hébert & Laprade, 2020). The defeat to Adnan was particularly noteworthy (Hébert & Laprade, 2020).<sup>53</sup> Because of his incredible strength, Andre never *had* to lose, and the rare occasions where he did were to talents and for

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<sup>53</sup> The match took place before a sold-out stadium in Baghdad where Adnan's childhood classmate and friend who happened to be the de facto dictator of Iraq Saddam Hussein was in attendance.

promoters who he respected. Andre would also fight to draws in title matches with AWA champion Nick Bockwinkel and NWA champion Harley Race in this era (Hébert & Laprade, 2020). Andre specialized in battle royal matches where he would ostensibly defeat 10-20 men at a time (Hébert & Laprade, 2020). Andre was also infamous for “protecting his spot” by bullying and beating up other wrestlers billed as “giants,” with the notable exceptions of All-Japan promoter Shohei “Giant” Baba and young WWF star Mark “The Undertaker” Callaway (Hébert & Laprade, 2020). The story of Andre the Giant could not be told without acknowledging his reputation as the “World’s Greatest Drunk,” where there are at least five known stories with multiple witnesses that tell of the massive French grappler consuming over a hundred 350ml cans of beer in a sitting, and at least one where he consumed 156 cans of beer with a volume of 470ml (Hébert & Laprade, 2020). Wrestlers who would be working with Andre would regularly bring him bottles of wine as gestures of goodwill prior to their matches to avoid the wrath of the (literal and figurative) biggest star in professional wrestling (Flair, 2004).

When the younger McMahon booked the undercard of Inoki vs Ali on worldwide television and closed circuit, Andre was tasked with a worked boxing match against former boxing title challenger Chuck Wepner, who he defeated by countout after hurling the heavyweight over the top rope in battle royal fashion (Hébert & Laprade, 2020). In the WWWF, Andre was always a fan favorite. In the early 1980’s he feuded with a then-heel Hulk Hogan (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Hogan and Andre would feud on-and-off in the WWWF and Japan until 1983 (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). The two were featured across the WWWF territory, and feuded in Japan (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). While the younger McMahon was launching his bid to dominate professional wrestling in the United States in 1984, Andre played a pivotal role as an attraction (Hornbaker, 2015). Andre spent the early years of the WWF feuding with heel manager Bobby “The Brain” Heenan, and his ever-growing stable of heel wrestlers dubbed “The Heenan Family” (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Andre would win Heenan’s \$15,000 Bodyslam Challenge against Big John Studd, and once again cemented himself as the top giant in the WWF (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). Barely ten weeks later Andre would claim the 1985 IWGP World Heavyweight tournament title in New Japan Pro Wrestling, surprisingly the giant’s first singles world title win in his then 20-year career, though the Grand Prix title did not have to be defended like a lineal title would have (Tanabe et al.,

2022). Andre would again be victorious against NFL players and WWF wrestlers at the Chicago main event of Wrestlemania 2 (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001).

In 1986, the AWA and NWA had both launched insurgencies against McMahon's takeover of professional wrestling in the United States. In 1987, McMahon would move to finally stamp out the territorial resistance to WWF brand supremacy. Thus far, the WWF, Wrestlemania, Hulkamania, McMahon's innovative business strategy, and successful celebrity crossovers had made the WWF the name brand. However, because the first-two Wrestlemanias had been largely sold on co-promotional content, it left the WWF's central event as being fringe entertainment. Wrestlemania III would change that pattern by creating self-contained main attractions, proving the WWF's drawing power beyond that of mainstream crossovers. This would be built around two title matches: a historically dazzling Intercontinental title bout between "The Macho Man" Randy Savage and Ricky "The Dragon" Steamboat, and a mythic showdown between WWF World champion Hulk Hogan and Andre the Giant (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001).

In the lead-up to the event, Andre would turn heel after becoming jealous of Hogan's success and stardom (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). To cement his status as a villain, Andre would align himself with Bobby "The Brain" Heenan, much to Hogan's shock and horror (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). During a famous segment on Piper's Pit, Andre would demand a title match at Wrestlemania and tear the champion's trademark yellow shirt (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Hogan accepted the challenge and the promotion for the bout would go on through a series of videos and vignettes in the lead-up to the event (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010).

Because Andre's health was beginning to fade due to his illness, everyone within the WWF knew that the match with Hogan would not be an artistic triumph (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). For that, the company turned to the featured bout for the Intercontinental title (Flair, 2004). The secondary title match would be built around the rivalry between Savage and Steamboat, after Savage injured Steamboat in the storyline by driving the edge of the ring bell into Steamboat's throat (Graham & Paul, 2017). Steamboat vowed to return and defeat Savage for the intercontinental title (Graham & Paul, 2017). Steamboat had been widely regarded as the best in-ring babyface wrestler in professional wrestling in his era (Flair, 2004). Savage would emerge behind Hogan as the second-to-biggest star of the era, though at the time Savage's in-ring performance dwarfed Hogans and his ethical character versatility

gave him certain edges over his contemporary (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The match would also feature Savage's wife, Miss Elizabeth, and Steamboat's second George "The Animal" Steele at ringside (Graham & Paul, 2017). Their match was considered an instant classic and is widely regarded as one of the best WWF/WWE matches of all-time (Graham & Paul, 2017).

McMahon and Hogan have said in interviews since that up until the match itself, Andre had not agreed to lose to Hogan (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). This victory would be considered a symbolic passing of the torch by the top star of the prior era (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Though they had been in-ring rivals and colleagues for years, Hogan was not overly close with Andre (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Gorilla Monsoon gave the legendary call on commentary, "The irresistible Force meeting the Immovable Object!" (Graham & Paul, 2017) Hogan and Andre met in the main event of the card and worked through a largely fundamental match (Graham & Paul, 2017). Andre's failing health made it difficult for the once-super-athletic giant to perform much beyond the basics of the craft (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). At the end, Hogan would iconically bodyslam the Giant, hit the "atomic" leg drop, and win the match (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Monsoon's call and the clip of the bodyslam, along with McMahon's announcement of "Welcome to Wrestlemania III!" are as relevant to WWF iconography as Jerry West's dribbling is to the NBA logo.

The event itself proved to be an astronomical success. Built around Hogan vs Andre, the event sold out the Pontiac Silverdome on the outskirts of Detroit. The reported attendance of the event was 93,173, a then- world indoor attendance record (Assael & Mooneyham, 2004). This massive crowd grossed a then-record \$1,600,000 (Assael & Mooneyham, 2004). Motown music icon Aretha Franklin sang a stirring rendition of *America the Beautiful* at the opening of the event, an ongoing tradition in the WWF/WWE (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). The event would also reportedly sell more than 663,000 pay-per-view buys, atop another 450,000 closed-circuit theatre television tickets sold (Bixenspan, 2019). The event is reported to have generated over \$10,300,000 in revenue for the WWF, not including merchandising and later video sales (Beekman, 2006). Unlike the previous editions of Wrestlemania, this event was not built around pop culture crossovers or MTV tie-ins, it was built around a brand of professional wrestling and had now widely exceeded its economic performance of its predecessors. A massive swath of the audiences that had tuned in for the celebrity novelty

crossovers in the previous years had now been hooked on the genre of professional wrestling as an end unto itself.

The success of this event would also change the state of play for the WWF's competition with Crockett and Gagne. The AWA's roster of young stars would dwindle during this time period, as promotions like the WWF and surviving top territories like Championship Wrestling from Florida and Crockett would allow them more opportunities to raise their creative profile and make money. The AWA would increasingly co-promote with Jerry Jarrett's CWA from Memphis. Gagne would finally relent and put his world title on rising young star Curt Hennig at *SuperClash II* (Tanabe et al., 2022). However, the event itself would be a financial disaster for Gagne, as it was produced outside of the Midwest, and drew only 2,800 in the Cow Palace arena in San Francisco (Thompson & Jarrett, 2021). Gagne would also heavily push the high-energy, high-flying young tag-team The Midnight Rockers (Shawn Michaels and Marty Jannetty) as tag champions twice during this year and a featured attraction throughout (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). Gagne's son Greg also failed to connect with fans as a character, despite a considerable push (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Unfortunately, this move towards younger stars would prove too late and attendance continued to dwindle for live events.

While business was marginally down from 1986, Crockett posted another strong year in 1987 (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Behind a strong roster of stars, a solid in-ring product, national television distribution, emerging young stars, and the lineage of the recent name-brand of professional wrestling with the NWA, JCP seemed to have the tools it needed to be a competitive national wrestling company (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Unfortunately, financial issues hurt the company as Crockett decided to buy out the debt and content of once-large, now-permanently depressed territories like Central States Wrestling and Mid-South Wrestling (Thompson & Crockett, 2021). Each territory was bought out in the seven figures but yielded little in immediate return (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). At the time, WWF contracts only guaranteed \$150 per match with the rest coming in forms of gate and merchandising payoffs calculated by the company office (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). While the WWF was famously the highest-paying promotion, Crockett countered this by giving performers the first "guaranteed money" contracts in professional wrestling history (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). If a wrestler was guaranteed a certain amount minimum for



their contract, but their gate-based payments from the promotion for the year totaled less than that mark, talents would be given balloon payments for the difference at the end of the fiscal year (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). This, combined with bloated travel expenses, created a situation where Crockett could (and did) end up in a massive revenue deficit at the end of the year (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Crockett also had to contend with the politics of the remaining NWA members, despite being its president and the official owner of an ever-growing number of territories (Thompson & Crockett, 2021). However, with the success of the Starrcade events in years past, Crockett was confident that the promotion's first foray into pay-per-view would be successful enough to stabilize the business (Thompson & Crockett, 2021).

While the AWA had struggled to deliver financially with special events, Crockett had a number of successes. In 1985, Crockett debuted "The Bunkhouse Stampede," a battle royal street-fight, where wrestlers eschewed traditional wrestling gear and fought in street clothes, often armed with improvised weapons (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). This would go on to be an annual tradition for JCP through 1988 but would suffer severe criticism when booker Dusty Rhodes chose himself to win the event all four years (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). In 1986, they debuted "The Great American Bash" (alternately called "the Bash") a live-event tour across their key territorial markets in the mid-summer that featured an all-star amalgamated NWA roster and must-see cards featuring feuds that had massively engaged fans (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Noticeably absent from the Great American Bash was Harley Race, who had joined the WWF, won the 1986 edition of the "King of the Ring" tournament, and was reduced to "King" Harley Race (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). The 1987 edition of the Great American Bash saw the debut of the "War Games" match (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). This match featured teams of four (or more) fighting in a two-ring, roofed, steel cage match. These bloody battles were displayed around the country and were an instant gory hit with fans (Flair, 2004). With unique tent-pole events like the Bunkhouse Stampede, War Games, The Crockett Cup, The Great American Bash and Starrcade, emerging between 1983 and 1987, Crockett and the NWA were actually well ahead of McMahon and the WWF in terms of annual branded special event content (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Other than the one-off The Wrestling Classic event and the non-televised annual King of the Ring events, the WWF featured only Wrestlemania as a tenth pole event.

This would prove to be short-lived. McMahon would employ a tactic that would help him to defeat the NWA and its later iteration WCW, he adapted to a competitor's innovative business model while engaging in hostile horizontal economic integration. Starrcade '87: Chi-Town Heat was scheduled to be the first pay-per-view offering by JCP, but it would end up being a financial disaster that is widely acknowledged as having been a mortal blow to the promotion (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). After the success of Hogan vs Andre at Wrestlemania III, JCP spent the year building a feud between Ric Flair and "Rugged" Ron Garvin for the annual Thanksgiving extravaganza (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). McMahon attempted to counter-program Starrcade on Thanksgiving night by creating a pay-per-view event called Survivor Series, featuring exclusively five-man elimination tag-team matches (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Crockett decided to change the air-time for Starrcade to earlier in the afternoon to prevent head-to-head competition with the top pay-per-view brand in professional wrestling (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This would have led to a double-header of professional wrestling content on Thanksgiving night (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Unfortunately for Crockett, McMahon gave the pay-per-view providers an ultimatum that if they carried both Starrcade '87, he would not allow them to air subsequent Wrestlemania showcases on their platforms (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). In these early days of satellite and cable television, the providers had not yet been largely conglomerated and thus controlled little market power. Most of the fledgling pay-per-view providers across the country, not wanting to gamble on a new pay-per-view entity against a proven money-maker, caved to McMahon's demands (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Starrcade was bumped to the week of Christmas of 1987 (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). By then, it was only carried by three cable companies and was only ordered by roughly 22,000 homes (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Though Starrcade was carried via closed circuit to over 100 locations across the United States and sold out Chicago's UIC Pavilion with over 8,000 fans, the event proved a financial disaster for JCP (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017).

Meanwhile, the Survivor Series was a financial success, with over 21,300 fans selling out the Ohio's Richfield Coliseum and collecting 525,000 home buys for pay-per-view (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Survivor Series continued the feud between Hogan and Andre by pitting their respective 5-man teams against one another in the main event (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The main event saw Hogan eliminated by count-out, and Andre the Giant defeated

Bam Bam Bigelow to emerge as the “sole survivor” of the bout (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This renewed their feud into the coming year, as now Andre’s tag-team victory over Hogan brought him back into contention.

Thanksgiving 1987 proved to be a clear turning point in the history of professional wrestling. This move by McMahon is widely reviled by NWA performers and employees from the era. This was also the only time that cable providers would allow McMahon to put them to such an ultimatum, as they soon-after realized the necessity of their services to the WWF’s business model. This event is also widely considered the beginning of the end for Jim Crockett Promotions. The massive financial loss and the blow to the reputation of the company placed it as a distant second between the national promotions.

The strategy of counter programming would continue into 1988. Crockett would attempt to hit back by producing their 1988 Bunkhouse Stampede as a pay-per-view from WWF heartland New York City (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This Bunkhouse Stampede would take place inside of a steel cage from the Nassau Coliseum on the outskirts of Queens, NY (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Unfortunately, the “bunkhouse” branding did little to attract attention from northeastern fans, and the event drew only an estimated 6,000 attendees out of a possible 15,000+ capacity (Flair, 2004; Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The event was also beset with other problems. This included a growing frustration among NWA fans regarding the overuse of what is derisively called the “Dusty Finish” (Flair, 2004) The Dusty Finish shows an apparent, and usually long-awaited triumph by an aspirational babyface over a hated heel, only to have that victory reversed via technicality (Flair, 2004). This style of finish was effective in the pre-televised era of weekly live events in territorial loops, however, after fans had seen it multiple times on national television, they were no longer surprised or impassioned by the event (Flair, 2004). This type of finish grew stale with fans, as it consistently robbed them of overdue happy endings. With Crockett being a “heel territory” wherein aspirational babyfaces chase titles long-held by heels, the lack of payoffs to those angles eroded fans support (Flair, 2004). This was also antithetical to the WWF model wherein there was virtually always a happy ending for the fans watching the heroic Hogan overcome and pose for the crowd (Flair, 2004). Despite these challenges, the Bunkhouse Stampede proved much more successful than its predecessor, selling over 200,000 pay-per-view buys (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Though many of these fans

would be disappointed to see an aging Dusty Rhodes win the match for the fourth straight year over younger and by-then more popular up-and-coming performers (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). In this case, a rising Lex Luger was expected to win the bout and be propelled into the status of main eventer (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017).

With the cable companies refusing to let him hostage Wrestlemania this time around, McMahon would shift his counter-programming strategy. The first Royal Rumble would be broadcast from the sold-out Copp Coliseum in Hamilton, Ontario with over 18,000 attendees (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The namesake match featured 20 wrestlers entering the ring one-at-a-time in timed intervals (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The match was won by fan-favorite “Hacksaw” Jim Duggan and was such a hit with fans that it too became an annual tent pole event for the WWE (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Subsequent editions of the match have ranged for 30-50 wrestlers per match, with a median and mode numbering of 30 participants (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This counter-programming also proved successful as it drew an estimated 8.2 television rating, equating to nearly 18,000,000 viewers, an all-time cable television record (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Besides the Royal Rumble itself, the event featured the in-ring contract signing between Hogan and Andre for their world title rematch at The Main Event on NBC scheduled for two weeks later (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

The Main Event would prove to be the most watched event in American professional wrestling history (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Though worldwide broadcasts have allowed some events to be viewed by more homes internationally, this event still holds the record as the most domestically watched televised professional wrestling show of all-time with over 33,200,000 live viewers (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The main event saw the rematch between Hogan and Andre where Andre would end Hogan’s 1,474-day run as champion (Tanabe et al., 2022). This was the last 1,000-day or longer run of a single champion at a major promotion in American professional wrestling history to date (Tanabe et al., 2022). Andre would pin Hogan with the help of a cadre of heels, including “The Million Dollar Man” Ted DiBiase, Bobby “The Brain” Heenan, and Earl Hebner (the “evil” twin brother of referee Dave Hebner) (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The memorable finish saw the evil twin referee switched by the heels, and a false three-count by the official. Andre was presented with the championship belt, only to immediately sell it to Ted DiBiase (Thompson &

Prichard, 2016). This wildly nefarious plot led to the title being declared vacant a week later and a 14-man tournament scheduled for Wrestlemania IV at the Trump Plaza casino-adjacent Boardwalk Hall in Atlantic City to determine the new champion (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This would be the first of five Wrestlemania events that would feature Donald Trump in some capacity, and those events would prove to have an ancillary but significant effect on American history. Though the tournament format meant that the event could not feature a single main event directly, the marquee bout on the advertisements featured the rubber match between Hogan and Andre in the quarterfinals of the tournament (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The show would purportedly sell over 900,000 in-home buys, but a comparatively dismal 175,000 closed-circuit buys (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). With home pay-per-view business expanding, closed circuit broadcasting for major professional wrestling events would be hereafter discontinued by the WWF (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The broadcast would notably see Hogan and Andre fight to a draw, though Hogan would again bodyslam the giant and pose his way out of the building to the delight of the capacity crowd (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The tournament saw a babyface “Macho Man” Randy Savage with Miss Elizabeth at his side defeat “The Million-Dollar Man” Ted DiBiase to claim the spot as the primo uomo of the WWF (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Though this position was somewhat tenuous as Hogan persisted nearby as a sort of top-babyface in absentia for Savage’s reign (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This pattern would persist throughout much of the rest of their careers, in the WWF and elsewhere.

Crockett would strike back at the WWF by counter-programming Wrestlemania IV with the “Clash of the Champions” (Flair, 2004). This event featured pay-per-view quality match-ups on free cable television in direct opposition to the WWF’s biggest event (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). The event would draw over 12.5 million viewers and feature a title bout between perennial champion Ric Flair and up-and-coming top star Steve “Sting” Borden (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Crockett showed that there was still plenty of drawing power in the NWA, with a sold-out Greensboro Coliseum to go with the massive television viewership (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). The success of the first Clash of the Champions event saw it become a recurring quarterly television event to promote and occasionally conclude major angles for JCP (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017).

The spring and summer of 1988 saw Crockett again putting on The Great American Bash, but this time as a pay-per-view event (Thompson & Anderson, 2019). JCP continued to offer perhaps the strongest tag-team division in American professional wrestling history, but Flair remained the primo uomo of the NWA, this time defeating Lex Luger in the main event (Thompson & Anderson, 2019). Flair's continued positioning as the world champion had also begun to become stale with NWA fans, as he had been the top star of the promotion for almost an entire decade without interruption. Still, his proven drawing power was vitally important to the NWA during the time of uncertainty, especially with young babyface stars like Sting and Luger unproven in the role of marquee draw. The event itself would draw less than 200,000 buys on pay-per-view (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). This would prove to be the final event that the original Jim Crockett Promotions would put on pay-per-view (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017).

McMahon would drop another tent pole event in August of 1988 when SummerSlam was created (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This event emerged as the second-to-top event on the WWF/WWE calendar after Wrestlemania (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This first event would feature WWF Champion Randy Savage align with Hulk Hogan to for "The Mega Powers" tag-team with Miss Elizabeth in their corner; they would take on "The Mega Bucks" featuring Andre the Giant and Ted DiBiase, and it again drew a monster buy rate of roughly 880,000 homes (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The event also featured rising star "The Ultimate Warrior" Jim Hellwig ending the record 14-month intercontinental title reign of "The Honky Tonk Man" Wayne Ferris (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The Mega-Powers triumphed but Savage would begin to become jealous of what he perceived as romantic tension between Hogan and Elizabeth (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This would lead to a storyline break-up of the tag-team, and eventually Hogan and Savage facing off at Wrestlemania V (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

The fall of 1988 would prove to be pivotal in the history of American professional wrestling. The AWA and Jim Crockett Promotions would take their final swings at the WWF's seemingly inevitable final conquest of the American professional wrestling territories. The major territories had endured a seemingly endless barrage of WWF merchandise, talent acquisitions, hostile counter-programming, pop culture crossover events, and fan-pleasing Hulk Hogan pose-downs. The old territories could not seem to muster enough revenue or

promotional capacity to compete with the emerging brand-name in professional wrestling. While the Jarrett's retreated to the professional wrestling polis of Memphis, the promotions to operate out of there would permanently be regarded as secondary development territories by anyone outside of The Music City.

On 13 December 1988, Verne Gagne's AWA put on their last historically significant special event with SuperClash III (Thompson & Jarrett, 2021). This event would be a co-promotion between the remaining major territories who had not become proxies of Crockett (Thompson & Jarrett, 2021). Jerry Jarrett of the Memphis territory had bought out Fritz Von Erich to take control of World Class (Thompson & Jarrett, 2021). Gagne collaborated with Jarrett once again out of necessity (Thompson & Jarrett, 2021). The card featured a curious combination of not-yet-ripe and somewhat over-ripened stars (Thompson & Jarrett, 2021). Wendy Richter, who had just three years before been instrumental in launching the WWF's Rock n' Wrestling Era, was featured in a six-person tag-team match (Thompson & Jarrett, 2021). Richter had left the WWF after a dispute with Moolah, and a supposed "swerve" finish, where the WWF women's title was unknowingly taken from her in a match with a masked Moolah (Thompson & Jarrett, 2021). The card also featured future world singles champions Chaco Guerrero, Jeff Jarrett, "Diamond" Dallas Page, Madusa Miceli, and Robert "Sgt. Slaughter" Remus, alongside future stars who would emerge as Hall of Famers Solofa "Rikishi" Fatu and Luna Vachon (Thompson & Jarrett, 2021). The card also saw Jerry Lawler successfully unify his AWA title with the World Class title by defeating Kerry Von Erich, though Gagne would strip Lawler of the title after Jarrett's CWA split off from the AWA soon after (Thompson & Jarrett, 2021). However, the lineage of these combined titles in Memphis would eventually create the elder Jarrett's USWA Unified World Heavyweight title, which would arguably crown a litany of unacknowledged world titlists throughout the 1990's (Thompson & Jarrett, 2021). The main event saw The Rock n' Roll Express fight to a double disqualification draw with the Stud Stable, featuring Robert Fuller and Jimmy Golden (Thompson & Jarrett, 2021). After stripping Lawler of the title, he would place his son-in-law Larry Zbyszko as the top star of the promotion for all but 54 days of its final two years (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). This event drew only 1,672 fans to Chicago's UIC Pavilion, a dire sign as Chicago had once been a top-drawing city for Gagne (Thompson & Jarrett, 2021). As the first (and only) pay-per-view offered by the AWA, it drew just under 50,000 buys (Thompson & Jarrett, 2021). This served as definitive, if not immediately acknowledged

proof that a resurgence of the American Wrestling Association was not in the cards. Gagne's once-co-equal national promotion would limp along for another 25 months (Thompson & Jarrett, 2021). By January of 1991, the promotion would permanently cease operations (Thompson & Bischoff, 2019). The AWA's intellectual property and tape library would eventually be sold to the WWE (Thompson & Bischoff, 2019). All taped AWA events are currently available on the WWE streaming network internationally and on the Peacock streaming network in the United States (Thompson & Bischoff, 2019).

By the fall of 1988, Jim Crockett Promotions was now hemorrhaging money and on the verge of bankruptcy (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Eroding live event revenue and growing debt made staying in business impossible for the second-generation promoters (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). However, the Crockett family would not bow to McMahon and the WWF. On 2 November 1988, Jim Crockett Promotions would sell controlling interest in their promotion to longtime national television distribution partner Turner Broadcasting Systems (Thompson & Crockett, 2021). Nicknamed "Captain Outrageous" by the media, founder and owner Ted Turner was a self-made eccentric billionaire who had a great affection for professional wrestling (Evans, 2021). Turner also liked the NWA's drawing power in the Old South. Since professional wrestling had been one of the three prongs of Turner's successful programming strategy for WTBS (alongside Atlanta Braves Baseball and reruns of *The Andy Griffith Show*), Turner saw value in the southeastern powerhouse promotion (Evans, 2021; Thompson & Bischoff, 2019). So in the fall of 1988, for what was likely the then-record sum of \$9,000,000, Ted Turner got into the professional wrestling business (Evans, 2021). JCP would continue with the Crockett family as consultants, and David Crockett as a producer for their television programming (Thompson & Bischoff, 2019). While Turner's entrepreneurial spirit drew him into this historically puzzling back corner of the entertainment industry, many within the Turner organization would oppose the company being involved in narrative stage combat-focused melodrama marketed to the working class (Thompson & Bischoff, 2019). Shortly after the purchase of Jim Crockett Promotions, the organization was officially branded "World Championship Wrestling" or "WCW" for the remainder of its existence (Thompson & Bischoff, 2019; Evans, 2021). Though the NWA would remain as a sanctioning body until 1991, schisms between the WCW and NWA championships would emerge in 1991 and persist until the promotion and formerly dominant sanctioning entity of American professional wrestling in 1993 (Flair, 2004). Under Turner's ownership and



helmed by Eric Bischoff, it would become the #1 professional wrestling promotion in the world (Evans, 2021).

Though it was not known at the time, the sale of Jim Crockett Promotions was the beginning of the present era of professional wrestling: The Corporate Wrestling Era. Prior to this sale, professional wrestling had been overseen by mom-and-pop outfits that operated more like cottage industries than major companies. Even the WWF was a third-generation family promotion, with a fourth generation likely being groomed for leadership now. With the entry of a billion-dollar television corporation into the industry, the insular norms of professional wrestling would be disrupted and ultimately ended. This would be the first time that corporate norms like standards and practices, human resource management, fiduciary responsibilities, and public perception of professional wrestling as a reflection on parent corporations would enter into the booking equations. Since this sale, professional wrestling in the United States has always been beholden to corporate or shareholder interests in some significant capacity. By the end of the decade, all major professional wrestling companies in the United States would be publicly traded entities. This would forever change the creative and presentational norms of the industry.

Likewise in 1989, McMahon would put a definitive end to the Kayfabe Conspiracy. After over a century of collective lies to the public, the truth about professional wrestling would become a matter of public record. Though there were some tertiary hints, numerous attempted exposes in the traditional media, and widespread public skepticism about the reality (or lack thereof) in professional wrestling matches, there had been no definitive statement on the issue. By this time in 1989, Vince McMahon was already the most successful professional wrestling promoter in history. Traditionalist promoters, performers and fans widely consider McMahon's choice to end the public charade to be yet another slap in the face by the man who destroyed the old model of professional wrestling. Though there were many others willing to, or who had exposed the nature of professional wrestling as performance art, McMahon's revelation is viewed as the definitive conclusion of any public doubts about professional wrestling being a legitimate athletic competition. Vince McMahon "killed kayfabe" on 10 February 1989 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The place was the New Jersey Statehouse in Trenton (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The New Jersey State Athletic Commission, along with many other states, had been charging considerable fees for

sanctioning professional wrestling events, despite professional wrestling being a non-competitive performance art (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). McMahon, crediting professional wrestling fans with being able to intellectually and emotionally enjoy melodramatic narrative stage combat, told the New Jersey State Legislature the truth under oath (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). McMahon coined the term “Sports Entertainment” to describe professional wrestling (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This term is widely used to describe professional wrestling and is often used synonymously (even derisively) to describe the WWF’s style of professional wrestling (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

The 1980’s was largely a changing of the guard in professional wrestling. The subgenre simultaneously saw dozens of companies die, and the national profile of the industry explode into prominence. A century-old conspiracy crumbled, and fringe vaudeville entertainment became mainstream. If ever there was an era of professional wrestling that could be described in the words of Dickens, the 1980’s<sup>54</sup> truly could be encapsulated as “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.” By the decade’s end, corporate America would become a permanent part of the subgenre for better or for worse. And that presence would lead to the evolution of professional wrestling into its contemporary form. Though these events happened over thirty years prior to the time of this writing, in an historical sense, the end of kayfabe and the sale of Crockett were the beginning of *now* in American professional wrestling.

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<sup>54</sup> The dueling professional wrestling boom of the 1980’s and their subcultural symbolism could be explored in long-form academic study.

## 5.10 The Corporate Wrestling Era

Professional wrestling in its current iteration has become a major source of content for a patchwork of conglomerated media distribution companies across the world. Gone are the days of major promotions being simple family-run businesses with true independent contractors. Major and reputable minor professional wrestling companies are largely beholden to the norms of corporate America. Top professional wrestling companies in the United States and abroad have become publicly traded corporations. Others have become subsidiaries of multi-billion dollar transnational corporations. At the very least, gaining the media profile to be significantly profitable requires corporate partnership, and corporate partnerships inevitably come with strings attached. The sale of controlling interest in Jim Crockett Promotions to Turner Broadcasting was the dawn of this era, though it would not fully take hold until the initial public offering (IPO) of WWF/WWE stock on 19 October 1999 (Evans, 2021; Duggan, 2022). The effect of non-wrestling shareholders and corporate partners on and in professional wrestling has been massive. It has changed the narrative content within the performances, the marketing style of the performances, and made demographic analytics the starting point of the creative process.

This has indeed made professional wrestling a bigger business, though it is a much different business. The chaotic cowboy days of gun-toting, hard-drinking, tough guy wrestlers crisscrossing the nation down an endless road keeping tight to their chest the secrets of their craft seem to be over. Now wrestlers act as personal brand-builders of a self-aware choreographed commercial performance art, beholden to dress codes, drug testing, and codes of conduct. The 1990's were the peak of general public fascination with professional wrestling and ushered in the new era. The final throes of the wild old days of professional wrestling made for historically unmatched public interest, producing classic television, voluminous litigation, and numerous tragedies. This section will dissect that final nostalgic era of professional wrestling history. The WWE IPO, to some degree like the fall of the Soviet Union, serves as the end of history and the beginning of now. This section will also briefly examine how the trends of publicly traded wrestling have seemingly forever changed the art form's most public showcases.

### 5.10.a The Decline of Hulkamania and the Identity Crisis of WCW (1990-1993)

The WWF had ridden the rocket of Hulk Hogan's fame to the zenith of its popularity throughout the late-1980's. However, by the turn to the final decade of the 20th century, fans had begun to sour on the familiar formula that had elevated the WWF to be the new name-brand in professional wrestling. The peak of Hogan's first run at the top was likely the year-long "Mega Powers Collide" storyline and rivalry with Randy Savage from Wrestlemania IV (1988) to Wrestlemania V (1989) (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Wrestlemania V had been the biggest event to date for the WWF (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). By 1990, the WWF had four tent pole pay-per-view events which divided the year into quarterly blow offs of television angles. These four events all continue to the time of this writing and are called the "Big Four" within professional wrestling: the Royal Rumble, Wrestlemania, Summer Slam and the Survivor Series (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

It is widely reported that by this time dissension between Hogan and McMahon had grown as a result of Hogan's desire to engage in outside projects. This led to the campy 1989 film *No Holds Barred*, which was executive produced by both McMahon and Hogan (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). McMahon funded the endeavor, which was a feature film that saw Hogan star as Rip Thomas, who was a WWF Champion lured into a competing league titled Battle of the Tough Guys, after Zeus (played by Tiny Lister) crippled Rips' brother at the behest of a corrupt television executive (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The film was panned by critics, received a lukewarm reaction from fans, and made just \$16 million at the box office after its June 1989 release (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This led to a six-month co-promotional event. To bolster the interest and drawing power of the film, McMahon hired Lister to portray Zeus on WWF television (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Hogan and the novice actor-turned-wrestler would collide in the ring live at three consecutive pay-per-view events. The two first met in a traditional tag-team match in the main event at SummerSlam 1989, with Hogan teaming with his real-life friend Brutus "the Barber Beefcake (Ed Lesley) with Miss Elizabeth as their valet and Lister teaming up with Savage with Savage's new valet "Sensational" Sherri Martel (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Hogan would pin Lister (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). At Survivor Series Hogan would lead a team title "The Hulkamaniacs" including Jake Robert and the tag-team Demolition (Bill easy and Barry Darsow) to defeat The Million Dollar Team featuring Lister with Ted DiBiase and the tag-team of The Powers of Pain (Terry "Warlord" Szopinski and Simone "Barbarian" Vailahi)

(Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The final bout in this pay-per-view trilogy would come as a Christmas double feature debuting on 27 December 1989 titled *No Holds Barred: The Match/The Movie* (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The broadcast would include the feature film, followed by a taped tag-team steel cage match with Hogan and Beefcake again defeating Savage and Lister at a WWF live event in Nashville on 12 December 1989 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Conflicting reports argue that the \$11.95 event drew between 176,000 and 440,000 buys, for a gross that seemed to finally make the year-long endeavor profitable (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). All of this is to say that the drawing power of Hulk Hogan outside of the WWF machine was beginning to be called into question. McMahon had used three consecutive pay-per-views to push Hogan's film.

In an effort to prove the machine he had built could function without Hogan as the top star, McMahon determined to replace Hogan as the top babyface in the promotion with Jim "The Ultimate Warrior" Hellwig (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Hellwig would eventually legally change his name to "Warrior Warrior" due to copyright issues with the WWF over the outside use of the Ultimate Warrior brand (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Hellwig had entered the professional wrestling business in a tag-team called "The Renegades" with Steve "Sting" Borden (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Warrior had been being groomed for a top spot for some time, as McMahon made him the Intercontinental Champion at SummerSlam 1988, then lost the title to Rick Rude at Wrestlemania V, before regaining it at SummerSlam 1989 Tanabe et al., 2022). Following Hogan's victory in the 1990 Royal Rumble, Warrior and Hogan would be booked in the main event at Wrestlemania VI in a babyface vs babyface match, wherein both performers portrayed heroes (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). Both titles were on the line, and Hogan surrendered his first clean loss in the Hulkamania era in the Toronto SkyDome before over 60,000 spectators (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

Warrior's run as champion became tumultuous as box office receipts argued that his drawing power was less than that of Hogan (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This combined with Warrior's ego and increasingly erratic behavior created issues with WWF management (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). In one of the most controversial storylines in professional wrestling history, the WWF booked its top angle for Wrestlemania VII to reflect the Persian Gulf War (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). After Saddam Hussein invaded neighboring Kuwait in late 1990 and the Iraqi Republican Guard seemed poised to attack neighboring Saudi

Arabia (A&E, 2009). This action could have put a massive portion of the world's petroleum under the control of an infamously cruel despot (A&E, 2009). In response, the US military activated "Operation Desert Shield" to build up troops in Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf (A&E, 2009). The WWF decided to make it the central storyline of their biggest pay per-view of the year. A returning Sgt. Slaughter, who had previously been a star on the GI Joe animated series, would reveal himself to be an Iraqi sympathizer, and ally himself with Col. Mustafa (a rebranded Iron Sheik) and Gen. Adnan Al-Kaissie (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Adnan had been a real-life childhood schoolmate of the Iraqi dictator and had once defeated Andre the Giant in Baghdad with Hussein present (Thompson & Prichard, 2016; Hébert & Laprade, 2020). The storyline was not well-received by critics and many found it to be in bad taste (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Slaughter was issued a number of death threats (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Despite this, Slaughter would unseat the Warrior as WWF Champion at the Royal Rumble, and after Hogan repeated as Royal Rumble winner, the main event for a USA-themed Wrestlemania (Hogan & Dagostino, 2010). The tactic of using an actual war as a promotion tactic was regarded as distasteful by many, though such tactics had been a hallmark of professional wrestling promotion since the First World War. Following the American victory in Operation Desert Storm, the patriotic fervor that swept the nation failed to reignite Hogan's earlier popularity. The event was set to be broadcast live from the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum which could seat over 98,000 at the time, but due to threats of terrorism was moved to the 16,000-seat indoor Los Angeles Memorial Sports Arena (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Despite mainstream media backlash against the angle, the WWF would continue to pursue it by putting Hogan in tandem with the Ultimate Warrior and defeating the trio of Slaughter, Adnan, and the Iron Sheik at SummerSlam 1991 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

Hogan would again be named the primo uomo of the WWF, but his drawing power was clearly beginning to wane. Pay-per-view buys across all of the WWF's major events were down and there was no other ready explanation. Critics and fans would observe that the children who had been attracted to Hogan's squeaky-clean image and cornball patriotism in the mid-1980's were aging out of interest in the youth-centric product that had made the WWF into a juggernaut. There was also the atrophy of interest in Hogan's formula of superheroics en route to victory. It seemed that WWF fans were clamoring for new top stars to emerge.

Meanwhile, Ted Turner's WCW struggled in the first year of the new decade to find its identity. While the WWF was a singular organization with a central mission and an undisputed leader, Turner Broadcasting was a multifaceted conglomerate and the magnate at the head of it was never involved in the day-to-day operations of the company (Evans, 2021). Instead, throughout its existence, Turner's WCW would be under the control of a number of different individuals with different visions of the business (Evans, 2021). There was also the issue that structurally, there were many executives for WCW leadership to answer to the Turner Sports subdivision of the conglomerate (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). This disseminated leadership without central focus created an inconsistent product in this era (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). In professional wrestling, most fans perceive the executive in charge of creative direction to be the most powerful in the wrestling company, when that individual is not the outright owner. The head of creative for a professional wrestling company is usually called "the booker" regardless of their executive title. However, this is not always the case, as the executives above the booker in many promotions have veto power over the booker, forcing the booker to follow directives from the upper corporate echelons of management. This was constantly an issue for WCW throughout its run from 1989-2001. There was no definitive leader of the promotion. Even at the zenith of WCW's success, the leader of the promotion was unceremoniously replaced in what appeared to be an inter-departmental power grab within the Turner organization (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Throughout the entire history of the promotion, there was ongoing conflict between the booking committee, which oversaw the wrestling product, and Turner executives appointed to head the programming. The brand identity was also somewhat in question, because WCW and the NWA operated as intertwined, but somehow autonomous entities. When Jim Crockett Promotions was sold to the media mogul in 1989, the assets included the six wrestling territories that were under Crockett's control, however, the NWA itself did not sell the rights to their world championship to Turner (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Turner had little interest in the squabbling of small regional professional wrestling promotions while a national brand was being built (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). This would eventually lead to ongoing schism between the brands until WCW ultimately left in the fall of 1993 (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018).

Turner's first appointed leader of WCW was Jim Herd (Oliva, 2021). The technical name of Herd's position was the Executive Vice President of World Championship Wrestling, which he held from 1988-1992 (Oliva, 2021). Herd had no background in professional wrestling, which caused endless controversy within WCW, as professional wrestlers of the era had a tremendous distrust of outsiders (Oliva, 2021). Herd's only prior relation to professional wrestling was his management of KPLR-TV in St. Louis, the home station for the promotion of former NWA President Sam Muchnick (Oliva, 2021; Flair, 2004). Herd's background as a television station manager in St. Louis and a regional manager of Pizza Hut did little to impress the infamously insular members of professional wrestling's fraternity (Flair, 2004). Herd eliminated George Scott as the booker of the promotion, and instead replaced him with a creative committee which was headed by Ole Anderson (Oliva, 2021). This committee and its alternating leadership would become a permanent feature of WCW (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). It often caused inconsistent storytelling because of the shifting creative focus and business philosophies of the alternating leaders. As time went on, the failures of WCW would always have a scapegoat upon which to place blame for any failures.

Upon the initial purchase of JCP by Turner, Ric Flair was the head booker of the promotion, giving him de facto control over the creative product (Bischoff & Thompson, 2018). In a glaring conflict of interest, Flair had also been the perennial leading man of the NWA for the entire decade of the 1980's (Bischoff & Thompson, 2018). Flair's early run as the head booker of WCW was relatively successful. He finally dropped the title to his longtime rival Ricky "The Dragon" Steamboat, kicking off a famed trilogy of bouts between them (Flair, 2004). Flair then had a wild feud with the apparently ageless Terry Funk who famously delivered a pile driver to Flair on the announce table to begin their feud (Flair, 2004). However, Flair's persistence at keeping himself as the top man in the promotion led to disharmony among the ambitious young locker room, and Flair was eventually forced out of the role (Bischoff & Thompson, 2018).

Among the professional wrestling community, Herd's attempts at creating angles and characters is the folklore used as a cautionary tale against admitting outsiders into decision-making roles within the industry. Highlights of these stories include an un-pinnable tag-team called The Hunchbacks, a confusion-causing/bell-wielding tandem called the Ding-Dongs, Brad "The Candyman" Armstrong, Oz the great and powerful portrayed by Kevin Nash, and



(allegedly) Spartacus played by Ric Flair (Oliva, 2021; Flair, 2004; Thompson & Herd 2020). Though Herd did have some success with WCW's marketing efforts and helped to attract new sponsors to the events, his overall term as the head of WCW was largely unsuccessful due to his limited creative skills in the genre (Thompson & Herd, 2020). This led many top stars from the JCP era to leave the promotion, including the Road Warriors and Jim Cornette (Oliva, 2021). Perhaps Herd is best remembered for his backstage power struggle with Ric Flair (Oliva, 2021).

By all accounts, Flair and Herd shared an historic enmity towards one another. Herd believed the Flair's time had passed, and that the style of wrestling he advocated in terms of both characters and ring work, were outdated (Oliva, 2021). Flair believed Herd to be completely ignorant of the working of professional wrestling (Flair, 2004). Herd's desire to place young babyfaces Sting and Lex Luger as the top stars did not align with Flair's creative plans (Oliva, 2021). Flair would leave the company in 1991 while still reigning as world champion (Flair, 2004). The custom "Big Gold Belt" that Flair carried had replaced the NWA's "10 Pounds of Gold" in 1986 (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). All NWA champions were required to place a \$25,000 deposit for the physical belt upon becoming champion as a method to dissuade them from running off with the title (Flair, 2004). The NWA and Turner did not return Flair's \$25,000 deposit or the \$13,000 in accrued interest on the bond. Flair was immediately signed by the WWF and took the belt with him onto WWF television (Flair, 2004).

Flair debuted in the WWF and immediately launched into a feud with Hulk Hogan (Flair, 2004). Flair would assist a young Mark "The Undertaker" Calloway to defeat Hogan to claim his first world title at Survivor Series 1991 (Flair, 2004). It was not known at the time, but this title loss to the Undertaker would mark Hogan's last dominant run in the WWF/WWE. After losing to the Undertaker at Survivor Series 1991, the heroic Hogan would only serve as the leading man of the WWF for a combined 99 days for the rest of his career, as compared to the 2,089 days he had already clocked (Tanabe et al., 2022). While Hogan would have a career renaissance as a heel in the late-1990's, his days as the top babyface in the professional wrestling business were over. The Undertaker was the first in a new generation of champions who relied on a more active and exciting in-ring style in the WWF.

The Undertaker's first run would be short lived, as Hogan would reclaim the title at the December *This Tuesday in Texas* pay-per-view event, with the Undertaker being inadvertently struck with blunt objects by Flair and his manager Paul Bearer, then having Hogan hurl ash into the Deadman's eyes prior to the win (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Due to the controversial finish to the match, the title was vacated and set to be decided in the 1992 Royal Rumble (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Flair eliminated "Psycho" Sid Justice to claim the WWF championship, making him the undisputed lineal world champion of both brands, and ostensibly the primo uomo of the industry at that point (Flair, 2004). Wrestlemania VIII was assumed to have Hogan versus Flair on pay-per-view for the first time, pitting the biggest hero and biggest villain of the wrestling world for the last 10 years against one another (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). However, due to lower than expected house show ticket sales with Flair and Hogan as the main event in the lead-up to the event, the plan was changed to have Flair defend the title against Randy Savage, and Hogan to close the show against Sid Justice (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This controversial move drew over 62,000 to the Hoosier Dome in Indianapolis, but also brought the lowest buy rate in Wrestlemania history (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

Wrestlemania VIII also saw another passing of the torch. A returning Roddy Piper had claimed his only singles title in the WWF by winning the Intercontinental title from Jacques "The Mountie" Rougeau at the Royal Rumble (Tanabe et al., 2022). Piper took on rising star Bret "The Hitman" Hart at Wrestlemania VIII in a much lauded match of Canadian stars (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). Piper ceded a rare in-ring defeat to the up-and-coming star (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). Piper had been a main eventer at the first Wrestlemania, and eight years later, he passed the baton to the wrestler who would be widely acclaimed as the top in-ring performer of the mid-1990's. Hart's physical storytelling skills during a professional wrestling match are considered some of the best of all-time. His fast-paced athleticism and competitive grappling techniques were honed under the tutelage of his father Stu Hart, and his one-time brother-in-law Tom "Dynamite Kid" Billington (Hart, 2010). By year's end, Hart would be elevated to the role of primo uomo of the company.

Hogan's role in the WWF was largely diminished thereafter, as he went off to pursue his acting career. Savage would have a respectable 149-day run as champion before dropping the title back to Flair on 1 September 1992 in Hershey (Tanabe et al., 2022). Just under six weeks

later, Flair would lose his final WWF title to Hart via submission at an un-televised event in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada (Hart, 2010). Hart's reign would be an historic shift away from the lumbering giants and slow paced wrestling of eras prior, and the introduction of an action-packed style that would come to dominate professional wrestling in the generations since (Hart, 2010). Hart would notably main event the final two pay-per-views of 1992, losing an instant classic match with his brother-in-law "The British Bulldog" Davey Boy Smith at a sold out Wembley Stadium at SummerSlam 1992, and successfully defending the WWF title by tapping out "The Heartbreak Kid" Shawn Michaels in the main event of Survivor Series 1992 (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). The inverse finish of the latter would become one of the most controversial moments in professional wrestling history six years later. And while this turn toward more natural physiques and a more exciting in-ring style was engaging and fascinating to fans, the move to it is generally regarded as a result of the federal indictment of WWF founder Vince McMahon (Hart, 2010).

#### 5.10.b The United States vs Vince McMahon

On 18 November 1993, Vince McMahon<sup>55</sup> and Titan Sports were indicted on six charges by the United States District Attorney for the Eastern District of New York (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The US District Attorney for the region was Zachary Carter, who most famously convicted white collar criminal Jordan "The Wolf of Wall Street" Belfort (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Carter indicted McMahon on a number of charges related to steroid smuggling and distribution from and by the WWF and McMahon to performers (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The use of steroids by performers was fairly well-known and patently obvious. The mammoth physiques of WWF performers alone were not enough to secure an indictment from the US Justice Department. Instead, the case hinged on the actions of Dr. George Zahorian, a doctor from Pennsylvania who served as the ringside physician for WWF events in the Keystone State (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Having a doctor present is a requirement by the Pennsylvania Athletic Commission, and Zahorian used this as a platform to sell steroids and other physique enhancing drugs to the wrestlers (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Zahorian would eventually be convicted for selling steroids to minors in 1991 and cooperated with the federal authorities in their investigation of McMahon and Titan

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<sup>55</sup> The purported, accused, and documented misdeeds of Vince McMahon may well warrant long-form academic scholarship.

Sports (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). McMahon was accused of dealing steroids to his wrestlers, embezzling company funds to buy illegal drugs, and for requiring wrestlers to use the physique-altering substances (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

McMahon's trial was held in July 1994 and he was represented by high-powered attorney Jerry McDevitt (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). By the time the trial began, three of the charges had been dismissed by US District Judge Jacob Mishler (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). McMahon admitted to using steroids prior to the Controlled Substances Act of 1991, which barred the legal sale of anabolic steroids and human growth hormones (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Only one wrestler testified that McMahon had told them to use steroids (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). That wrestler was Kevin "Nailz" Wacholz, who admitted on the stand that he hated McMahon personally and had previously attacked McMahon backstage at a WWF event in Green Bay, Wisconsin prior to his dismissal from the company, according to Bret Hart (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Hogan was the star witness for the prosecution (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Hogan admitted to using legal steroids during his run in the 1980's, he admitted to using steroids with McMahon, and exchanging them with McMahon as friends and training partners (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Hogan testified that McMahon never required him to use steroids or to his knowledge never overtly required anyone else to do so either (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Hogan maintained that McMahon never purchased steroids on his behalf. Hogan received immunity from prosecution for his testimony (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

The defense, confident that the prosecution's case had been effectively dismantled, called no witnesses (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Judge Mishler had dismissed three counts of the original six prior to the indictment (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Mishler would dismiss two other counts prior to jury deliberations, ruling that the prosecution had not demonstrated that the alleged crimes occurred in New York's Eastern District, where the court had jurisdiction, but rather in Pennsylvania where Zahorian was a licensed and practicing physician (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). After 16 hours of deliberation, the jury acquitted McMahon of the sole remaining charge of the indictment (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

As a result of the years-long investigation, the WWF dramatically changed its drug-testing policies (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Wrestlers were barred from using steroids, and

randomized drug tests were installed (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This would be the precursor to the WWE's Wellness Policy, which seems to evolve with each courtroom scandal that the organization faces (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This policy currently addresses steroids, concussions, recreational drugs and other blood doping practices (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This also led to top stars visibly shrinking in their muscle mass. Smaller, more athletic wrestlers, with faster-paced in-ring styles were elevated to top positions in professional wrestling (Hart, 2010). As there were no criminal convictions, perhaps the most enduring legacy of the WWF steroid trial was the artistic shift towards a new style of performance in top American wrestling companies.

### 5.10.c The Cult of Extreme - the Outsize Influence of ECW

The Philadelphia-based Tri-State Wrestling Alliance was founded by promoter Joel Goodhart who ran the promotion until 1992 (Williams et al., 2016). In 1992, Todd Gordon purchased the promotion, renamed it Eastern Championship Wrestling, and hired famed NWA performer "Hot Stuff" Eddie Gilbert as head booker (Williams et al., 2016). Gordon would hire Paul Heyman, a former manager in several territories and WCW, in 1993 (Heyman, 2004). Heyman would be promoted to booker after Gilbert's departure (Williams et al., 2016). Gordon and Heyman would collaborate successfully for several years, until Gordon sold his shares to Heyman in 1995 (Williams et al., 2016). Gordon would remain with ECW as an on-air character until 1997 (Williams et al., 2016). Heyman is widely credited with the innovative booking practices that made ECW a cult classic professional wrestling promotion (Williams et al., 2016).

Much of ECW's appeal was based off of a prevailing trend in American pop culture from the early 1990's. With "Generation X" entering adolescence in the 1990's, a cultural shift occurred away from the vapid showiness of the 1980's, and more towards a hard-edged nonconformity in the grunge aesthetic (Buck, 2017). ECW tapped into the angsty new generation and built itself as the anti-establishment brand of professional wrestling (Heyman, 2004). Based in and around Philadelphia, the underfunded, underdog promotion embraced the rejection of established norms of professional wrestling. While the major companies of the era muddled in the middle ground of broadcasting towards a middle-of-the-road product aimed at mass appeal, ECW was an early adopter of a cultural wave, and their example would

inspire some of the most popular content in those larger brands. This began with one of my most famous professional wrestling double-crosses of the era.

By 1994, the promotion was swiftly becoming a centerpiece of the NWA (Williams et al., 2016). Despite having been recently a top brand on Turner's network, the NWA had been in severe decline for a decade and had now eroded to a fraction of its former relevance. Without national television, the NWA became a collection of independent promoters, and a tertiary brand. Then-NWA President Dennis Coralluzzo, the promoter of NWA New Jersey, sought to use the title vacated by Flair to reset the NWA to its Territory Era committee system (Williams et al., 2016). For his part, Jim Crockett Jr had out-last-ed his non-competition agreement with Turner Broadcasting and was now keen to revive his family's brand and the NWA with it (Williams et al., 2016). ECW's local television exposure in the markets of the northeast was considered a major factor in their being selected to host a tournament to crown the new NWA champion (Williams et al., 2016). Gordon, Heyman, and wrestler Shane "The Franchise" Douglas would betray the NWA (Williams et al., 2016). Douglas would defeat Charles "2 Cold Scorpio" Scaggs in the finals of the tournament to win the NWA World Heavyweight Championship (Tanabe et al., 2022). Upon accepting the famed "10 Pounds of Gold" belt, Douglas cut a vicious promo, calling the NWA a dead organization and insulting former champions, while making a declaration of his status as ECW world heavyweight champion (Heyman, 2004). Coralluzzo and the NWA board were reportedly shocked and appalled by Douglas's actions and demanded that Gordon strip him of his NWA and ECW titles (Williams et al., 2016). The following day, Gordon ended "NWA: Eastern Championship Wrestling" and reopened under the branding "Extreme Championship Wrestling" (Heyman, 2004) In the 1990's "extreme" was a brand often used at targeting Generation X, and ECW would follow that branding as its mission statement over the next seven years (Buck, 2017).

The NWA would host a subsequent tournament for the NWA title later that year in New Jersey under the auspices of Smoky Mountain Wrestling, with NWA stalwart Jim Cornette as promoter (Linder, 2013). Chris Candido would win the diminished title (Tanabe et al., 2022). The title would re-emerge on national television in late-1997 when a cadre of NWA wrestlers performed a belated and poorly received invasion of the WWF (Thompson & Jarrett, 2021). By that time, UFC legend Dan "The Beast" Severn held the title as a part of his 1,479-day run

as champion (Tanabe et al., 2022). The title would land largely on minor league promotions and in Japan, until the 2002 founding of NWA: TNA by the Jarrett's (Tanabe et al., 2022).

From 1993 onward, ECW would be produced primarily from the "ECW Arena" in south Philadelphia (Williams et al., 2016). The arena had formerly been a freight warehouse, clothing store, and the home of the South Philadelphia Viking Club (Williams et al., 2016). The Viking Club had operated bingo games at the location, leading to "ECW Arena" being nicknamed "the world's most famous bingo hall" (Williams et al., 2016). The building would be converted into a live performance space. The weekly television program, *ECW Hardcore TV* was a hit with both critics and fans (Williams et al., 2016). ECW became the beneficiary of a national network of "tape trader" wrestling fans who would make one-another bootleg copies of hard-to-find matches in the pre-internet era (Williams et al., 2016). Heyman's editing of the program is widely applauded as a non-lineage intermixed anthology highlighting performances from the ECW Arena, un-televised events, and promos conducted by wrestlers (Heyman, 2004). The solo commentary of announcer Joey Styles was also widely lauded (Heyman 2004). The television program would syndicate in many major markets of the United States, usually ending up in time-slots at or after midnight (Williams et al., 2016). The program showcased bloody matches, sexual content, strong language, adult themes, extreme violence, wild and ethically neutral characters (Heyman 2004). This brand of "hardcore" wrestling appealed to an older audience, notably males 18-35, who found it to be a refreshing shift from the family-friendly mainstream wrestling in the WWF and WCW (Heyman, 2004). The program was syndicated in numerous major markets across the US, including Philadelphia, New York, Las Vegas, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Chicago, Orlando, along SportsSouth (a cable network available throughout the southeast) and several smaller markets around the country (Williams et al., 2016).

The success of ECW programming in syndication was also due in large part to a steady stream of young talent, and repackaged famous talents from across the wrestling world. The program was anchored by top singles stars like Douglas, Taz, Rob Van Dam, Jerry Lynn, Sabu, The Sandman, Tommy Dreamer, Rhino, Steve Corino, New Jack, Justin Credible, Masato Tanaka, Lance Storm, Raven, Mikey Whipwreck, and Al Snow (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). ECW was also home to a tag-team division, made wildly popular by teams like the Public Enemy, the Eliminators, the Full Blooded Italians, the Gangstas, the Impact Players,

Balls Mahoney and Axl Rotten, the Blue World Order, and a seemingly endless supply of Dudley Boyz (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). Building off of the popularity of smaller and more athletic “Junior Heavyweight,” ECW began a global recruiting campaign which brought in talents like Yoshihiro Tajiri, Dean Malenko, Eddie Guerrero, Chris Jericho, Rey Mysterious Jr, Chris Benoit, Ultimo Dragon, Taka Michinoku, Super Crazy, Kid Kash, Shane Helms, Juventud Guerrera, and Billy Kidman (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). A number of established wrestlers who had left larger organizations sought to reinvent and reinvigorate themselves in ECW, like Terry Funk, Steve Austin, Bam Bam Bigelow, Cactus Jack, and Brian Pillman (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). Perhaps what ECW is most widely remembered for are its “hardcore” matches, wherein much of the time there were no disqualifications, leading to palpable use of weapons, wild brawls that traveled around the building, and death-defying dives from high in the arena, with luminaries of this style fall in part or in full into one or more of the lists above (Williams et al., 2016).

With its patchwork syndication, rich talent roster, edgy television programming and national network of die-hard fans, ECW became an underground hit. Its position as a counter-culture style of wrestling led to cross-promotions with other professional wrestling promotions, most notably the WWF. From 1995-1997, the WWF used ECW as a feeder league through on-air cross promotion and McMahon serving as a benefactor for the promotion (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). ECW stars would appear on WWF programming occasionally, and some WWF personalities would come to ECW. This also led to another co-promotion between ECW and the USWA (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The USWA served as a developmental territory for the WWF at the time, but it provided the polar opposite flavor of professional wrestling. During this time, ECW’s talent roster was also often raided by both the WWF and WCW (Williams et al., 2016). Virtually all of the above-mentioned ECW luminaries would eventually work for WCW and/or the WWF. This took a particular toll on ECW’s cruiserweights, most of whom were signed to six-figure deals by WCW to build Bischoff’s historically acclaimed Cruiserweight Division, or the WWF’s less regarded Light Heavyweight counterpart (Jericho, 2014; Heyman, 2004). WCW would also secure various top talents from ECW, leading to a long-simmering backstage feud between former AWA and WCW colleagues Eric Bischoff and Paul Heyman (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018).



The underground promotion would struggle financially throughout its run. Heyman would famously pay talent late, or bounce checks to performers. Performers for the organization would serve various backstage roles to help keep the organization afloat (Heyman, 2004). The team atmosphere and sense of defiance of adversity further fueled the legend of the promotion (Heyman, 2004). The feuds with the WWF and USWA consistently highlighted the traditionally established norms of professional wrestling against the defiant youth of the hardcore generation. This passionate “us against them” mentality created a permanent niche in professional wrestling fandom (Heyman, 2004).

ECW hosted the first of its 21 pay-per-view offerings on 13 April 1997 (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). The event, titled *Barely Legal* was featured heavily in the famed 1999 documentary, *Beyond the Mat*, by filmmaker Barry Blaustein (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001; Blaustein, 1999). Backstage footage of Heyman’s defiant pre-show pep talk to the performers has become an iconic moment in the history of professional wrestling. Heyman said in part:

“Tonight, we have the chance to say, ‘Yeah, you’re right - we’re too extreme. We’re too wild. We’re too full of our own shit.’ And we have the chance to say, ‘Hey, fuck you - you’re wrong. Fuck you- we’re right.’ Because you have made it to the dance. Because believe me - this is the dance!” - Paul Heyman in *Beyond the Mat* (Blaustein, 1999)

In the main event, Terry Funk would capture his second recognized world singles title, more than twenty years after his first (Tanabe et al., 2022).

By August of 1999, ECW would finally secure a national television deal with The Nashville Network, commonly called TNN (Heyman, 2011). TNN would eventually rebrand as The National Network during ECW’s run on the network in 2000, and later to Spike TV and eventually the Paramount Network (Andreeva, 2017). ECW would become its highest-rated show with its Friday evening time slot (Heyman, 2011). ECW would run into trouble with its programming, as TNN and the earlier time slot had stricter FCC content standards than the syndicated after-midnight show (Heyman, 2011). ECW was also struggling to maintain its drawing power, as the WWF and WCW had both changed their marketing strategies to appeal to the adult and adolescent male demographics (Williams et al., 2016). In 1996, WCW

began a massive campaign toward this market with the smash hit nWo and “The Crow” Sting storylines, and the WWF had simultaneously entered its “Attitude Era” on the back of former ECW star “Stone Cold” Steve Austin, D-Generation X, the reformed Hart Foundation, and a harder-edged presentation (Williams et al., 2016). The uniqueness of ECW, and the consistent migration of its top stars to big money contracts in the feuding pair of top promotions also eroded interest in the promotion (Williams et al., 2016). The WWF introduced its own “hardcore” division in 1998, headed up by ECW vet Mick Foley, with WCW following suit in 1999 Tanabe et al., 2022). Foley’s performances as the standard bearer of hardcore wrestling in the WWF also drew fans away from ECW (Foley, 1999). ECW programming was also a favorite of then-head WWF writer Vince Russo, who sought to replicate the racy, unpredictable style of television in the WWF (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Russo’s writing had the benefit of McMahon’s story editing, and the guaranteed quality in-ring action by the veteran wrestlers acting as agents for the matches (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Having seen the success of professional wrestling on this network, TNN placed a bid for WWF programming in 2000 and won the network away from its longtime home USA Network (Heyman 2011). The final episode of ECW on TNN aired on 6 October 2000 (Dyken & McGee, 2011).

ECW spent its final months in dire financial straits (Heyman, 2011). In 2000, ECW had seen the release of 2 multi-platform video games, and a record 7 pay-per-view events, but video game maker Acclaim and the In-Demand pay-per-view provider had been slow to issue licensing payments (Heyman, 2011). Many wrestlers were owed months of back pay from Heyman (Williams et al., 2016). Heyman would struggle to keep up with operating capital, eventually seeing the company fold with close to \$9 million in debt against slightly more than \$1 million in assets (Heyman, 2011). Several wrestlers were owed five or even six figure debts by ECW management (Heyman, 2004). On 13 January 2001, ECW had its last live event far from its Philadelphia home, in Little Rock, Arkansas (Dyken & McGee, 2011). Many wrestlers realized that ECW had gone out of business when Heyman debuted as a color commentator on WWF Raw in February 2001 (Heyman, 2004). The original ECW was closed officially on 4 April 2001 (Williams et al., 2016).

The brand would survive in the wrestling space for some time thereafter. The WWE would license the brand from Heyman and sign many of its veteran wrestlers as part of “the

Alliance” storyline. With WCW and ECW having gone out of business in early 2001, a storyline of the combined forces of those promotions invading the WWF was the centerpiece of WWF programming from March-November 2001 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). During this time, the leading ECW star was Rob Van Dam, who debuted as the lone babyface in a massive heel faction and quickly claimed the WWF Hardcore title, appealing to the roots of ECW (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The storyline ended as expected with the WWF victorious on its own programming.

The WWE would purchase all remaining ECW assets on 28 January 2003, including the tape library (Williams et al., 2016). On 14 November 2004, the WWE released a commemorative two-disc DVD titled, *The Rise and Fall of ECW* (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The DVD broke sales records for the WWE, and that paired with persistently high ECW merchandising sales lead to an ECW reunion pay-per-view *One Night Stand* was broadcast live from New York’s Hammerstein Ballroom on 12 June 2005 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The event featured amalgamated ECW talent, and Heyman with Foley and Styles on commentary (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The storyline of the pay-per-view saw a show of classic matches between ECW alumni, followed by an invasion of ECW by the WWF’s combined forces of their internal brands Raw and Smackdown (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The climactic brawl of the event saw ECW triumph over the establishment. The event was a commercial and critical success, which spawned a sequel on 11 June 2006 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

The second *One Night Stand* event featured Rob Van Dam defeating WWE establishment hero John Cena for the WWE championship (Tanabe et al., 2022). With Heyman counting the pin, Van Dam was announced as the unified WWE and ECW champion; this would mark his first time as the primo uomo of a major professional wrestling company (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The WWE’s revival of ECW debuted on SciFi on 13 June 2006 in a 10PM time slot (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The program sought to try to replicate the feel and vibe of the original, but in the confines of the WWE branding system (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The challenges of producing this programming as a unique brand eventually gave way to a pre-taped ECW being part of Smackdown tapings, the rules of matches being standardized to the norms of the WWE, and the storylines being dictated through the same writing teams and editing processes of the other brands (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

Heyman helmed the brand until ECW's third and final offering under the WWE banner, *December to Dismember* in 2006 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Thereafter ECW would be used as a showcase program for emerging stars, and veteran performers who helped to groom them for the main brands. While WWE programming maintained that ECW was a co-equal brand with Raw and Smackdown and treated the ECW world title as the symbol of the leading man of the brand, it was regarded by ostensibly all fans and critics as a mundane experiment that never captured the spirit of the original. The brand would continue as its own program until 13 March 2008, when it was shuttered by the WWE (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

Throughout the 1990's and the 2000's, ECW was a persistent voice of underdog professional wrestling fans. Numerous reunion shows and storyline alliances of alumni have populated professional wrestling events and programming since the original promotions closure. Hardcore wrestling in the United States remains a very popular niche, with many of the fans being perfunctory adopters of the defiant counter-culture<sup>56</sup> ideology that made ECW famous. A fledgling upstart promotion, ECW became a household brand in professional wrestling with neither corporate money, nor a pre-made national profile. Many of the top stars of the professional wrestling boom of the 1990's and many of the top performers who emerged in the 2000's were at one point members of ECW. ECW also demonstrated and first mastered the demographic shift in professional wrestling programming which caused the boom of the late 1990's. Artistically, the cruiserweight style featured heavily on ECW programming led to the American debuts of many of the top stars ever of the style. These early highlights of a new in-ring style, with hard hitting, athletic, and technically sound action has proven to be a long-standing influence on major performers and promotions. The wild and bloody brawls popularized and/or normalized on the brand have proven to have staying power in promotions across the United States as well. The "deathmatch" subgenre has become a niche unto itself within American professional wrestling, with many popular promotions like Combat Zone Wrestling, Game Changer Wrestling and Juggalo Championship Wrestling among others, appealing to the same defiant, anti-establishment, die-hard wrestling fans which made ECW famous (Admin, 2021). In defiance of a century of tradition of presenting professional wrestling as family-friendly entertainment, a brand with barbed-wire in its logo became a

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<sup>56</sup> An examination of how counter-culture trends in 1990's pop culture led to and manifested with the professional wrestling boom of the 1990's may well warrant considerable academic study.

national wrestling company. Indeed, despite all conventional wisdom, ECW had a wildly outsized historical influence on professional wrestling.

#### 5.10.d Controversy Creates War: Eric Bischoff and the Birth of the Monday Night War

Following Flair's departure, WCW continued to struggle both financially and creatively. The absence of their top star was sorely felt as fans would loudly chant "We want Flair!" in the middle of shows, complicating the fact that he had been a heel prior to his exit (Oliva, 2021). Herd would anoint rising stars like Lex Luger, Sting, and Leon "Vader" White as his new leading men (Tanabe et al., 2022). Dusty Rhodes was reappointed as the head of WCW's booking committee and sought to rejuvenate the reeling brand (Oliva, 2021). Rhodes also sought to reinvigorate the promotion by pushing Sting as the top babyface of the company (Oliva, 2021). Following his feuds with Flair from 1989-1990, Sting would remain at or near this position for the remainder of the company's history and is widely considered to be WCW's all-time top babyface (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Rhodes would heavily push Paul E. Dangerously's "Dangerous Alliance," an expansive stable that originated in the AWA and would eventually follow Heyman to WCW and ECW (Oliva, 2021). The stable was populated with a patently absurd number of hall of fame talents. WCW also added a short-lived "Light Heavyweight Division" which sought to highlight the skills of smaller talents, though it was never made a focus of the programming (Oliva, 2021). On 3 January 1992, Herd was finally relieved of his position (Oliva, 2021).

WCW's direction would remain in flux for most of 1992. Management of the company went through numerous shifts, altering the creative focus and brand identity of the promotion. Herd was replaced by a Turner lawyer named Kip Frey (Oliva, 2021). Frey did not have a background in professional wrestling however he had the advantage of being a savvy businessman. Frey had been an intellectual property lawyer for Turner's legal division and had been a contributor to several major acquisitions and initiatives at Turner Broadcasting (Oliva, 2021). Prior to graduating Duke Law School, Frey had graduated from the highly regarded School of Cinema at Southern California University, giving him a unique set of skills to use on the television program (Kip A. Frey, 2022). Frey rebranded Turner's fabled 6:05 PM Saturday evening professional wrestling time slot as *WCW Saturday Night*, upgraded the Atlanta studio used to tape WCW programming, and hired famed announcer

Jesse “The Body” Ventura (Oliva, 2021). For the wrestlers themselves, Frey approached the stagnant in-ring product by creating a \$2,500 “match of the night bonus,” which would incentivize wrestlers with guaranteed contracts to work harder in the ring (Oliva, 2021). Luger would finally return and lose the world title to Sting at WCW’s SuperBrawl pay-per-view event on 29 February 1992 (Oliva, 2021; Tanabe et al., 2022). This would be Luger’s final appearance for the promotion until his shocking debut on the first episode of *Monday Nitro* (Oliva, 2021). To secure release from his contract, Luger had agreed to a one-year non-compete agreement with WCW (Oliva, 2021). Luger would find a loophole in this agreement by joining McMahon’s World Bodybuilding Federation, which was shuttered in its second year after installing steroid-testing policies and an exodus of talent in the wake of the Justice Department’s investigation and indictment of McMahon (Ojst, 2021; Oliva, 2021). Sting’s feud with the Dangerous Alliance was a critical success and popular with fans, though the promotion remained in a distant second and continued to lose money (Oliva, 2021). Despite his popularity with the talent roster, Frey’s successes would see him move on after only a few months (Oliva, 2021). Frey would go on to be a successful entrepreneur and a long-time professor at Duke University (Kip A. Frey, 2022).

Herd and Frey had been modern television executives who were placed at the head of a wrestling promotion. Their successor was a professional wrestling promoter who would struggle mightily to adjust to becoming a modern television executive. “Cowboy” Bill Watts was hired as the new executive Vice President of WCW (Oliva, 2021). Watts had been a successful no-nonsense promoter of Mid-South Wrestling and the UWF for several years. His promotion was wildly popular throughout the territory era, with solid wrestling, a consistent stream of new stars, and the opportunity for wrestlers to work every day (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Watts was also known as an uncompromising figure who issued brutal travel schedules, incontestable edicts, and purportedly miserly pay (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Watts attempted to bring his promotion into national prominence with stars like “Dr. Death” Steve Williams and Sting at the forefront, but the collapse of inflated oil prices in the mid-1980’s saw the revenue of Watt’s Oklahoma territory shrivel (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Watts eventually sold his territory to Jim Crockett Promotions for over \$2,000,000 (Thompson & Ross, 2019).

After some years of sabbatical, Watts had returned to WCW on a mission to restore his vision of no-frills, sport-like professional wrestling (Thompson & Ross, 2019). This meant no more amazing leaps from the top rope, and slow-paced matches (Oliva, 2021). A staunch traditionalist, Watts struggled to adjust to the evolving presentation of the art form. The television and production budget was slashed, creating a stale and dated presentation on television (Oliva, 2021). The style of matches that had been successful for Watts in the 1970's were now monotonous for the television viewers in the 1990's. Watts also swiftly made himself unpopular among the wrestlers, forcing massive pay cuts across the board (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Watts further alienated his roster by instituting fines for violating his brand of locker room etiquette which banned actions like playing cards, leaving the building once one's performance was done, or being seen in public with another performer whose character had an opposing ethical alignment (Thompson & Anderson, 2019). While Herd and Frey had fostered a talent-sharing partnership with Inoki's New Japan Pro Wrestling, Watts' prior dealing with them had caused them to distrust him and NJPW severed the relationship (Oliva, 2021). Watts also made every attempt to push his son Eric Watts as a top star, despite the skills and charisma of the younger Watts being widely panned by fans, critics, and other performers (Thompson & Anderson, 2019). This period also saw the co-promotion of the NWA and WCW brands as co-equal and often with schisms among the title holders. This brand confusion did nothing to build public interest. Despite having outstanding performers like Rick Rude, Sting, Ricky Steamboat, the Steiner Brothers, and Vader at the forefront, the organization creatively stagnated (Oliva, 2021).

Watts' tenure would not last long. Prior to his hiring as the head of WCW and an Executive Vice President for Turner Broadcasting, Watts had given an interview to Wade Keller of the *Pro Wrestling Torch* newsletter (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Watts launched into a profanity-laden racist and homophobic tirade in support of discrimination (Keller, 2019). Academic decorum prohibits the inclusion of most of the content of that interview in this study, suffice it to say that an Executive Vice President of a major media company whose tamest quote in the interview was, "That's why I went into business, so that I could discriminate." (Keller, 2019) These comments were shared by Torch columnist and Pittsburgh Post Gazette newspaper writer Mark Madden with baseball legend Hank Aaron (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The then-all-time leader in Major League Baseball home-runs had been a staunch civil rights figure during the American Civil Rights and Desegregation

movement (Bixenspan, 2018). Relevantly, Aaron also spent the majority of his career with the Milwaukee/Atlanta Braves, and his stature as a player and civil rights figure lead him to becoming an executive of the Atlanta Braves following his playing career (Bixenspan, 2018). Ted Turner had bought the Braves in 1976 and thus Aaron was a venerated black sport icon and a fellow Turner executive (Bixenspan, 2018). Watts attempted to defend his actions by citing his record as a promoter having pushed several black wrestlers as top babyfaces, most notably Sylvester “The Junkyard Dog” Ritter in Mid-South Wrestling and Ron Simmons in WCW as the first black champion of a major American professional wrestling promotion (Thompson & Ross, 2019). While this was true, Turner Broadcasting discontinued Bill Watt’s services in January of 1993 (Bixenspan, 2018). This effectively ended Watt’s final run as a top executive in professional wrestling.

WCW had now been through its third leading executive in a year, and the company had lost roughly \$10 million in that time (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). As a subsidiary in the Turner organization, WCW was considered a working class disgrace to the rising conglomerate (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Moreover, despite eroding public interest in the WWF’s presentation, WCW was a solid and distant second-place company despite its corporate backing, national television footprint, and talent-rich roster (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Turner would next turn to former AWA television syndication point man and by this point a self-proclaimed “third-string announcer” for WCW, Eric Bischoff (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Born in Detroit, Bischoff had grown up in America’s upper Midwest, settling in Minneapolis near the home of the AWA. Bischoff’s early career was marked with a variety of jobs including being a grassroots entrepreneur, male model, traveling salesman and a stint as a professional kickboxer (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). One of Bischoff’s endeavors with partner and future WCW manager Sunny Ohno, was titled “Ninja Star Wars” and led to a meeting with Verne Gagne’s AWA about possible advertising (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Gagne hired Bischoff as a syndication representative, and later promoted him to video editor, producer, and on-air announcer (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Bischoff would stay with Gagne throughout the slow decline of the AWA, and with the legendary wrestler-promoter’s blessing, scored an announcing position at the fledgling Atlanta-based promotion. Bischoff’s proposal for a new vision for WCW beat out longtime wrestling executives and fellow announcers Tony Schiavone and Jim Ross (Thompson & Ross 2019). Bischoff’s approach to



WCW would be the catalyst for an incredible corporate turnaround and would ignite the most popular period in American professional wrestling history.

Initially, Bischoff would serve relatively low in the Turner management structure, below WCW President Bill Shaw, WCW Executive Vice President Bob Dhue, and Junior Vice President Jim Barnett. Bischoff would overhaul production, creative, and perception of the company over the next three years (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). He initially closed a ticket-booking loophole that many wrestlers had been using to scam airlines and the Turner travel department. Bischoff also made the controversial move of canceling all WCW house shows (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). This flew in the face of conventional wrestling presentation, where television acted as an advertisement for house shows (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Instead, WCW was a television company that produced professional wrestling content, and since house shows were leading to financial losses due to poor attendance, they were abandoned until the television product could raise public interest (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). WCW would move their filming exclusively to Disney-MGM Studios in Orlando (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). These studios served as both a television studio and an attraction amidst the swaths of theme parks in the central Florida region (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). There the production soundstage served as a desperately needed upgrade to the production values of WCW's television shows, with vibrant crowds attending the events as an attraction amid their theme park experience (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018).

By 1994, Bischoff had risen up the ladder to replace Dhue as the Executive Vice President for WCW (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). He used his position to lobby for larger budgets to upgrade the product and sign big-name talent. Bischoff sought to acquire big name stars of professional wrestling who still had considerable brand equity but had left the WWF. To accomplish this, Bischoff enlisted Ric Flair as a recruiter who helped to bring in Hulk Hogan and Randy Savage to WCW (Flair, 2004; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). This makeover began to attract new sponsorship and catch the eyes of a growing fan base. Hogan's brand still held considerable name recognition and weight with advertisers (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Savage brought with him millions in advertising revenue because of his iconic association with the Slim Jim brand of jerky products (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Bischoff shattered pay-per-view records by having Hogan challenge Flair for the WCW championship at the 1994 Bash at the Beach pay-per-view (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018).

This match-up, a dream match of the late-1980's, succeeded in crushing pay-per-view records and demonstrating a misstep by McMahon by not having the bout headline Wrestlemania VIII. Bischoff periodically increased the number of WCW pay-per-view events until it was a monthly occurrence (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). This increase was because pay-per-view revenue was a 50-50 split with the providers, it was a massive source of income for WCW that did not go through the rest of the Turner machine (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Throughout 1994 and 1995, WCW steadily made gains against its deficits, by building its audience. WCW also expanded its international distribution and syndication during this period in lucrative deals (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Live events returned with the expanded star power and advertising revenue skyrocketed (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Bischoff also established the WCW Power Plant, an Atlanta-based training center for new and developing wrestlers in 1995; this would be a precursor to the WWE's own in-house development system and Performance Center (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). By late-1995, WCW was projected to become profitable for the first time in its history (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018).

In 1995, Bischoff had a one-on-one meeting with Ted Turner at the CNN Center in Atlanta (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). This meeting was a key turning point in the history of professional wrestling. Bischoff's successes with WCW had caught the mogul's eye and Turner had decided that WCW should enter into direct competition with McMahon's WWF (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Upon Turner's inquiry into how that could be achieved, Bischoff advocated, among other things, that WCW enter a prime time television slot on a Turner station to compete directly with the WWF's flagship Monday Night Raw program (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Turner acquiesced, Bischoff would shortly thereafter head the launch of WCW Monday Nitro, and the Monday Night Wars began (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The competition between these two Monday night prime time television wrestling programs fueled the late-1990's professional wrestling boom, which saw the zenith of professional wrestling as mainstream entertainment.

#### 5.10.e The New Generation: The Harts vs The Kliq

Through the early and mid-1990's, McMahon and the WWF struggled to find their way through the post-Hulkamania Era. Hogan's presence as the top star of the promotion, even when he did not occupy the top spot, created creative issues for the company. Hogan was

moving to a part-time schedule and his continued push as the top star despite fan sentiment turning away from him was a major cause of political unrest in the WWF locker room (Hart, 2010). In the wake of the Justice Department's steroid investigation, the WWF sought to divorce their brand from the chemically bloated physiques of the 1980's and sought out more streamlined competitors (Hart, 2010). This also coincided with a shift in popular culture away from the hair metal and shallow glitz of the 1980's.

The marketing campaign for this new crop of stars was titled the "New Generation." At the forefront of this new generation of talent was Bret "The Hitman" Hart. Hart's technical skills as an accomplished amateur wrestler harkened back to a bygone era of top professional wrestlers, but his neon pink and black presentation and fast-paced, action-packed style made him a hit in the professional wrestling ecosystem of the 1990's (Hart, 2010). Hart was first elevated to the top spot of the WWF by Ric Flair in 1992 and would be the stalwart performer for the company until late 1997 (Hart, 2010). In terms of ring craftsmanship, Hart was superior to Hogan, however, he never quite reached Hogan's level of drawing power (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The initial fad of professional wrestling popularity had passed, leaving a vacuum where the new gyration of performers had to recapture the interest of a played out public.

Perhaps the most memorable name to emerge from the WWF in this period was not that of a wrestler, but that of a television program. It was on 11 January 1993 that the WWF debuted *Monday Night Raw* on USA Network. Broadcast live from New York's Manhattan Center, Raw would become the longtime flagship program of the WWF (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The program has run weekly and continuously for 30 years at the time of this writing, generating over 1,500 episodes, and becoming synonymous with WWF/WWE programming (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). As the flagship program of the WWF, it would become the target of Ted Turner's counterprogramming in head-to-head competition through the late-1990's.

Hart's first title reign would come to an end at *Wrestlemania IX* in Las Vegas (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The event has been historically maligned by fans, critics, and performers, but nothing more so than the main event. Bret Hart had a highly anticipated main event match defending his title against Yokozuna, the sumo wrestler character of 300 kg Samoan Rodney

Anoa'i (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Yokozuna achieved victory when his manager, Harry "Mr. Fuji" Fujiwara, threw salt into Hart's eyes (Hart, 2010). Yokozuna had undergone a months-long build as an unstoppable monster and had won the title (Hart, 2010). Moments later, a protesting Hogan entered the ringside area, challenged Yokozuna, and defeated him in mere seconds (Hart, 2010). This match booking, suggested by Hogan, has been one of the most controversial in the history of professional wrestling, with Hart remaining bitter about his loss of his top spot to Hogan up to the time of this writing (Hart, 2010; Hogan & Dagostino, 2011). The subsequent pay-per-view event, King of the Ring 1993, saw Hogan lose the title to Yokozuna after being struck with a fireball by a Japanese photographer; meanwhile Hart put on an in-ring clinic featuring three outstanding matches and claiming the 1993 King of the Ring tournament championship, only to be attacked by Jerry "The King" Lawler to end the match (Hart, 2010). After the event, Hogan would leave the WWF until 2002, and Hart would continue to be the standard for performers in the WWF (Hart, 2010).

Throughout 1993-1996, the WWF muddled creatively, promoting a number of corny occupational gimmicks, including a garbage man, a hockey player, a country singer, an evil dentist, a clown, a government tax auditor, a monk, an alligator hunter, a repo man, a magician, a barber, a soccer player, a voodoo priest, a Viking, a Brooklyn tough guy, a plumber, a race car driver, several cowboys, a number of hillbillies, a teacher, and a baseball player, among others, were all presented as characters in the program (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). There were also questionable inclusions of unrealistic gimmicks like a man in a turkey suit (The Gobbledygooker), a Cape Fear-inspired maniac (Waylon Mercy), an ill-defined buffalo-man (Mantar), and the evil twin brother of Santa Claus (Xanta Claus) (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). These gimmicks failed to catch on with the audience of the 1990's. The cartoonishness that was fun in the 1980's failed to capture the cultural hunger for gritty and human characters in the 1990's.

It was, however, in the WWF during this era that the top stars of the late-1990's would begin to emerge. While the Undertaker would establish himself as the perennial top attraction of the promotion during this time, other wrestlers would emerge as top stars (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The shockingly athletic Rodney "Yokozuna" Anoa'i would emerge as a top star and the first member of professional wrestling's Samoan dynasty to claim the world title (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Kevin "Diesel" Nash emerged from being a 7ft wizard in

WCW to being an absurdly handsome trucker in the WWF, en route to a year-long run as WWF Champion (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Scott “Razor Ramon” Hall would emerge as a Scarface-inspired hit character and top star (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). After the collapse of the WBF, former WCW/NWA champion Lex Luger would receive an All-American push from the WWF, which raised his stock but failed to deliver a significant bump in public interest (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Tammy “Sunny” Stych emerged as a top star for the WWF as a ring valet for villainous fitness gurus the Bodydonnas, consisting of her longtime boyfriend Chris Candido and Tom Prichard (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Sunny was famed for her beauty, posed in a best-selling bikini spread in WWF magazine, was AOL’s most downloaded person of 1996 and would be historically regarded as “the first Diva” in WWF/WWE history en route to her WWE Hall of Fame induction in 2011 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). As a 150kg athlete who could perform spectacular aerial maneuvers, Scott “Bam Bam” Bigelow would emerge as a top star at this time, main eventing Wrestlemania XI against Lawrence “L.T.” Taylor and a number of other pay-per-views (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Sean “The 1-2-3 Kid” Waltman emerged as the most respected cruiserweight in the promotion, regarded by many as a litmus test for a wrestler’s performance ability (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Several members of the Hart family would come into their own in this period as well. The younger brother of Bret Hart, Owen Hart would emerge as a top performer in this period and was regarded by many throughout the rest of his life as one of the best in-ring performers in the world (Hart, 2010). Owen and Bret would engage in a memorable feud, which is a favorite of critics and fans, and saw Owen defeat Bret at Wrestlemania X (Hart, 2010). “The British Bulldog” Dave’s Boy Smith returned to the WWF in this period and established himself as a top singles star, alongside his brothers-in-law Owen and Bret Hart (Hart, 2010).

While Hart was the WWF’s top wrestler during this period, the next top star of the promotion would emerge shortly thereafter, and the two would become heated on-stage and locker room rivals. Michael “Shawn Michaels” Hickenbottom, had emerged from the San Antonio territory under the tutelage of Jose Lothario (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). The son of an army colonel, Michaels would emerge as a member of the babyface tag-team, “The Rockers/The Midnight Rockers” in the 1980’s alongside Marty Jannetty (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). The tandem would rise to fame in the AWA, claiming the tag-titles twice (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). The pair would also become magnets for backstage ire

throughout their run (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). The Rockers would eventually make their way to the WWF and become mainstays of the tag-team division (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). On a memorable segment on Monday Night Raw, Michaels betrayed his partner and threw him through a glass window (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). Michaels would rebrand himself as “The Heart Break Kid” and proceed to emerge as a top singles star (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). Michaels ability as an in-ring storyteller is regarded as arguably the best of all time (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). His rise would create conflict with Hart over who would emerge as the top star of the company (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Throughout this period Michaels would emerge as a top star and garner considerable political favor with McMahon, allowing him to flout the norms of backstage etiquette (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Michaels held considerable and growing backstage power during this era, thanks to the formation of his informal cadre of friends including Scott Hall, Kevin Nash, Sean Waltman, and a young Paul Levesque (Hart, 2010). These five would collectively be known as “the Kliq” (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Their purported political position and exploits during this time have been the source of a mind-boggling amount of controversy among performers, critics and die-hard fans (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

Michaels political power was bolstered by the emergence of his storyline bodyguard and tag-team partner Kevin “Diesel” Nash. Diesel and Michaels were pushed as the tag team “Two Dudes with Attitudes” (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). After having been Michaels bodyguard for 1993 and 1994, Diesel suddenly won the WWF title from Bob Backlund at an untelevised live event from Madison Square Garden (Tanabe et al., 2022). Backlund was in the midst of a late-career resurgence as the voice of old timey morality in the WWF, and had defeated Bret Hart for the title at the Survivor Series pay-per-view event the Sunday before with the assistance of Owen Hart (Hart, 2010). While Hart continued his simultaneous feuds with his brother Owen and Backlund, Diesel would reign as the primo uomo of the WWF for 51 weeks (Tanabe et al., 2022). During this time, Michaels entered into a feud with Scott “Razor Ramon” Hall over the WWF’s Intercontinental title (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). This title had been considered symbolic of the best in-ring performer in the promotion since the 1980’s, and Michaels and Hall would feud over it in a series of ladder matches at the Wrestlemania X and SummerSlam 1995 pay-per-view events (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). Michaels is credited with popularizing the ladder match in these bouts, however, the ladder match was brought to the WWF by Bret Hart, who defeated Michaels in one such

match at an untelevised live event in Portland, Maine for the same Intercontinental title (Hart, 2010). As singles champions Michaels and Diesel would reform their tag-team to defeat Owen Hart and Yokozuna for the tag-team titles, and for a short time hold all three men's titles in the WWF at once (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). Michaels would also have a much publicized affair with Sunny during this time, despite his being married and her being in a long-term relationship with one of Michael's WWF colleagues (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). Michaels, Waltman, Hall, and Nash would often only lose titles to one another during this period (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

Hart and Michaels would jockey for position as top star of the WWF during the mid-1990's. In 1996, the two met in the main event of Wrestlemania XII in an "Ironman Match" which lasted more than an hour (Hart, 2010). Michaels would unseat Hart as the primo uomo of the WWF and begin his first run as the company's top star (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). Elsewhere on the program, Hall and Nash had used their considerable stature as WWF stars to secure massive contracts from Turner's WCW (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The two would return to WCW in May 1996, and spark WCW's meteoric rise to becoming the temporary top promotion in the world (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Levesque would remain with the WWF (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). At an untelevised live event at Madison Square Garden on 19 May 1996, Hall, Michaels defeated a heel Nash in a cage match (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). This would be both Hall and Nash's last night in the promotion (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). After the match, Levesque and Hall entered the ring, despite antithetical ethical alignments, and all posed in the ring, hugged and took a bow (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). This "Curtain Call Incident" infuriated a number of traditionalists backstage and was viewed as a massive violation of kayfabe (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Despite professional wrestling having been legally established as a performance art since 1989, this open display that the performance was art and that characters of opposite ethical alignments were played by performers who were actually friends, was an outrage to the traditional mindset that such knowledge would destroy the audience's ability to suspend its disbelief. This served as a galvanizing moment in the criticism of Michaels and the Kliq in wrestling lore.

#### 5.10.f The Dirt Sheets

Tales of “the Kliq” were considerable fodder for the budding industry of professional wrestling tabloids at this time. A number of newsletters, magazines and websites would emerge in popularity during this period. Dissimilar to an older generation of publications dedicated to telling professional wrestling stories within the world of the play, this generation of periodicals would be largely dedicated to backstage gossip, salacious behavior, industry punditry, and criticism regarding matches and storylines. Within the industry, these publications are often viewed as a form of social media, with match grades and ratings being prized as means for performers to build their brands. The nickname “Dirt Sheets” became common, as these periodicals would often intersperse particularly harsh editorial views towards particular performers or executives without discerning news from opinion (Thompson & Prichard, 2016; Thompson & Bischoff, 2019). Within professional wrestling lingo, such derision is referred to as “burying” someone, and the nickname “dirt sheets” was derived from that (Albano et al., 2000). These publications often use wrestlers and backstage producers as anonymous sources however these insiders have often used the publications as an apparatus to spread negative gossip about rivals, stir up public discontent against others, and propagate falsehoods (Thompson & Prichard, 2016; Thompson & Bischoff, 2019). These publications are also maligned for creating toxic fandom, needlessly spreading constant spoilers, and a massive lack of objectivity (Thompson & Prichard, 2016; Thompson & Bischoff, 2019). Due to these factors, these publications have not been used as sources in this study. Popular periodicals of this kind include *Pro Wrestling Torch* from Wade Keller, *The Wrestling Observer* from Dave Meltzer, and *Pro Wrestling Insider* from Dave Scherer (Thompson & Prichard, 2016; Thompson & Bischoff, 2019).



## 5.10.g The Monday Night Wars and the Attitude Era

Following his 1995 meeting with Ted Turner and his mandate to compete directly with the WWF, Bischoff went to work creating a strategy to take on the proven brand name in professional wrestling (Bischoff & Roberts, 2007). Bischoff also sought to make the WCW product as different from the WWF presentation as possible (Bischoff & Thompson, 2018). Bischoff famously listed all of the aspects of the WWF and pursued an alternative approach (Bischoff & Thompson, 2018). Bischoff has discussed these meditations at length on his podcast *83 Weeks* with co-host Conrad Thompson. Bischoff performed a tape study of WWF television and proceeded to create the antithetical product (Bischoff & Thompson, 2018). Raw was a one hour program, WCW would be a two-hour program that started an hour earlier, allowing the advantage of the lead-in audience, typically programming the hour-shifting segment to be in the middle of a non-stop, all-action cruiserweight match (Bischoff & Thompson, 2018). In opposition to Raw being taped, Bischoff determined that Nitro would be live (Bischoff & Thompson, 2018). He would also use this in controversial fashion by reading the results of the taped Raw show just before the WWF would go on the air, while actively denigrating the matches and the performers (Bischoff & Thompson, 2018). Bischoff is widely credited with creating the two-hour live format that has become the standard of the professional wrestling industry since then (Bischoff & Thompson, 2018). To increase interest in these live television episodes, Bischoff would often leave “cliffhanger endings,” with live feeds being cut as action was building to a crescendo (Bischoff & Thompson, 2018). He would also make use of “overruns,” an extended period of roughly 5 minutes after the show’s set ending time where more action would take place; this served to steal viewers from the other promotion in the final segment and boost TNT’s next quarter-hour rating for the following program (Bischoff & Thompson, 2018). While the WWF was centered on Anglo-North America, WCW would create a more international brand (Bischoff & Thompson, 2018). While WWF presented a family-friendly product targeted at children, Bischoff would target adults (Bischoff & Thompson, 2018). While the WWF created a cartoonish universe clearly divorced from reality, WCW would seek realism (Bischoff & Thompson, 2018). These shifts in theoretical approach flew in the face of what had been working in mainstream professional wrestling for over a decade, and in some ways against the norms of the industry throughout its history. Nonetheless, Bischoff pursued this angle with aplomb. Bischoff created his SARSA formula for creating professional wrestling television content, an

abbreviation meaning: Story, Anticipation, Reality, Surprise, Action (Bischoff & Thompson, 2018). This formula would dictate much of Nitro's programming by creating "an air of unpredictability" (Bischoff & Thompson, 2018). Fans would be drawn into complex stories, elements of those stories would be left untold to build anticipation to reveals and collisions, reality would make the stories believable, surprises would keep fans guessing and the program unpredictable, and palpable action to successfully pay off the buildup (Bischoff & Thompson, 2018).

*Nitro* debuted on 4 September 1995 at the Mall of America in Minnesota (Bischoff & Roberts, 2007). Its final episode, dubbed "A Night of Champions" would run on 26 March 2001 from Panama City, Florida (Bischoff & Roberts, 2007). During this time, the Nielsen ratings between the two promotions would become the central prize of the industry. In total *WCW Monday Nitro* would produce 288 episodes, with 272 head-to-head with *Raw* (Meizner, 2022). Of those competing shows, 116 episodes of *Nitro* of them would best the *WWF Monday Night Raw* in the ratings (Meizner, 2022). *WCW* would log its first victory on 25 September 1995 and its final win on 26 October 1998 (Meizner, 2022). *Nitro* was also a two-hour live program at its inception, which it would maintain until most episodes were expanded to three hours from 1997 onward (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). From 17 June 1996 to 13 April 1998, *WCW* would have a streak of 83 consecutive weeks topping *Raw* in the ratings, sometimes by a factor of millions of viewers (Meizner, 2022; Bischoff & Roberts, 2007). *WCW* would become the top professional wrestling company in the world during this time. Throughout the run of the Monday Night Wars, Bischoff, McMahon and their respective staffs and rosters would engage in call-outs to one another, multiple legal battles, unapologetic talent poaching, and tap the best of their creative energies to best the opposition.

*Nitro*'s debut would send shockwaves through the industry. On that fateful September night, Lex Luger made a surprise debut at his former promotion, despite making multiple promises to the *WWF* that he would resign (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). This type of cloak and dagger negotiation would occur frequently during this period. Both organizations were heavily litigious at this time, with the *WWF*'s lead attorney Jerry McDevitt taking on the legal department at Turner Broadcasting throughout the time period (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Content from the programs would be the source of considerable legal wrangling throughout the late-1990's. Bischoff would sign away *WWF*

Women's Champion Debrah "Alundra Blayze" Miceli, and had her toss the WWF Women's Championship belt into the trash live on Nitro, in a historic moment of controversy which led to a lawsuit (Bischoff & Roberts, 2007). Both organizations would accuse the other of contract interference, intellectual property infringement, and bad faith business practices (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Upon the debuts of Nash and Hall, their look and mannerisms were so similar to their WWF characters that they were ordered to alter them after the WWF filed suit (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

With Turner bankrolling talent acquisition, Bischoff built one of the most talented and star-studded rosters in professional wrestling history. Most of the top stars with usable brand equity from the late-1980's and early-1990's were approaching the downslope of their career, while many of the top stars of the 21st Century were budding on the undercards (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Bischoff's push for international talent led him to creating the most critically acclaimed and talent-rich division of the era with WCW's famed Cruiserweight division (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Though the performers in this division were said to all be under the 225lbs limit (102kg), their in-ring craft involving gymnastic maneuvers, precise execution of complex series of moves, advanced technical grappling, and hard hitting would come influence the coming generations of wrestlers and raise the standard of ring craft from then on (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Many of these competitors had previously made their names in Mexico, Japan and Europe, or made their American debuts in ECW, but the massive reach of Turner's TNT and TBS networks would showcase a new style of wrestling to the American public (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The exposure of the cruiserweight style on WCW programming would forever and fundamentally change the presentation of American professional wrestling. Indeed, the utter spectacle of this style has led many to believe that the traditional American style is passé, in lieu of the new tradition. The luminaries of this division included Eddie Guerrero, Dean Malenko, Perry Saturn, Chris Benoit, Chris Jericho, Lance Storm, Rey Mysterio, Juventud Guerrera, Justin Thunder Liger, Alex Wright, Billy Kidman, Chaco Guerrero, La Parka, Psychosis, Shinjiro Omani, Ultimo Dragon, Yuji Nagata, Katz Hayashi, Shane "Hurricane" Helms, and Sean "Styx" Waltman (Kreikenbohm et al., 2022). Though this division is lousy with top stars from around the world, during its time, it was viewed as a secondary division to the WCW heavyweight title, which almost exclusively featured older performers whose in-ring performance was far less

dynamic than the cruiserweights (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Likewise, top stars of the heavyweight division earned multiple times more than their cruiserweight counterparts (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018).

The creative pressure of this era would see both promotions create the best, of at least the most memorable content, in their history. This creative arms race sparked massive public interest, eventually creating a second mainstream boom of professional wrestling. Moreover, many stars of this era would extend their brands beyond professional wrestling and into mainstream entertainment. This would set the blueprint for the generations of stars thereafter.

It has been said the interest in professional wrestling extends from the top down (Thompson & Ross, 2019). This means that the main events in professional wrestling tend to drive business. During the Monday Night Wars, this meant that major professional wrestling companies would abandon the pursuit of child fans who would spend their parents' money, and towards adults with disposable income. This racier, unpredictable presentation fits in with the cultural phenomenon of "crash TV," also called "car-crash TV" (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This brand of television is defined as "gratuitously shocking or sensational, or of embarrassingly poor quality in terms of dialogue, acting, etc." (Treguer, 2022). The term was coined by American journalist Donna Larcen in 1989 and would eventually make its way into major dictionaries (Treguer, 2022). The term is used to liken the horrified fascination of onlookers at the scene of an automotive accident to the viewers of salacious television programming (Treguer, 2022). Professional wrestling in the late-1990's embraced the mandate to gratuitously shock and abandon all pretense in what history would refer to as "The Attitude Era" (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Thompson & Prichard, 2016). At the helm of that era would be the emerging top acts of both promotions, with the rise of the nWo faction in WCW and the ascension of "Stone Cold" Steve Austin and a cadre of rising stars in the WWF (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Both Austin and the nWo would explode into the public consciousness in the late-spring of 1996 (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Thompson & Prichard, 2016). During that summer, Austin would begin a slow build to becoming the biggest star in the history of professional wrestling. While the Texas Rattlesnake was on the long path to the top, three former top WWF stars reinvented themselves in WCW and set the industry ablaze.

### 5.10.g.i The New World Order

Bischoff would become the architect of the nWo and set up the debut angle for the stable during May and June of 1996 (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The angle is widely believed to be that a group of top WWF stars invaded WCW to take over the promotion, while Bischoff maintains that their invasion angle was of former WCW stars taking revenge on the promotion that buried their talents as “The Diamond Studd” and “The Wizard of Oz” (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The first seeds of the nWo were planted when Scott Hall emerged from the crowd during a match on the 27 May 1996 edition of Nitro (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). He grabbed a microphone cut a promo including the famous lines, “You people, you know who I am, but you don’t know why I’m here.” He proceeded to cut a cryptic promo alluding to an ominous reason for his arrival in WCW. He capped the promo with, “You wanna go to war? You want a war? You’re gonna get one” (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018) The promo proceeded to call out WCW wrestler “Macho Man” Randy Savage, Ted Turner, and announcer “Gene” Gene Okerlund. Hall made numerous references to WWF parodies of WCW content, in an attempt to create the impression that his arrival might be part of a promotional invasion (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The Georgia-born Hall also spoke in a voice similar to his Tony Montana-inspired WWF character Razor Ramon, causing a lawsuit (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018).

The following week on the 20 May 1996 edition of Nitro, two notable things happened: Kevin Nash debuted on Nitro, and Nitro notched its first ratings victory over the WWF (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Meizner, 2022). Nash’s debut increased intrigue among fans, as another top WWF star had arrived in WCW. Nash also behaved similarly to his broadly defined character Diesel’s mannerisms. The WWF would sue WCW due to the likeness of the performances to WWF trademarked characters and against the perception that the WWF was invading WCW. These lawsuits would drag on for years and saw the WWF perform the rare move of recasting un-masked wrestlers by Diesel and Razor Ramon with Glenn Jacobs and Rick Bognar respectively (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Hall and Nash would immediately spike WCW’s ratings and the Atlanta promotion to win three straight weeks to close May and begin June 1996 (Meizner, 2022). Raw would win the ratings battle by 1/10 of a point on 10 June 1996, then lose every week for nearly two full years (Meizner, 2022). Nash and Hall’s arrival was big business for WCW. On the 16 June 1996 edition of Nitro where WCW began its winning streak, Bischoff would emerge as an on-screen character

(Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Bischoff would play a fictionalized version of himself, the leading executive of WCW (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Acknowledging this on television predated McMahon doing so by over a year (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). On the June 16th show, Nash would powerbomb Bischoff through a table live on Nitro (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018).

A six-man tag-team match, dubbed a “Hostile Takeover Match” was set for June’s *Bash at the Beach* pay-per-view event (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). This event was another turning point in the history of professional wrestling. The match pitted WCW heroes Sting, Lex Luger and “Macho Man” Randy Savage against Hall, Nash and their mystery partner (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Speculation ran rampant over the ensuing weeks about the identity of the third man. Anticipation was palpable leading into the event (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The main event match saw Nash and Hall gain the upper hand on WCW’s heroes by nefarious means, injuring Luger and seeing him lead out early in the match. As he had many times in the past, Hulk Hogan emerged into the performance area in the face of evil. After over a decade as the most popular and top drawing babyface in professional wrestling history, Hulk Hogan betrayed the fans and attacked his fallen friends Sting and Randy Savage. After Sting and Savage received a beating from the trio, Hogan declared on the microphone that the three men were now the “New World Order of wrestling!” and that “You fans can stick it!” (Hogan & Dagostino, 2011). Fans tossed trash into the ring, filling it in a memorable display of disgust for a fallen hero. This angle would be the biggest in the history of WCW.

The nWo became an iconic stable within professional wrestling. They engaged in gang-like behavior, leading group assaults, spray painting graffiti, and constantly gloating about their impending hostile takeover of WCW (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). At the August *Hog Wild* pay-per-view event, Hogan defeated Paul “The Giant” Wight for the WCW heavyweight championship, Hogan would then spray paint the letters “nWo” on the championship belt, which would become a symbol of the stable’s motivation to flout tradition (Hogan & Dagostino, 2011). Nash and Hall’s tag team would become known as The Outsiders and defeated the tag-team of Lex Luger and Sting in the semi-main event of that same event (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). The black t-shirt with “nWo” underscored with “New World Order” emblazoned in white in the font of apparent spray paint is one of the most iconic and

best-selling pieces of professional wrestling merchandise in history (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Following the merchandising model set by McMahon, anything that could be licensed to carry the nWo logo was, despite WCW's comparatively small licensing presence (Hogan & Dagostino, 2011; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Tapping into a cultural moment of anti-establishment sentiment, brought on by a cultural backlash against Reagan Era American conservatism, the nWo became anti-heroes (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Though they engaged in villainous behavior, fans loved them. The cool factor the Hall and Nash brought to the characters along with the pirate-television style broadcast interruptions which heralded their arrival on television created a massive sensation (Hogan & Dagostino, 2011). Catchphrases like "Too Sweet!" And "4-Life" became ubiquitous among fans who would sing along with the villains, or painstakingly write their catchphrases on their signs (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). With WCW's establishment defending the traditions of professional wrestling, it set up a feud symbolically between tradition and modernity. At the time WCW claimed a defensible lineage dating back to the NWA's dominance over the territory, and their heavyweight title claimed lineage back to Hackenschmidt. Many of the late-1990's leaned towards the modern sentiment of the nWo, rather than the historically expected traditionalist sentiment that many long-time industry professionals had anticipated (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017).

The nWo spend months running roughshod over the standard bearers in WCW including the Four Horsemen stable, longtime heroes, and most notably with Sting (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). With Hogan, Nash and Hall all as top performers and with Hogan and Nash increasingly limited in the ring, the stable was forced to grow to include wrestlers who could be active participants in matches throughout the program and take falls for the stable without jeopardizing the credibility of the top performers (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). However, the booking committee of WCW, and performers hoping to get in on the fastest rising trend of the decade, continuously expanded the group (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). By the end of the stable's run in WCW, the ranks of the nWo had swelled to over 43 official members, including valets, managers, NASCAR's Kyle Petty, and Dennis Rodman of the Chicago Bulls NBA franchise (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001).

From 1996-1997, Sting would undergo a character makeover and build up which would become an historic angle (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Sting's early career saw his iconic

look as a colorful hero with face paint, bleach blonde hair, a flat top haircut, sometimes complete with a “rat tail” (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). This early iteration of the character was the top babyface of the late 1980’s and early 1990’s for WCW. Fans colloquially referred to this version of Sting as “Surfer Sting,” in reference to the early 1990’s fascination with surfer culture (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). As the nWo storyline wore on, Sting would be constantly betrayed by allies who joined the ranks of the nWo (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The nWo would then cultivate suspicion among the WCW wrestlers that Sting was set to betray the promotion, employing an imposter (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). In the storyline, Sting’s longtime storyline friend and rival Lex Luger refused to believe that Sting had not attacked him, and that Sting would suffer a psychological break (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). At the *Fall Brawl* pay-per-view event where Sting, Luger, and their former rivals Ric Flair and Arn Anderson took on Hogan, Nash, Hall, and an imposter Sting in a War Games cage match, Sting proceeded to decimate the nWo single-handedly, then abandon his team (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Sting would declare himself a free agent on Nitro the following night (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). On the 21 October 1996 edition of Nitro, Sting returned for his final appearance on WCW Nitro in his original form (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Sporting a black trench coat and black and white face paint. Sting dispatched his imposter with a reverse DDT, dubbed the “Scorpion Death Drop,” and gave an ambiguous reply to an invitation to join the nWo (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Sting proceeded to leave and not speak on WCW television for over a year (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018).<sup>57</sup>

Sting’s character would be rejuvenated. Scott Hall, who had a reputation for being one of the brightest creative minds in professional wrestling, encouraged Sting to mimic Brandon Lee’s iconic performance in the 1994 action-horror cult classic *The Crow* (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). In the film, Lee stars as Eric Draven, a brooding Detroit musician who is brutally murdered alongside his fiancé the night before their wedding, who is resurrected to exact brutal revenge against the violent inner-city gang that killed him (IMDb, 2022). The dark tones, visuals, and presentation of the film became a massive part of 1990’s pop culture, particularly among the goth, punk rock and metal communities. Sting’s new character would grow long black hair, wear a black trench coat, paint his face white and

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<sup>57</sup> Sting’s character transformations throughout his career could make for a fascinating case-study of long-term character dynamics within the blurry canonical history of professional wrestling.



black, and lurk in the recesses of arenas (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). The darkness and trauma of the character were a hit with fans, and the year-long build to his return became WCW's hottest storyline. During 1997, Sting would periodically appear and menace the nWo with a baseball bat, save a fellow wrestler from a gang assault, or deliver horrific symbols of his desire for revenge (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Sting did not speak, and had no one speak for him, creating a suspenseful ambiguity about the character's motivations. Though the nWo would expand and aim to replace WCW as the TBS/TNT brand of professional wrestling, Sting appeared to be the only wrestler they feared (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The showdown between Sting and Hogan for the WCW title was built up for over a year to Starrcade 1997, on 28 December 1997 (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017).

These were the best of times for WCW. Revenues skyrocketed, merchandise was flying off of the shelves, the nWo had become a mainstream sensation, and WCW had completed an historic corporate turnaround. When Bischoff had taken over the promotion, it had posted a year-over-year net loss of \$10 million; by 1998, WCW had posted \$350 million in total revenue, with over \$50 million in profit (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). It had been the most dramatic turnaround of a professional wrestling company in history. Nitro became the top-rated cable program in the world. The 100th episode of Nitro aired on 4 August 1997, and featured Lex Luger defeating Hulk Hogan by submission for the WCW heavyweight championship (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Luger had debuted on the first episode of Nitro, and unseating Hogan as the world's champion drew much of the WCW roster out to the ring to celebrate with him (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Of course, Hogan would reclaim the title only days later at the *Road Wild* pay-per-view event, as he had the year prior (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). Bischoff was also now a member of his brainchild stable on-air, where he would become a mouthpiece and corporate powerbroker. The episode concluded with an image of an expressionless Sting brooding alone in the upper trusses of the arena.

The popularity of the nWo despite their villainous behavior was a major contributor to the rise of less ethically binary characters in professional wrestling. Austin too tapped into this moment of prevailing anti-establishment sentiment among the target demographic and engaged in wild, unruly, abrasive, and gratuitously violent behavior, to the unbridled delight of the fans. It was during this era that the historical ethical binary of professional wrestling became an ethical *spectrum*, where degrees of heroism and villainy became relative and

contextual within the story. This moral ambiguity and ethical complexity lead to a more sophisticated presentation of ethics in professional wrestling. This era was characterized by the rise of the “tweener” or the “cool heel” (Thompson & Prichard, 2018) Tweeners are characters that fall towards the center of the ethical spectrum, who are capable of playing either or both roles, depending on what the story requires. The term “cool heel” is used somewhat derisively to describe characters who seek the adoration of a hero but are aimed at attracting the cool factor of an anti-hero. As anti-heroes have become a ubiquitous part of American culture in the late-20th and early-21st Centuries, the “cool heel” has become extremely common, and lead many critics to lament that few modern heels truly seek real “heat,” defined as the violent ire and true hatred of the audience (Thompson & Ross, 2019).

#### 5.10.g.ii The Birth of Attitude

Meanwhile, the WWF spent much 1996 and 1997 in search of its identity. The characters on the program from top to bottom seemed to be behind the times. The fun, brightly colored, family-friendly presentation of professional wrestling in its traditional form failed to capture the audience’s interest. While the nWo<sup>58</sup> were committing gang assaults and tagging production trucks with spray paint, Bret Hart<sup>59</sup> was fighting an evil dentist and a pirate (Hart, 2010). Shawn Michaels’ assertion to the spot of primo uomo did little to shift business, because despite his incredible matches, his “boyhood dream” storyline and “white meat babyface” persona did not attract new fans (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). But it was in 1996 that WWF Vice President of Talent Relations (wrestling nomenclature for Human Resources), recruited and signed the three performers who would turn the tide of the Monday Night War: Steve Austin, Dwayne Johnson, and Mick Foley (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Austin and Johnson would stumble in their early days of the now-Connecticut-based promotion, before finding their creative voices (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Foley would use his commitment to character and reliability for innovative storytelling to make or elevate most of the major stars of the era (Thompson & Foley, 2022). They were also joined by two other star performers of the era: the WWF’s immovable standard bearer The Undertaker, who had spent the mid-1990’s as a top attraction with few unique storylines built around him; and Paul Levesque, a reliable-as-the-tides performer with a generational business acumen. With

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<sup>58</sup> The cultural importance of the now also warrants academic study.

<sup>59</sup> The influence of Bret Hart within the industry warrants academic study, both for his influence on the craft and as a case study for the use of nationalism in character development.

McMahon at the helm, five performers, a deep roster of hungry wrestlers, and a shift to a more contemporary artist presentation, the WWF would turn the tide of the Monday Night Wars.

Austin debuted as “The Ringmaster” and was paired with Ted DiBiase (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Austin was presented with the “Million Dollar Belt” and sported a blonde crew cut in the ring (A&E, 2021). Austin had been born and raised in Texas, and had been a successful amateur athlete, playing collegiate gridiron football at North Texas University (A&E, 2021). Austin would leave the gridiron and university to pursue professional wrestling, training under “Gentleman” Chris Adams in the waning days of WCCW (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Dubbed “Stunning” Steve Austin, the long-hair blonde Texan would grow into a respected performer in WCW, with a penchant for athletic matches and outstanding in-ring storytelling (Thompson & Ross, 2019). He would claim multiple titles in the promotion and work with top talents, including Ric Flair, Ricky Steamboat and Sting (Tanabe et al., 2022; Kreikenbohn et al., 2001). However, with little available in upward mobility, Austin was fired by WCW via Federal Express. Austin would join ECW as a bitter, straight-talking firebrand that became a hit with audiences. Austin caught the eye of the WWF and agreed to the character as a foot in the door for the WWF (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). After several months as the Ringmaster, DiBiase would leave the WWF to join WCW and the nWo, leaving Austin to reinvent himself (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Austin pitched the trash-talking heel “Stone Cold” character, which debuted in the late-spring of 1996 (Thompson & Ross, 2019). In the aftermath of the “Curtain Call Incident,” Levesque’s anticipated coronation as King of the Ring at the June pay-per-view was canceled due to backstage backlash (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Austin was given the spot and proceeded to change the professional wrestling industry with an offhand remark. After defeating and evangelical Jake “The Snake” Roberts in the finals of the 1996 King of the Ring tournament, Austin was presented with the titular crown and cut his famous “Austin 3:16” promo on Roberts and the promotion at large:

The first thing I want to be done is to get that piece of crap out of my ring! Don’t just get him out of the ring, get him out of the WWF. Because I proved son, without a shadow of a doubt, you ain’t got what it takes anymore! You sit there, and you thump your bible, and you say your prayers, and it didn’t get you anywhere. Talk about your

Psalms, talk about John 3:16.... Austin 3:16 says 'I just whipped your ass!' - "Stone Cold" Steve Austin (Thompson & Ross, 2019)

Austin 3:16 became the best-selling t-shirt in professional wrestling history (Thompson & Ross, 2019). One "Stone Cold" Steve Austin t-shirt would be sold every six seconds globally at his peak (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Austin reportedly received quarterly royalty checks in the mid-7-figures during his peak (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Austin would also take to raising his middle finger to others in an obscene gesture of defiance and derision to his adversaries (Thompson & Ross, 2019). At the Survivor Series 1996 pay-per-view event, Austin had his first televised match with Bret Hart, after months of build-up with Austin's pointed trash-talk towards The Hitman (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). The two clicked in the ring and the match was an instant classic (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Despite Austin's heel booking, persona, and behavior, audiences loved the foul-mouthed, straight ahead, badass, trash talk he delivered in his Texas twang (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Austin's rise in popularity followed a similar anti-establishment bent as the nWo, but instead of an invasion of a corporation by an ever-growing army of wrestlers, Austin was a working class loner hellbent on upsetting the status quo (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Austin's rebelliousness would make him a cultural icon of the 1990's and 2000's (Thompson & Ross, 2019).

Dwayne Johnson grew up in and around the professional wrestling business (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). He was the grandson of a pioneering Samoan territory wrestling legend, and the son of a pioneering black territory wrestling legend (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). As a child, the young "Dewey" Johnson was a familiar face backstage at professional wrestling events (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). A stellar amateur athlete he would play gridiron football for the University of Miami Hurricanes, winning a national title at the storied program in 1991 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). After failing to make an NFL or CFL roster, Johnson famously returned home with \$7 in his pocket (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). He asked his father, then-future hall of famer Rocky Johnson, to instruct him in the ways of the family business (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). After receiving basic training, in 1996 Johnson completed a series of three tryout matches with the WWF against the Brooklyn Brawler, Chris Candido and Owen Hart (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Johnson impressed and was assigned to USWA, by a farm territory for the WWF (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Wrestling as Flex Kavanagh, Johnson would excel quickly under the tutelage of "Doctor"

Tom Prichard, who is also credited with the in-ring training of Kurt Angle and Vince McMahon (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Johnson would make his WWF debut at the Survivor Series 1996 pay-per-view event as “Rocky Maivia,” a white meat babyface with his father and grandfather’s amalgamated names (Thompson & Ross, 2019). His early run would be marked with a significant push as a “blue chipper” and a classic professional wrestling hero, which fans absolutely hated (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Despite being given the prestigious intercontinental title, and swiftly improving ringcraft, Rocky Maivia floundered with fans (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Chants of “Rocky sucks!” Echoed in arenas throughout the country and one infamous fan sign read, “DIE ROCKY DIE” (Thompson & Ross, 2019). This fan backlash against the dated character led the WWF to turning Johnson heel and aligning him with the Nation of Domination stable, which had by this time become a black militant group headed by Ron “Faarooq” Simmons (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Johnson would cut a memorable promo on the 18 August 1997 edition of Raw to introduce his new persona:

I got three words, ‘Die Rocky Die.’ That’s the gratitude I get from you pieces of crap? For all my blood, my sweat and my tears? You know, hey, this isn’t about the color of my skin, this is about respect. I became the youngest intercontinental champion in WWF history, and what did it get me? In arenas across the country, I heard chants of ‘Rocky sucks!’ Well Rocky Maivia is a lot of things, but sucks isn’t one of them! - Dwayne “Rocky Maivia” Johnson, (Thompson & Ross, 2019)

Johnson would go on to adopt the moniker of “The Rock” (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). He would begin referring to himself in the third person constantly and developed a seemingly limitless number of catchphrases (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Under the mentorship of Simmons, Johnson would swiftly rise as a top, trash-talking heel (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). However, much the same as with Austin and the nWo, his charismatic trash-talking won over fans would sing along with his catchphrases in promos regardless of his position on professional wrestling’s ever-graying ethical spectrum. His moniker of “The People’s Champ” would play into his egomaniacal character too charismatic to deny (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). By late-1998, the Rock was the heel WWF Champion and in a blood feud with Austin (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). By Spring 1999, the Rock had turned babyface and his star rose like a rocket through 1999 and 2000, until offers for Hollywood film roles

began coming in droves (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). After his first three films consecutively opened as the #1 film at the box office, Johnson would become a full-time actor and become the top blockbuster performer in Hollywood (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

In 1997 four men would hold the WWF's intercontinental title: Austin, Johnson, the late Owen Hart and Paul "Triple H" Levesque (Tanabe et al., 2022). Levesque had been the longest tenured in the WWF at that time and would go on to have the longest active career with the company by a factor of decades. Levesque was a native of New Hampshire, where he would become a bodybuilding champion in his youth. He would attend Walter "Killer" Kowalski's wrestling school in Massachusetts in 1990 (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Levesque would debut on the independent circuit as "Terra Ryzing," a moniker he would use through his WCW debut in 1994 (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Later in the year, he was given a French aristocratic gimmick of Jean-Paul Levesque and adopted a French accent (Thompson & Ross, 2019). He would play some version of this blue blood character until 1997 (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Levesque would briefly be paired with "Lord" Steven Regal in a tag-team, before feuding with German wrestling star Alex "Wunderkind" Wright (Thompson & Ross, 2019).

At a chance meeting with McMahon, Levesque would attempt to sell his services to promote his childhood fandom (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Levesque was hired by the WWF in January 1995 and was made an American aristocrat named Hunter Hearst Helmsley from the grotesquely wealthy community of Greenwich, Connecticut (Thompson & Ross, 2019). The alliterative name alludes to Gilded Age moguls George and William Randolph Hearst and real estate billionaire Harry Helmsley. The "Connecticut Blueblood" character wore purple horse-riding pants and entered classical music with a series of valets, including numerous playmates (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Quickly upon entering the WWF, Levesque became close friends with the Kliq, including Michaels, Waltman, Nash and Hall. While Waltman, Nash and Hall left for WCW in 1996, Levesque and Michaels remained (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). After winning feuds with working class babyfaces Henry O. Godwin and Duke "The Dumpster" Droese, Levesque won the intercontinental title from "Wildman" Marc Mero on the 21 October 1996 edition of Raw (Thompson & Ross, 2019; Tanabe et al., 2022). Helmsley would drop the title to Johnson on the 13 February 1997 edition of Raw. Johnson and Levesque feuded repeatedly throughout 1997-2000 over both the

Intercontinental and later WWF title (Thompson & Ross, 2019; Tanabe et al., 2022). At the *In Your House 13: Final Four* pay-per-view event on 13 February 1997, Levesque's then real-life girlfriend Joanie Laurer debuted in the WWF by attacking Goldust's valet Terri "Marlena" Runnels (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Following a tumultuous upbringing, Laurer had graduated the University of Tampa with a degree in Spanish literature and been a Peace Corps volunteer prior to joining Kowalski's school (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Standing nearly 180 cm and weighing over 90kg, she cut a striking figure as Helmsley's female bodyguard (Thompson & Ross, 2019). On the 11 August 1997 edition of Raw, Levesque, Chyna and Rick Rude would aid Michaels in defeating Mankind, thus forming the original iteration of the D-Generation X (DX) stable (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). Rude would swiftly leave the group and join WCW, leaving Michaels, Levesque and Laurer as the original trio (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Hunter Hearst Helmsley was shortened to "Triple H" and the stable would become the WWF's answer to the nWo (Thompson & Ross, 2019). At the time of its inception, DX was a sophomoric pair of rebellious degenerates who constantly mocked and flouted authority (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Their catch phrase "Suck It!" accompanied a two-handed x-shaped or V-shaped over the groin, insinuating that the recipient perform oral sex (Thompson & Ross, 2019). This controversial gesture and catchphrase became a massive and iconic piece of pop culture, and a well-known sign of disrespect. Membership of this group would expand to include "Badass" Billy Gunn, "Road Dogg" Jesse James, and the promotion-hopping Sean "X-Pac" Waltman (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Waltman carries the distinction of being the only member of the nWo and DX to be inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame as a member of both stables (Melok, 2021). After Michel's injury and first retirement at Wrestlemania XIV, Levesque would become the leader of DX through its peak in 1998 (Thompson & Ross, 2019).

Foley's arrival in 1996 as an opponent for the Undertaker led to a series of high profile matches on pay-per-view (Thompson & Foley, 2022). His character of Mankind as a deranged madman with no fear of harm to his own body (Thompson & Foley, 2022). Foley would also enter into feuds with Michaels and Levesque during this time. Following a series of sit-down interviews with Jim Ross in Spring 1997, Foley turned face and revealed his three distinct characters, Mankind, Cactus Jack and Dude Love (Thompson & Foley, 2022). Foley would undergo the famous Three Faces of Foley story arc throughout 1997-1999 (Thompson & Foley, 2022). His character development and storytelling in the short and long term is

reputed to be some of the best in the history of the industry (Thompson & Foley, 2022). Foley's arc during this period is covered in a case-study in section 3.10 of this study.

As these new stars rose meteorically around him, the stalwart attraction in the WWF was The Undertaker. Mark Calaway was a native of Houston, Texas (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). At 208cm, the towering Texan was a standout athlete, playing collegiate basketball at Angelina College and collegiate football at Texas Wesleyan University (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). After leaving university, Calaway signed-up to wrestle under veteran Dan Spivey, who after receiving payment for training provided little in terms of instruction and left the area without notice or warning (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). With his impressive height, incredible balance and tremendous athleticism, Calaway would wrestle throughout the territories under a number of gimmicks, including Texas Red, The Master of Pain, The Punisher, and most notably "Mean" Mark Callous (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). As Callous, he would join the roster of WCW from 1989-1990, never finding a creative footing in the promotion (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). After considerable lobbying by longtime WWF executive Bruce Prichard, Calaway was hired by WWF in 1990 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). McMahon assigned him a gimmick he had sketched for years for "Kane The Undertaker," a towering figure in black and purple with a long trench coat and black hat in the visage of an undertaker in the American Old West (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Calaway took to the monster heel gimmick and made an immediate impact upon his debut at the Survivor Series 1990 pay-per-view event (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The Undertaker would roll his eyes back into his head, and deliver his signature "Rest In Peace," catchphrase in his deep bass voice, terrifying the family oriented audience (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The Undertaker would also come to master a number of death-related matches throughout his career, including container matches where opponents were forced into containers usually reserved for the dead like the body bag match, the last ride match (hearse), the buried alive match (grave), and his signature casket match (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). A year into his tenure, The Undertaker would capture his first WWF title by defeating Hulk Hogan at Survivor Series 1991, though he would return the title to Hogan six days thereafter at the *This Tuesday in Texas* pay-per-view event (Tanabe et al., 2022). The Undertaker cultivated mystique through a commitment to remaining in character in the performance area at all times and at nearly all times in public lead. The character's creative also included a number of supernatural elements, including an urn that was the source of his power, control over an



army of druids or a cult, the apparent power to control rain and lightning, and the ability to resurrect himself after being buried alive. Nicknamed “the Deadman” his finishing maneuver was named the Tombstone Pile Driver, as the iconic maneuver saw the necromancer kneeling over a defeated opponent, crossing their arms like a corpse at a funeral for a pinfall.

Throughout the mid-1990’s, the Undertaker was consistently paired with other physically imposing characters, including several weighing over 200 kg or standing over 200cm tall (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). One memorable storyline saw him do battle with his own doppelgänger at SummerSlam 1994 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). While he was considered one of the great character performers in the industry, more human characters like Diesel, Shawn Michaels and Bret Hart were officially the leading man of the promotion during this time. While backstage the politics between Hart and Michaels created upheaval in the lead-up to Wrestlemania 13, the Undertaker would be trusted as the steady hand to oversee the promotion (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Calaway would become the undisputed leader of the WWF locker room for the 1990’s and 2000’s (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Known as “the Conscience of the WWF/WWE,” his presence loomed large over the expectations of etiquette and professionalism, as he operated with the unqualified respect of his peers (Thompson & Ross, 2019). He had summarily rejected every offer to leave the WWF for WCW throughout this period (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). As the only universally respected locker room figure in the WWF, the Undertaker would rise to prominence during this time, as tumult between feuding stars took place in the WWF.

By 1997, Michaels and Hart were consistently at one another’s throats (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006; Hart, 2010). There were many reasons for their feud, but the consensus is that their shared desire to be the leading man of the WWF morphed from competitive professional rivalry to deep personal resentment as chiding and rumors erupted into pettiness, squabbles, arguments, and eventually physical fights (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006; Hart, 2010). The two men ostensibly staged professional wrestling’s equivalent to Joan Crawford and Bette Davis, but this time it took place in front of sold out arenas. Hart and Michaels would sit at the very forefront of the WWF in 1997 and set the tone for the era, but both would also swiftly slide into the supporting roles as the popularity of professional wrestling soared. Hart and Michaels would both form legendary stables that year, and they would both hold the WWF title twice (Tanabe et al., 2022).

At the nexus of their feud both backstage, and later on-screen, was Vince McMahon. McMahon was the ultimate decider of who would or would not be the leading man of the WWF, and his favor in the artistic decisions of the promotion was sought after by his two top stars (Thompson & Ross, 2019). It was also significant that during this time WWF writer Vince Russo had risen to prominence as the lead writer of WWF programming (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Russo was a master of “crash TV” and was attuned to the American cultural moment of the late-1990’s. With racy programming like *The Jerry Springer Show* and *The Howard Stern Show* at the apex of pop culture, the Long Island native sought to recreate the WWF in a wilder, raunchier, unpredictable format (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Russo’s indulgence of wild storylines full of twists and unforeseeable content would proceed to help redefine the WWF’s identity and push the fledgling promotion back into its position as the top organization in the industry (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Russo would create interwoven storylines throughout the programming, creating interesting throughlines for the audience to follow, adding storylines of significance to every segment, and cultivating a spontaneous atmosphere on the programming (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Russo has a legacy as a divisive figure among industry personnel, as his vision included very little in-ring action in its storytelling and relied heavily on violent, chaotic, or sophomoric melodrama (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018).

A notable early example of this boundary-pushing content came on 4 November 1996, when Austin invaded Brian Pillman’s home, only to have Pillman pull a massive revolver pistol on Austin; the screen would go black as a gunshot was heard (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Though it was a harbinger of things to come, the “Pillman’s Got a Gun Incident,” was widely panned by critics, fans and industry professionals (Thompson & Ross, 2019). It was also during this time that WWF characters and storylines were made more realistic, with performers often portraying factionalized versions of themselves and on-air stories increasingly becoming meta-commentary. This would lead to on-screen stories within the world of fiction referencing real-life rivalries between performers and personal issues from which performers were suffering. These storylines were and are criticized for being in bad taste, catering to the gossip-mongering of “dirt sheet” pundits, and exploiting performers’ real-life issues with addiction, divorce and physical injury (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Russo is also criticized for failing to create long-term arcs, instead racing through stories without cultivating tensions to build to a money-making promotional payoff (Thompson &

Bischoff, 2018; Thompson & Ross, 2019; Thompson & Prichard, 2016). In the WWF, Russo had the safety net of McMahon's expertise on how to construct money-making storylines that paid off over time, as well as the benefit of a team of expert agents and producers with palpable experience in the ring to create a satisfying in-ring product for the fans (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Thompson & Ross, 2019; Thompson & Prichard, 2016). With these failsafes in place, Russo would be a principle creative voice behind a golden era of WWF television from 1997-1999 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Without those fail safe in place, Russo would flounder in spectacular fashion (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018).

The latter months of 1996 saw Hart at the center of a bidding war between the WWF and WCW, with WCW reportedly offering \$9 million over 3 years for the WWF's top star (Hart, 2010). The WWF would counter with a massive 20-year, \$10 million contract, laden with incentives and perks (Hart, 2010). Hart resigned with the WWF in October of 1996, while his rivalry with Austin was beginning to turn heads (Hart, 2010). Michaels had reigned as WWF Champion for the bulk of 1996, but his run as the top star paled in comparison to the skyrocketing public interest in the nWo/WCW conflict on the other channel (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006; Hart, 2010). Michaels lost the title to "Psycho" Sid Eudy at Survivor Series 1996 (Tanabe et al., 2022). The 1997 Royal Rumble pay-per-view event from the Alamodome in Michaels' home city of San Antonio would be a pivotal event (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). Hart and Austin would be the final two men in the match (Hart, 2010). When a brawl between Mankind and Vader distracted the match's referees, Hart threw Austin out of the ring, only to have Austin attack him from behind and be called the winner (Hart, 2010). Michaels would reclaim the title from his former bodyguard in the main event match (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). It seemed to fans that Michaels and Austin would meet at Wrestlemania 13, but injuries, storylines and backstage politics would see them wait another year for that pivotal match. Michaels would report a potentially career-ending knee injury prior to the February pay-per-view event, and vacate the title (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). The veracity of his injury claims were immediately questioned by other wrestlers, many of whom believed it to be a ruse for Michaels to avoid losing the title to Hart in the ring in a rematch of Wrestlemania XII (Hart, 2010). These suspicions were deepened when some weeks later Michaels was reportedly cleared to wrestle and able to perform acrobatic maneuvers (Thompson & Prichard, 2016; Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). Michael's promo upon vacating the WWF title is a piece of professional wrestling folklore as it was seen as a

self-serving display of self-pity known by the tagline of “I lost my smile.” (Thompson & Ross, 2019) Michael’s mental health in this period was also in some doubt as he was in the midst of battling depression and painkiller addiction (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). Hart would claim the WWF title in a critically acclaimed bout against Austin, Vader and the Undertaker at the *In Your House: Final Four* pay-per-view event on 16 February 1997 (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). This was Hart’s fourth reign as WWF champion, tying him with Hogan for the most all-time at that point (Tanabe et al., 2022; Hart, 2010). Hart’s fourth title reign would come to an end the following night on Raw, when he was struck over the head with the chair by Austin and pinned by Sid (Hart, 2010). This led to Austin and Hart being paired together for a submission match at Wrestlemania 13 (Hart, 2010).

The weeks leading up to Wrestlemania 13 were pivotal in professional wrestling history. The backstage politics of the WWF and their implication on who would hold the WWF championship would become the centerpiece of the rise of the company in this era. On 3 February 1997, Raw expanded to two hours to combat WCW’s two hour format (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The aforementioned 17 February 1997 episode of Raw saw a promotional invasion angle of ECW invading the WWF, which had been teased at the pay-per-view the night before (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The WWF would have storylines fending off invasions from both ECW and the fledgling NWA in 1997 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The 10 March 1997 edition of Raw displayed a much-needed update to the set and production of the flagship program of the WWF (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The program was rebranded as *Raw is War*, featuring the “*War Zone*” second hour with additionally chaotic programming (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). A new set, new heavy metal opening music, and expanded pyrotechnics were also on display.

Though Bischoff had already created a similar storyline in WCW regarding his own role and become a member of the nWo, the WWF’s version of this storyline would see Vince McMahon emerge from behind the announcer desk and become the most reviled villain in professional wrestling history. On the 17 March 1997 edition of Raw, this storyline began with a furious Bret Hart in the ring (Hart, 2010). After having been granted a rematch in a steel cage with Sid, Hart was again on the cusp of claiming his fifth title, when the Undertaker slammed the cage door on Hart, allowing Sid the victory (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). After the match, as the cage was being disassembled, McMahon entered the ring in the

guise of his decades old role as a commentator and attempted to interview Hart (Hart, 2010). Hart shoved McMahon to the ground and grabbed the microphone for a shocking, profanity-laden promo that would alter the course of professional wrestling history (Hart, 2010). This was a swift and dramatic departure from Hart's consummate good guy character from years past. The character of Bret Hart would air several of the grievances of the performer Bret Hart to kick off an era of the WWF that would often seek to blur the lines between the world of kayfabe and reality. Hart said:

Frustrated isn't the goddamn word for it! This is bullshit! You screwed me!  
Everybody screwed me! And nobody does a goddamn thing about it! Nobody in the building cares! Nobody in the dressing room cares! There's so much god damn injustice around here! I've had it up to here! (Gestures to his head) Everybody knows it! I know it! Everybody knows it! I should be the World Wrestling Federation champion! Everybody just keeps turning a blind eye! (To McMahon at ringside) You turn a blind eye to it! I've got that Gorilla Monsoon, he turned a blind eye to it! Everyone in that god damn dressing room knows that I'm the best there is, the best there was, and the best there ever will be! If you don't like it, tough shit! - Bret "The Hitman" Hart, (Hart, 2010)

Shortly thereafter, an extended brawl broke out between Sid, the Undertaker, Hart and Austin, with Michaels lurking around the performance area (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

Wrestlemania 13 would be a pivotal point in WWE history. The Undertaker would defeat Sid to claim the WWF title in the night's main event (Tanabe et al., 2022). However, the Submission Match between Austin and Hart would be the most historic bout on the card (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The match itself was a massive hit with fans and a colossal critical success, garnering several "Match of the Year" awards (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The match was refereed by former UFC Superfight Champion Ken "The World's Most Dangerous Man" Shamrock, who had recently joined the WWF roster (Hart, 2010). Hart would defeat a bloodied and battered Austin who passed out while in Hart's signature Sharpshooter submission hold (Hart, 2010). This match would feature a rare "double turn" where both characters involved changed their ethical alignments (Hart, 2010). This is considered to be a very difficult creative move, as it must capitalize in growing audience

sentiments and flip the emotional narrative. At the end of the match, Hart continued his assault on an unconscious Austin, to the dismay and anger of the crowd (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Austin's popularity had been steadily growing despite his heel persona, and his valiant effort in defeat had earned the respect of any fans who were not yet onboard (Hart, 2010). Hart, a consummate good guy, attacking the helpless man was sacrilege to everything he purportedly stood for (Hart, 2010). Shamrock intervened and suplexed Hart to the mat to stop the assault (Hart, 2010). Shamrock then goaded Hart to fight him, but Hart subtly backed down from Shamrock, showing cowardice for the first time in his career (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Hart left, victorious but with his good guy character forever tarnished in the eyes of fans, kicking off the most successful heel run of his career (Hart, 2010). Austin would hit his finishing Stone Cold Stunner on a referee and walk to the back on his own rather than be carried (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Austin's uncompromising gallantry in this moment finally made him a hero in the eyes of fans, and his ensuing babyface run would catapult the industry to new heights (Hart, 2010).

Throughout the rest of the year in the WWF, Hart, Michaels, the Undertaker and Austin would all engage in intersecting feuds at or near the top of the WWF cards (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). In the upper-mid-card, a memorable feud between Mankind and Hunter Hearst Helmsley would elevate Triple H from a one-note aristocrat to a viable threat, and elevate Foley to the position of beloved lovable multi-faceted everyman (Thompson & Foley, 2022). Hart and Michaels both founded their own stables (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006; Hart, 2010). Michaels would engage in sophomoric chicanery with his real-life friends Triple H and Chyna in the DX stable (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). Hart would recruit his brother Owen, his brothers-in-law Jim Neidhart and Dave's Boy Smith, and their longtime friend Brian Pillman into the anti-American/pro-Canadian Hart Foundation stable (Hart, 2010). Though still solidly behind WCW, which was in the midst of a year-long build-up to a bout between Sting and Hogan, public interest began to grow in the new wilder version of the WWF (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The transition into a new style of narrative became the biggest story in the professional wrestling world that year. At the core of this transition was Austin's rebellious babyface character, and McMahon's emergence as a heel (Thompson & Ross, 2019).

The evolution of the WWF would continue throughout the year. Austin would continue his feud with the Harts throughout the year (Hart, 2010). Bret Hart underwent knee surgery, and would be out of action for several months, so the tandem of Dave's Boy Smith and Owen Hart would be instrumental in this feud (Hart, 2010). Smith and the younger Hart would win the tag-team titles together, while simultaneously holding the inaugural European and Intercontinental titles (Tanabe et al., 2022). On the 12 May 1997 edition of Raw, Hart derided Americans for their "attitude," in a heel promo, which further embedded the branding of the WWF's new identity; he would also chide Michaels as an unapologetic degenerate and airing his resentment for Michaels not meeting him at Wrestlemania 13 (Hart, 2010). On the 19 May 1997 edition of Raw, Michaels and Hart exchanged disparaging promos of one another, with Michaels famously giving an unscripted insinuation that the married Hart had had an affair with Tammy "Sunny" Stych, an ironic accusation given Michael's famous long-term infidelity with the female performer the previous year (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006; Hart, 2010). Austin and a returning Michaels would claim the WWF tag-team titles from Smith and Hart on the 26 May 1997 edition of Raw, only to have them summarily stripped on 6 June 1997 (Tanabe et al., 2022). Prior to the 6 June 1997, Michaels and Hart got into a fight in the locker room, leading to Michaels walking out and being stripped of the titles (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006; Hart, 2010).

Several weeks later, Austin and Dude Love would win the tag-team titles anew (Foley & Thompson, 2022). Austin would win the Intercontinental title from Owen Hart at SummerSlam 1997 on 3 August 1997, however a botched piledriver in the match broke Austin's neck (Thompson & Ross, 2019). The injury may have proven disastrous for the WWF as their swiftly rising star now had a career-threatening injury and could not wrestle for months (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Austin would forgo surgery and engage in short matches and non-wrestling segments throughout the remainder of the year (Thompson & Ross, 2019). This was also built into a storyline where McMahon and WWF management would deny Austin the right to compete in the ring. Austin's injury would lead him to being stripped of the tag-team and intercontinental titles by McMahon (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). On the 22 September 1997 edition of Raw, Austin and McMahon had a memorable confrontation in the ring over Austin being denied medical clearance to compete (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Austin was menacing a quartet of supposed NYPD officers, while McMahon implored Austin to accept his medical suspension, and to "work within the

system” (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This proved to be a pivotal moment in the storyline and in professional wrestling, Austin would respond by cutting a brief promo, hitting McMahon with the Stone Cold Stunner on McMahon for the first time, and was arrested in the ring to the uproarious approval of the thousands at Madison Square Garden (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Current AEW commentator and former WWE Talent Executive Jim Ross said of the incident and ensuing feud:

I had a feeling it was gonna be significant, and it was. It was as significant as any angle that we had done on Raw maybe ever. Vince getting involved with physicality, it put that marriage together, and let’s not forget what that attitude between McMahon and Austin meant. It was huge. You couldn’t have booked it any better because it was perfect. The timing was good, Vince’s character was spot-on. Best heel we had in the Attitude Era. It kept the babyface in jeopardy – the babyface being Austin. He knew Vince was gonna get retribution because Vince had more soldiers in his army than Austin did, which again, puts the babyface in jeopardy and outmanned, shall we say. Austin loved that. It showed him overcoming all obstacles, and it worked out really well I thought. - Jim Ross (Thompson & Ross, 2019)

Michaels and Hart’s enmity towards one another festered during mid-1997. Hart would be elevated back to WWF champion for the record 5th time by defeating the Undertaker, thanks to an accidental chair shot by Michaels in his capacity as guest referee (Hart, 2010). Hart had spat on Michaels during the match, prompting Michaels to swing the chair, accidentally striking the Undertaker (Hart, 2010). Hart’s struggles with his place in the WWF during this time were recorded in the documentary *Hitman Hart: Wrestling with Shadows* (Hart, 2010). In the documentary, Hart openly laments his concerns about the emerging mature themes in professional wrestling, and his consternation that his heroic character was being characterized as outdated (Hart, 2010). Hart created his television character in 1997 around the idea that by vilifying American fans and the degeneracy of American wrestling characters, he could remain a hero in his native Canada and internationally, while playing a villain in the United States (Hart, 2010). This plan was largely successful (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). McMahon decided in late-summer 1997 to rescind the 20-year contract he had made with Hart and aided the former top WWF star in negotiating a contract with WCW for over \$2.8 million per year over three years (Hart, 2010). Hart was the reigning WWF champion at the



time, but his place as the leading man of the WWF was in doubt (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Austin's popularity had skyrocketed, and Michaels was emerging as an edgy heel in this period (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). While Hart held the title, Michaels main evented the next three consecutive pay-per-view events (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). Michaels engaged in a classic brawl to a No Contest with the Undertaker at *In Your House: Ground Zero* on 7 September, unseat Hart's brother-in-law Dave's Boy Smith as European champion at the UK-only pay-per-view *One Night Only* on September 20, and defeated the Undertaker in the "Hell in a Cell" cage match with help from a debuting Kane (played by long-suffering character wrestlers Glenn Jacobs) at *In Your House: Badd Blood* on 5 October (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001; Thompson & Prichard, 2016). At these same respective events, the champion Hart performed in the semi-main events defeating "The Patriot" Del Wilkes, a disqualification win over the Undertaker, and a tag-team flag match victory of Wilkes and Vader (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001; Hart, 2010).

Hart's deal with WCW was finalized and he would be set to leave the WWF (Hart, 2010). However, he was the reigning WWF champion, and the incident with Miceli trashing the WWF women's title belt had caused unease among the WWF brass (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). McMahon asked Hart to lose the title to Michaels at the Survivor Series 1997 pay-per-view event in Montreal (Hart, 2010). Hart refused to lose the title in his native Canada (Hart, 2010). Hart's contract stipulated he had reasonable creative control of his character in the final 30-days, so his acquiescence could not be legally enforced (Hart, 2010). McMahon had agreed to allow the match to end in a No Contest and have Hart vacate the title on Raw the following night (Hart, 2010). Hart's refusal was viewed as unprofessional by traditionalists and was largely seen as a violation of the norms of the industry, particularly a rule of etiquette that states that a performer should lose their finals matches while leaving a promotion to elevate the wrestlers who remained (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The personal enmity between Hart and Michaels had also festered to an untenable point.

On 9 November 1997, over 20,000 fans unknowingly came to the Molson Centre in Montreal to witness professional wrestling infamy (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). While accounts of who masterminded the plan differed wildly, what would occur is a "title swerve," wherein the finish of the match would be changed without Hart's knowledge and Michaels would be awarded the title (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006; Hart, 2010). While the belt itself is a prop

in the story, it symbolized the fictional championship that drove the characters of the WWF forward, to avoid it being devalued in WCW, McMahon sought to change the script without one of the actors knowing. This was tantamount to a director and leading actor deciding that tonight Hamlet lives and stabs Fortinbras as he enters. Since Hart was a collegiate champion in freestyle wrestling, it was prohibitively unlikely that Michaels could simply beat him in a fight, particularly as Hart had family members both backstage and in the front row to aid him (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006; Hart, 2010). The subterfuge saw Michaels arrange to have Hart in a choreographed submission hold, and for referee Earl Hebner to end the match after a phantom tap out (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006; Hart, 2010). This conspiracy was played to perfection live on worldwide pay-per-view to the shock of fans and industry workers. McMahon came to ringside and called for the bell himself to bring blame for the incident onto himself and protect an apparently dumbfounded Michaels (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006; Hart, 2010). The storyline would explain that knowing of Hart's plan to go to WCW, McMahon changed the script without Michaels knowledge (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This was the story Michaels echoed to Hart's family while lying through his teeth backstage that night (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006; Hart, 2010). This was the most significant serve since Stanislaus Zbyszko had taken the title from Wayne Munn by force in 1925. The Hart family was outraged, outraged roared in the locker room as wrestlers were aghast at what they had seen (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006; Hart, 2010).

The incident came to be known as "The Montreal Screwjob" (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006; Hart, 2010). It sits in professional wrestling lore as a moment when kayfabe was absolutely abandoned and the nature and politics of professional wrestling came into full view (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Survivor Series 1997 had seen the WWF debut their new "scratch logo" replacing the "block letter logo" that had been in use since the promotion's creation in 1983 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The old logo and the old style of hero were both seemingly unceremoniously abandoned in Montreal, establishing the new norms of the promotion. This incident solidified McMahon as the most hated villain in professional wrestling (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Several performers walked out of the WWF in protest of these actions, but virtually all returned, including Owen Hart (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Despite his fairly transparent pleas of ignorance, Michaels was roundly derided by fans, performers, and the wrestling media for his role in the incident (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006; Hart, 2010). Michaels would use the heat from the incident to catapult

himself and his stable as the top villains in the WWF (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006; Hart, 2010).

After arenas and fan signs erupted with the outrage declaration of “You screwed Bret,” McMahon gave a sit-down interview with Jim Ross on the 17 November 1997 edition of Raw where he famously said, “Bret Screwed Bret.” Russo and McMahon would parlay the controversy into casting McMahon as an overbearing boss, with Austin as the avenging blue collar hero beating up the oppressive jerk running his workplace. Hart gave his side of the story on an episode of Canadian sports show *Off The Record* on 3 December 1997, Hart would tell his side of the story (Hart, 2010). Hart’s side of the narrative would be further demonstrated when *Hitman Hart: Wrestling With Shadows* debuted in 1998, to critical acclaim and festival awards. Hart would go to WCW and be the fourth man in the debacle of a climax to the Sting-Hogan feud at Starrcade 1997 (Hart, 2010; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Hart would languish in WCW under less-than-stellar creative over his time with the promotion (Hart, 2010; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The finish of the match would be replicated at Survivor Series 1998 with the consent of all parties, as McMahon aided the Rock in defeating Mankind (Foley, 1999). In WCW, Hart would take part in his over-replication, this time incredulously winning his 7th and final world title against Goldberg when Roddy Piper declared a false submission victory (Hart, 2010; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018).

On 15 December 1997, McMahon would permanently leave his place at the announce table to become an on-screen character (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). He would open that evening’s edition of Raw with a declaration that the WWF had forever changed its way of doing business. This moment marked a massive shift in the history of professional wrestling artistically, as it would introduce the Attitude Era in storylines. This was also a moment widely lamented by traditionalists as it openly and publicly acknowledged that professional wrestling was a performance art. The resistance to this admission was somewhat undermined by the written and choreographed nature of professional wrestling that had been public knowledge for decades. An article in the *New York Times* from 1930 noted that professional wrestling had been placed under “theatrical classification” (Chow et al., 2017). In the 2013 book *The Squared Circle: Life, Death, and Professional Wrestling* scholar David Shoemaker quoted a 1932 issue of *Literary Digest*, “maybe the Chief reason that wrestling is popular is

that it is not wrestling” (Chow et al., 2017). While traditionalists feared that professional wrestling being acknowledged as anything other than sport would kill public interest in watching. The fact that McMahon’s public declaration came just prior to a colossal and permanent spike in the popularity of professional wrestling serves as evidence against the assumption. The Kayfabe Conspiracy came about because of a false assumption about public interest. Indeed quite the inverse seems to be true. In 2013 the IOC voted to eliminate wrestling from the Summer Olympics Programme due to low public interest (Grohman, 2013). Meanwhile, within weeks of the IOC vote, the WWE staged Wrestlemania 29 sold out MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, with over 80,000 in attendance, and more than one million people paying \$59.99 to watch live on pay-per-view (Grasser, 2013). On that fateful Raw in 1997, McMahon said:

It has been said that anything can happen here in the World Wrestling Federation, but now more than ever, truer words have never been spoken. This is a conscious effort on our part to open the creative envelope, so to speak, in order to entertain you in a more contemporary manner. Even though we call ourselves Sports Entertainment because of the athleticism involved, the key word in that phrase is entertainment. The WWF extends far beyond the strict confines of sports presentation into the wide-open environment of broad-based entertainment. We borrow from such program niches like soap operas like *The Days of Our Lives*, or music videos such as those on MTV, daytime talk shows like *Jerry Springer* and others, cartoons like *The King of the Hill* on Fox, sitcoms like *Seinfeld* and other widely accepted forms of television entertainment. We in the WWF think that you in the audience are quite frankly tired of having your intelligence insulted. We also think that you’re tired of the same old simplistic theory of ‘good guys vs bad guys.’ Surely the era of the superhero who urges you to say your prayers and take your vitamins is definitely passé. Therefore, we have embarked upon a far more innovative and contemporary creative campaign that is far more invigorating and extemporaneous than ever before. However, due to the live nature of *Raw* and *The War Zone* we encourage some degree of parental discretion as relates to the younger audience allowed to stay up late. Other WWF programs on USA such as Saturday morning *Live Wire* and Sunday morning *Superstars* where there’s a 40% increase in the younger audience, obviously, however, need no such discretion. We are responsible television producers who work

hard to bring you this outrageous, wacky, wonderful world known as the WWF. Through some 50 years, the World Wrestling Federation has been an entertainment mainstay here in North America and all over the world. One of the reasons for that longevity is as the times have changed, so have we. I'm happy to say that this new vibrant creative direction has resulted in a huge increase in television viewership, for which we thank USA Network and TSN for allowing us to have the creative freedom, but most especially, we would like to thank *you* for watching. *Raw* and *The War Zone* are definitely the cure for the common show. - (McMahon, 1997)

This roughly two-minute speech was something of a promo masterwork. McMahon acknowledged in no uncertain terms that professional wrestling was a performance art, while casually and matter-of-factly associating the WWF with many of the most popular pop culture brands of the time. This type created a branded content pattern that would make a modern algorithm blush. After harkening to brands with similar content to the WWF, McMahon promised a racy product with an intriguing allusion to parental discretion, while also touting the family-friendly programming on weekend mornings for children. McMahon successfully advertised the WWF's main programs on USA Network, and their Canadian partners at TSN. Multiple times, he promised a more contemporary product. He derided his former leading man Hulk Hogan's brand of superhero babyface; this also took a jab at Hogan as the top star of the opposing brand. This was one of the most important and influential promos in the history of professional wrestling.

The trajectory of the WWF going into 1998 was now set. Austin would be returning to form to take on Shawn Michaels at Wrestlemania XIV (Kreikenbohm, et al., 2001). Michaels would be formidable, as he had the DX stable at his side (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Backing Michaels was "Mr. McMahon," the real-life Vince McMahon's on-screen character (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). McMahon's on-screen character would become a legendary sadistic egomaniac with absolute power over his entire company, with the exception of the wily rattlesnake "Stone Cold" Steve Austin. The elements of this feud were ripe for those already watching professional wrestling, but this storyline would catapult the WWF back into the lead in the Monday Night Wars and to the forefront of American pop culture thanks to the incipient arrival of controversial boxing phenom "Iron" Mike Tyson (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

### 5.10.g.iii Breaking the Streaks - The Coronation of Austin and the Fall of Goldberg

By late-1997, WCW was nearing the zenith of its creative and monetary achievement (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Sting and Hogan were set for a showdown at Starrcade 1997 (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). The public interest in Sting's new character had skyrocketed with the use of mystique to drive record merchandise sales without a single match or promo that year (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The final pay-per-view event of 1997 would be the biggest event in the history of the promotion, and it would be the first in a series of missteps that saw the promotion's popularity begin to wane (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). The event itself would be the most watched WCW pay-per-view of all time, drawing an estimated 700,000 pay-per-view buys at a \$29.99 price point, alongside 17,500 onlookers in attendance at the MCI Center in Washington DC (Thompson & Bischoff, 2008). Despite the strong numbers, the event was a failure in the eyes of critics, fans, performers and industry professionals (Thompson & Bischoff, 2008).

Despite featuring an eight-match card lousy with top-drawing talent, the show failed to deliver for the audience. The card saw strong performances in singles matches with respective pairings of Eddie Guerrero and Dean Malenko in the opener, and Perry Saturn and Chris Benoit in the 4th match; this quartet would famously walk out of WCW in early 2000 and join the WWF as The Radicalz faction (Thompson & Bischoff, 2008; Thompson & Schiavone, 2017; Kreikenbohm et al.,2001). Future college football Hall of Famer and All-Pro Super Bowl champion Steve "Mongo" McMichael would put over another former NFL player, Bill Goldberg, who was in the early stages of his ascension into becoming WCW's leading man for 1998 (Kreikenbohm et al.,2001). Veterans of Verne Gagne's AWA would occupy five of the six slots in matches at the top of the card. In 1997, "Diamond" Dallas Page had emerged as a top babyface in WCW and would be one of its most popular performers throughout the remainder of the promotion's history (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Page defeated former AWA champion Curt Hennig for the WCW United States title (Tanabe et al., 2022). In the semi-main event, pro-nWo executive and announcer Eric Bischoff (with Scott Hall at his side) made his in-ring debut against fellow announcer and AWA alum Larry Zbyszko (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). On the line in this match was the storyline control of WCW programming (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Fresh off of the Montreal Screwjob the month prior, Bret Hart was the referee for the bout, which ended in a disqualification victory for Zbyszko (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018).

The main event match between Sting and Hogan proved to be an artistic and creative failure (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). After more than a year of build-up, the match failed to deliver on the lofty expectations of fans (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). A “fast count” by an nWo-supporting heel referee was set to be at a pivotal point in the match, but this spot was botched with Hogan pinning Sting at a regular speed count (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The cause of this is disputed, though referee Nick Patrick insisted that he purposefully botched the count at Hogan’s request (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). This met with Hart, still at ringside as the timekeeper for the bout, to refuse to ring the bell ending the match (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Sting would submit Hogan some moments later (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The WCW roster would join Sting in the ring to celebrate, though the luster of his mystique and the angle was somewhat lost (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Sting broke his television silence with an unscheduled cry of, “Mamasita” into the camera during the celebration (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Bischoff would later lament on his *83 Weeks* podcast that Sting had been dealing with personal issues causing him to underperform (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Bischoff would also openly discuss his realization that tremendous momentum had been lost by WCW at this time (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018).

Creative momentum had shifted into the WWF’s favor by the *Royal Rumble* 1998 pay-per-view event (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The WWF had secured a major coup by retaining Mike Tyson for several appearances throughout “Wrestlemania Season,” the period from January to late-March/early April where the WWF/WWE built up to their signature event (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Tyson had been a pop culture icon since his meteoric rise to becoming the youngest heavyweight boxing champion in history at 20 years old (Tyson & Solomon, 2017). Tyson had become one of the most controversial figures in sports history following his title loss and prison stint in the early 1990’s (Tyson & Solomon, 2017). After being released from prison, Tyson would unleash a vicious, chaotic public persona (Tyson & Solomon, 2017). He would reclaim the heavyweight title, before losing it to longtime rival Evander Holyfield (Tyson & Solomon, 2017). In their infamous June 1997 rematch, Tyson would be roundly behind on the scorecards and proceeded to bite off chunks of Holyfield’s ear, leading to a disqualification defeat and a one-year suspension from boxing (Tyson & Solomon, 2017). During his suspension, Tyson would split with longtime promoter Don

King, after revelations of massive embezzlement from the flamboyant promoter, leading to lawsuits between the two and Tyson eventually delivered a viciously beating upon King (Tyson & Solomon, 2017).

Hoping to court Tyson as a promotional client during this time, McMahon hired Tyson for a series of dates in the WWF (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). On 18 January 1998, Tyson appeared at a number of televised events for the WWF, including the *Royal Rumble* (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Austin would win the Rumble match itself, last eliminating the Rock, who Austin had bested for the Intercontinental championship at the December 1997 *In Your House: D-Generation X* pay-per-view event, only to have dastardly Mr. McMahon return the title to the Rock (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This was Austin's second consecutive Royal Rumble win, but this year he was a massively popular babyface (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Michaels defeated the Undertaker in a Casket Match for the WWF title with help from Kane, who would lock his storyline brother inside the casket and set it ablaze in the middle of the sold out San Jose Arena (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Notably during that match Michaels was thrown over the top rope with his back striking the edge of the casket (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). This crushed one of the discs in Michaels back and herniated two others (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). The WWF champion now had a broken back leading into the biggest pay-per-view event of the year.

The following night on the 19 January 1998 edition of Raw, a major announcement featuring Mike Tyson was teased throughout the show (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). In the final segment, Tyson and his entourage joined McMahon in the ring (McMahon, 1998). McMahon had announced that Tyson would be in the ring at the 29 March Wrestlemania XIV event but had not explained in what capacity when his announcement was interrupted by Austin's entrance music (McMahon, 1998). Austin sauntered to the ring, which was swiftly filled with WWF officials in anticipation of chaos (McMahon, 1998). Austin proceeded to insult and threaten both McMahon and Tyson prior to challenging Tyson to a physical confrontation (McMahon, 1998). In his promo Austin said:

I respect what you done, Mike. But you're out here calling yourself 'The Baddest Man on the Planet.' Right now, you've got your little beady eyes locked on the eyes of the world's toughest son of a bitch! I could beat you any day of the week, twice on



Sunday. Do I think you could beat my ass? Hell no. Do I think I could beat your ass? Why hell yeah! I don't know how good your hearing is, but if you don't understand what I'm saying, I always got a little bit of sign language, so here's to ya! - "Stone Cold" Steve Austin (McMahon, 1998)

Austin raised both of his middle fingers directly in Tyson's face (McMahon, 1998). Tyson proceeded to shove Austin violently, causing a brawl between the two (McMahon, 1998). Tyson's entourage and WWF officials struggled to pull the brawl apart (McMahon, 1998). The crowd chanted for Austin, and an incensed McMahon for the first time tried to physically attack Austin for the first time (McMahon, 1998).

The mainstream sports media latched onto the story, giving the Wrestlemania event massive publicity. Bischoff recalled, "When I heard that they got Mike Tyson, I knew we were in trouble" (Bischoff & Thompson, 2018). On the 2 March 1998 edition of Raw, Tyson would again appear, and this time he would be challenged to a fight by Michaels (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The ring cleared of their respective entourages and Tyson, clad in a WWF shirt, squared up to the WWF champion (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Just as it seemed that fists were about to fly, Michaels ripped off Tyson's WWF t-shirt to reveal a sleeveless D-Generation X t-shirt underneath (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Tyson had aligned himself with DX and McMahon in opposition to Austin (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). McMahon would name Tyson as a secondary ringside referee, titled the "special enforcer" (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This role was an homage to Muhammad Ali's role as a ringside referee for the original Wrestlemania 14 years earlier.

On 29 March 1998, Austin and Michaels met in the ring for the WWF title (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). At the end of the match, the referee was incapacitated when Austin hit Michaels with his Stone Cold Stunner finisher, prompting Tyson to double-cross D-Generation X and perform a fast count to seal Austin's victory (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This face turn from Tyson delighted the live fans at the sold out FleetCenter in Boston (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Austin presented Tyson with an Austin 3:16 t-shirt. Following the match, an outraged Michaels confronted Tyson regarding his betrayal, only to have the former heavyweight champion knock him out with a single punch. On commentary, Jim Ross made the historical call, "Austin is the champion! Stone Cold! Stone Cold! Stone Cold! The Austin

Era has begun! Stone Cold's eight-year journey has been culminated!" (Thompson & Ross, 2019)

This would be a changing of the guard in the WWF. Michaels would begin a four-year hiatus from performing wherein he would overcome drug addiction, find religion, and significantly restore his mental health prior to relaunching an historic comeback (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). Hart and Michaels, the pillars of the WWF through the mid-1990's were gone (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Austin would be the first of four first-time world champions crowned in 1998, joined by Kane, the Rock and Foley (Tanabe et al., 2022). The following year would see Triple H, The Big Show, and McMahon himself claim the title (Tanabe et al., 2022). During this period, the Undertaker would remain seated as the de facto elder statesman of the WWF, further entraining his position as the most respected performer in the industry (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

On the 30 March 1998 edition of Raw, Austin was presented with a new version of the WWF title belt, retiring the "Winged Eagle," which had represented the WWF's leading man from Hogan's title defeat to Andre the Giant until Austin (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The new edition of the belt would find its way into Austin's possession six times in the next three years (Tanabe et al., 2022). Despite the creative success, and the sale of Wrestlemania XIV to over 700,000 viewers, Nitro was still winning the ratings war (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). However, for several months the ratings had been inching close together (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). On 13 April 1998, Raw broke WCW's 83-week-long streak of victories but promised that the long-simmering feud between Austin and McMahon would finally explode in a match (Thompson & Prichard, 2016; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Austin had agreed to tie one arm behind his back and was summarily attacked by former tag-team partner Dude Love (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

Following the debacle at Starrcade 1997, Sting was stripped of the WCW title, only to win it back following a two-month vacancy at the SuperBrawl III pay-per-view event on 22 February 1998 at the Cow Palace in San Francisco (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The title would then hop to Randy Savage at the 19 April 1988 Spring Stampede pay-per-view event in Denver (Tanabe et al., 2022). Then back to Hogan on the 20 April 1998 edition of Nitro (Tanabe et al., 2022). Each of these matches featured considerable outside interference from

various members of the nWo (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). WCW's presentation of these high-profile matches had begun to become predictable (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017).

Falling behind the WWF, Bischoff and WCW turned to their fastest-rising star in a generation, Bill Goldberg (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Goldberg had been a Tulsa-born football star that had joined WCW's Power Plant in 1997 (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). A wildly intense and charismatic presence, Goldberg cut an imposing figure with a look similar to Austin's. Goldberg rose to prominence through a seemingly endless series of very short "squash matches," where he would quickly dispatch his adversaries with his twin finishers, the spear (a football tackle) and the jackhammer (a vertical suplex bodyslam) (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). His entrance of walking through the backstage area while epic classical music theme "Invasion" played, and fans would rhythmically chant "Gold-berg!" (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018) Upon entering onto the stage he would stand in flying sparks and breathe smoke on his way to the ring (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Despite having little skill at in-ring storytelling, Goldberg was a hit with fans and was arguably WCW's last truly successful star (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Goldberg was also notoriously rough in the ring with his performance partners due to his lack of experience, leading to numerous and infamous stories of injuries caused by Goldberg in matches (Thompson & Anderson, 2019). Goldberg was built through "The Streak" storyline, wherein he was undefeated in his entire professional wrestling career (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The Streak began on 22 September 1997 with a victory over Bill "Hugh Morris" Demott (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). On the aforementioned 20 April 1998 edition of Nitro, Goldberg defeated Raven to win the United State title and extend his streak to 75 victories within the storyline (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Goldberg would peak on the 6 July 1998 edition of Nitro from the Georgia Dome in Atlanta (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Over 40,000 spectators paid a gate of nearly \$1,000,000 to fill the stadium in the city of Turner's headquarters (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). While Goldberg was internationally popular at this point, his collegiate football career at the University of Georgia and his professional season on the Atlanta Falcons made him an ostensive hometown hero for the Atlanta fans (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). On this edition of Nitro, Goldberg would secure a title match by defeating Scott Hall in a United States title defense (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). In the main event, Goldberg would defeat Hogan for the WCW title, making him a double champion with a storyline record of 108-0 (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Goldberg's title win was Nitro's first ratings victory over the WWF in

over two months (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Though WCW won the night, the WWF brass took it as a sign of desperation that Goldberg's crowning title win was given away on free television (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This perception is disputed by Bischoff, who is always quick to remind doubters that WCW was a television company that produced wrestling content, so pay-per-views were a secondary goal to television viewership (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018).

Just six days later, WCW would hold the *Bash at the Beach* pay-per-view event on 12 July 1998 (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The event would be the second-highest grossing pay-per-view of WCW's history, drawing an estimated 580,000 buys (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). This event saw Goldberg extend his streak to 109-0 by defeating Curt Hennig in the semi-main event (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). In the final match of the show, Hulk Hogan teamed with Chicago Bulls star Dennis Rodman to defeat "Diamond" Dallas Page and Utah Jazz star Karl Malone (Thompson & Schiavone, 2016; Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). A month earlier, Rodman had been a crucial third man (behind Michael Jordan and Scottie Pippen) in the Bulls NBA title victory over Malone's Utah Jazz (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Rodman's and Malone's participation in this angle throughout the later rounds of the NBA playoffs had created considerable controversy in the mainstream sports media (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Less than a month later, WCW would host the *Road Wild* pay-per-view event from the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally on 8 August 1998, which saw a similar conclusion at the top of the card (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Goldberg was now far and away the most popular wrestler in the promotion, but again he would occupy the semi-main event on the pay-per-view, winning a battle royal against the nWo (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The main event saw the tag-team of "Diamond" Dallas Page and *The Tonight Show* host Jay Leno defeat Hogan and Bischoff in a tag-team match (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). This match had been part of a co-promotional effort with WCW and NBC that included an nWo takeover of the *Tonight Show* set (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018).

By the summer of 1998, the combined professional wrestling ratings on a given Monday night would have not less than a 4.0 for either program, commonly venturing above 5.0 and sometimes over 6.0; each ratings point equated to roughly equating to 1.1-1.2 million viewers (Meizner, 2022). Professional wrestling was the hottest thing on cable, typically topping the weekly cable ratings (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Both the

WWF and WCW divided their programs into contiguous programs listed as one-hour separate episodes to occupy additional positions in the ratings rankings (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This led to professional wrestling occupying the top five hours on cable for many weeks in 1998 (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

A merger between Turner Broadcasting and Time Warner was contractually finalized on 10 October 1996 (Evans, 2021). At the time, no one knew that the mortal blow against WCW had been struck, or that the promotion would slowly bleed out over the next four and a half years (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). This would be the final and most profitable year for WCW (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The death of WCW has been a topic of debate, conjecture, scholarship and controversy throughout modern professional wrestling history. For 1996, 1997, and early 1998, WCW had been the top professional wrestling promotion in the world; in March 2001 it would be out of business (Evans, 2021). Following a series of creative missteps, ill-timed injuries, overextension of content, budget cuts, and the increasing imposition of creative limitations by the standards and practices department of Corporate media, WCW's popularity would collapse (Evans, 2021; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Meanwhile, without massive amounts of Corporate bureaucracy interfering in the process of creating professional wrestling content, McMahon's WWF would continue to skyrocket in popularity behind its young and emerging stars (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Indeed it was the toxic cocktail of the merger between the corporate oversight of unseasoned overseers put in place during the merger of Turner Broadcasting and AOL-Time Warner, and the prevailing perception among those television executives who believed that professional wrestling was working class entertainment unfit for the cable networks upon which it was the top-rated program (Evans, 2021; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018).

The meteoric rise of WCW was not without controversy at Turner. Bischoff recounts that the upper echelons of executives at Turner Broadcasting wanted rid of WCW even before his tenure had begun (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The skyrocketing fortunes and popularity of the brand would not sway the internal perception among executives that professional wrestling was working class entertainment, and its prominence was lowering the perceived tone of the TBS and TNT networks (Evans, 2021; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Time Warner had been a publicly traded company since 1992, and with that came the fiduciary

duty to maximize stock prices for shareholders at all times (Evans, 2021; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). This meant to produce content for consumers that could be monetized, while not creating anything so controversial as to affect stock prices, lest it cause a lawsuit by shareholders (Evans, 2021; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). This paradigm affected WCW enormously. While the “crash TV” professional wrestling of the late-1990’s was adored by fans, its popularity came with massive backlash from religious and parents’ groups hoping to censor the violent, sexual, beer-swilling, profanity-laden and suggestive content (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). This affected WCW more than the WWF because the issues with Time Warner shareholders *did* matter to Turner executives above Bischoff (Evans, 2021; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Meanwhile, at the time, Vince McMahon was running a family-owned media and licensing juggernaut and had no one to answer to but USA Network, which had emerged as the most-watched channel on cable thanks to WWF programming (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The adult themes of WCW and the nWo had once propelled the promotion to the forefront of the industry, but Bischoff’s creative powers were now neutered by Turner censors (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Profanity was banned, as were wrestler’s calling one-another “stupid” (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). McMahon continued to push the envelope on the other channel, with segments that included the Kai En Tai stable attempting to cut off the genitals of Sean “Val Venis” Morley with a katana, only to see him saved by John Wayne Gary, or crucifixions on live television, or matches where victory could only be achieved by setting your opponent on fire (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). WCW and the WWF had now reversed positions in their creative approach, where in 1996 WCW was formerly the contemporary racy product with the WWF as the passé kid-friendly brand, the inverse became true in 1998 (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018).

WCW also began to struggle financially, despite 1998 being the most profitable year in the company’s history (Evans, 2021; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). However, following the success of WCW in 1996-1997, Turner again mandated that Bischoff create an additional live broadcast to boost WCW’s former home network of TBS (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Bischoff was mandated to create *Thunder*, a live Thursday night professional wrestling program (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). With the top stars of WCW on limited-dates contracts for the year, many top stars (most notably Hogan) would not be required to perform on the new program (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Bischoff has long contended that the impetus for Bret Hart’s massive contract was that the Canadian star was meant to anchor the

Thursday night programming (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). By early 1998, Hart had joined the nWo and more or less taken on a supporting role despite being the reigning United States champion (Hart, 2010; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Bischoff has been quoted as saying that by this point, Hart had lost his motivation to perform (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Thunder would be a massively expensive production (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). With Nitro's expansion to 3 hours, this additional programming would balloon WCW's weekly prime-time cable footprint to five hours on the Turner networks (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Overexposure of talents became an issue (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Nevertheless, WCW now had a "B-show" which during its initial run drew respectable ratings in its early run, with over four million viewers, though by the end of its first year these numbers were halved (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Bischoff has admitted that the distraction of fending off the issues with the merger prevented him from direct oversight of the artistic direction of the programming (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). WCW had maintained its alternating booking committee structure throughout its run as the top promotion in the world (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). However, with several wrestlers now having million-dollar contracts with "creative control" clauses which allowed them to dictate their own on-screen stories, the process was becoming muddled (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018).

Creative stumbles began to emerge for the Atlanta-based promotion (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Warrior Warrior, the legal name of the former Jim Hellwig who had performed in the WWF as The Ultimate Warrior, returned to professional wrestling on the 17 August 1998 edition of Nitro (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Having signed a lucrative contract, Warrior had been brought to the company to oppose Hogan and create a oWn stable representing the "One Warrior Nation" (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). This story is universally panned by critics and fans, and only resulted in 3 matches for the Warrior on WCW television (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The story would extend to the 1998 edition of the WCW *Halloween Havoc* pay-per-view event on 25 October (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). This event has been pilloried as an abject disaster for WCW. Hogan and Warrior would have a rematch of their well-received match from 1990's *Wrestlemania VI* in the semi-main event of the 1998 pay-per-view (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). This performance is widely considered one of the worst professional wrestling matches of all time, winning awards for the worst match of the year from critics and fans, with some publications calling it the worst match of the decade. Unfortunately, the magnitude of that match's artistic failure paled in comparison

to the other issues throughout the program. The overbooked show featured 12 matches and ran for over three and a half hours, as several segments ran long on time and WCW had a limited amount of time on the pay-per-view feed (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The Hogan-Warrior segment was between a fading heel and an aging babyface, and it went over 22 minutes (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The main event pitted WCW's two most popular babyfaces against one another with "Diamond" Dallas Page challenging Goldberg (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The two had what is widely considered to be the best match of Goldberg's entire career, but the pay-per-view feed was cut mid-match due to time constraints (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). This caused colossal backlash among fans, demands for refunds came in droves, the match was shown the next night on Nitro, but severe damage to the goodwill of fans was done (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). That 26 October edition of Nitro would be the final victory Nitro ever had in the Monday Night Wars (Meizner, 2022).

Goldberg's run in 1998 would come to a screeching halt when booking committee member Kevin Nash was chosen to end The Streak at Starrcade 1998 (Evans, 2021). Nash had been the de facto leader of the "nWo Wolfpac," a splinter group of the nWo that wore red and black (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). This sub-stable had opposed Hogan's black and white "nWo Hollywood" (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). The new stable debuted on the 4 May edition of Nitro with Nash, Savage, and Latino wrestling legend Konnan (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Though the faction would eventually see thirteen members filter through the murky changing alliances of the sub-stables, by mid-1998 the stable included Nash, Hall, Konnan, Savage, Curt Hennig, Rick Rude, and former nWo opposition heroes Sting and Lex Luger (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). The former Diesel has long been reputed to have booked himself to defeat Goldberg to benefit his own brand to the massive detriment of WCW's business overall; an allegation which Nash denies (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Nash won a three-ring, 60-man battle royal titled *World War 3* at the eponymous pay-per-view event on 2 November 1998 at the Palace at Auburn Hills in Detroit before over 17,500 spectators (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Goldberg did not perform on the pay-per-view (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Indeed, Goldberg's first pay-per-view main event that was not cut off during his run as champion was at Starrcade 1998 (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). Starrcade 1998 would draw over 16,000 attendees to the MCI Center in Washington DC on 27 December 1998 (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Nash would defeat Goldberg using his



jackknife powerbomb finisher after several wrestlers attacked Goldberg during the match, including Nash's tag-team partner Scott Hall wielding a cattle prod (Evans, 2021; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The match and the event was a major let-down to fans and critics who believed that ending Goldberg's streak at 173-0 seemed premature (Evans, 2021).

Also, on this event Ric Flair and Eric Bischoff squared off in a match for the storyline presidency of WCW (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The feud between them had been built off of real-life issues between WCW's former top star and the promotion's boss (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). This storyline included a fake heart attack for Flair, Bischoff being attacked by Flair's young son Reid (who was a youth AAU national champion), and Bischoff's character forcibly kissing Flair's wife (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Bischoff would win the bout after striking Flair with a foreign object given to him by nWo stablemate Curt Hennig (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The following night on Nitro, Flair would cut a massively acclaimed promo in the ring, stripping to his undergarments and betting his career on a bout against Bischoff with a 90-day term as WCW President on the line (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Flair would win the bout and WCW's storyline presidency (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018).

The 4 January editions of Raw and Nitro would be a decisive moment in the Monday Night Wars. Nitro was live and had a lead-in advantage on 8-9PM EST (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Raw had been taped on 27 December 1998 (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). As had often been the case with taped episodes of Raw, announcers on Nitro spoiled the results. Announcer Tony Schiavone said this on air while Hogan's music played in the background: "If you're even thinking about changing the channel to our competition, fans do not. Because we understand that Mick Foley, who wrestled here at one time as Cactus Jack, is going to win their world title (scoff) That's gonna put some butts in the seats" (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017).

This comment reverberated through professional wrestling history. Immediately upon Schiavone saying this, more than 600,000 viewers immediately changed the channel to watch Foley, by now a wildly popular folk hero among wrestling fans, achieve his dream by defeating Mr. McMahon's "Corporate Champion" The Rock with the help of fellow top babyfaces DX and Steve Austin (Thompson & Foley, 2022). The feel good moment of the

sock puppet-wielding everyman wrestling star dedicating the title win to his children after overcoming the forces of evil in the WWF with the help of his friends was antithetical to Nitro's historically bad conclusion.

Nitro had returned to the Georgia Dome, the site of their massive success some months prior. With roughly 40,000 spectators on-hand, Goldberg was set for his rematch with Nash (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Unfortunately, it was decided that Goldberg would be arrested in the storyline due to a false accusation of stalking by Miss Elizabeth (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). In Goldberg's place, Hogan returned to WCW, after having announced his retirement and run of the American presidency on the 26 November 1998 edition of *The Tonight Show* with his recent pay-per-view opponent Jay Leno (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Hogan and Nash would be the main event for the WCW title (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). In one of the most reviled incidents in professional wrestling history, Hogan and Nash met in the middle of the ring, Hogan gave Nash a single light poke to the chest, which Nash fell and allowed Hogan to pin him for the title (Evans, 2021). This incident became known as "The Finger Poke of Doom," and it is widely considered the end of WCW's prominence (Evans, 2021). This ending was panned by fans and critics and both boring and reductive (Evans, 2021). Nash was perceived to have devalued the world's title and ruined Goldberg's run for no pay-off (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Goldberg would be injured throughout much of 1999 (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Television stings strongly suggest that professional wrestling fans showed little interest in another Hulk Hogan title run in 1999 (Meizner, 2022; Evans, 2021). With fans glowing from the WWF's finish and disillusioned by WCW's, the Monday Night Wars effectively ended in the eyes of fans. The WWF had won by using the age-old strategy of giving the people what they wanted. Nitro would never beat Raw in the ratings again (Meizner, 2022).

Goldberg would suffer ill-timed injuries in late-1998 and early-1999, delaying his return to his spot as the primo uomo of WCW (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). At consecutive editions of Starrcade, WCW had lost major momentum, and this time they would never really recapture it (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). There was also growing discontent among WCW's roster that a glass ceiling had been placed over performers below a certain height and weight threshold (Jericho, 2007). Many of these smaller performers who were artistically superior in the ring to their colleagues, resented their comparatively small contract (Jericho,

2007). Bischoff was perceived to only have interest in communing with wrestlers in the “Millionaires Club” composed mostly of top stars (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). This disillusionment led to the exodus of many of the top stars in the cruiserweight and other supporting divisions (Jericho, 2007). Dean Malenko had been named the 1996 Wrestler of the Year by *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*, but due to his diminutive stature and serious demeanor was not in the top 25 highest paid performers for the promotion between 1996 and 2000 (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). With the main event scene becoming stale with similar interference-heavy finishes and an overemphasis on the 3-year-long nWo storyline, this collapse of the mid-card with 5 hours of prime time television to fill every week was a recipe for disaster. Discontentment in the locker room grew due to what is described as the “toxic politics” of a few powerful wrestlers (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). Substance abuse among some of those top wrestlers also and rampant bullying became major issues, as management seemed to be losing control of the roster (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018).

WCW’s creative woes would continue through 1999, with an ever-growing emphasis on the aging stars of the prior eras. The nWo never reached a thrilling conclusion (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Hogan and Flair would renew their once record-breaking feud and headline two pay-per-views in early 1999 (Flair, 2004; Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). Their pay-per-view bout at *Uncensored 1999* on 14 March 1999 drew 325,000 paid viewers, as compared to the 800,000 who paid to see Austin and Rock in their first *Wrestlemania* pairing just two weeks later (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Hogan and Flair squared off with the WCW world title and Flair’s permanent presidency of the promotion were on the line in a “First Blood Steel Cage Match” (Flair, 2004). The match, which was conceived with an overabundance of stipulations and gimmicks, saw Flair win the title and WCW’s presidency in a decisive defeat of the nWo (Flair, 2004). By now the nWo sub-factions had been divided into the “elite” and the “B-team,” which would feud through mid-1999 (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). The stable would slowly disband with members breaking off and going their separate ways in various storylines (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). A confusing overlap of betrayals involving Nash, Hogan, and Savage became a centerpiece of WCW programming, which suffered from ever-eroding viewership throughout the year (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The initial run of the nWo ended with a whimper, as Hogan reverted to his babyface persona to defeat Nash in a match where both men gambled their careers (alongside Hogan’s WCW title) at the *Road Wild 1999* pay-per-view event before a

pay-per-view audience of 235,000 (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Perhaps some semblance of completion came at the *Fall Brawl* pay-per-view event on 12 September 1999 (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). By this event, Sting's character had left the nWo Wolfpac and had returned to his "crow" character (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). With Lex Luger and a baseball bat at his side, he would defeat the man who had betrayed them in July 1996 (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). This main event drew 130,000 pay-per-view buys, down 570,000 from their disappointing 1997 showdown, and down 355,000 for the Flair and Hogan lead *SuperBrawl IX* card from February 1999 (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). No WCW pay-per-view would ever again reach 235,000 buys (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). After three years, the nWo had risen and fallen dramatically in popularity across American pop culture.

The future of WCW after the overdrawn invasion storyline looked to be taking on a new shape. The plummeting popularity of the brand saw a change in management that would precede the brand's collapse. In September of 1999, Bischoff was summoned to a meeting with Harvey Schiller, the head of Turner Sports (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Bischoff was removed as the President of WCW and replaced with Turner executive Bill Busch (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Busch would be moved into the leadership position of WCW, and he would replace Bischoff with for WWF Head Writer Vince Russo (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Evans 2021). Russo had felt burned out over the WWF schedule and sold Turner executives on the notion of his being the sole architect of the WWF's comeback (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Evans 2021). Bischoff's "pay or play" contract was triggered, giving him his full payment over the ensuing months after being relieved of his duties (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Evans 2021).

#### 5.10.g.iv The Fall of WCW

Russo's takeover of WCW creative was an abject disaster for the promotion (Flair, 2004). Without the editing of McMahon and his team, and unable to work within the confines of WCW's complex corporate structure, Russo struggled in his leadership of the brand (Flair, 2004; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). An attempted resurrection of the nWo with the silver and black logo and "nWo 2000" branding was made (Thompson & Jarrett, 2021). Bret Hart, Jeff Jarrett, Nash, and Hall were meant to be the group, but with a career-ending injury to Hart, alongside injuries to Hall and Nash, the stable would again balloon with seemingly

random members and peter out on television without a satisfying conclusion (Thompson & Jarrett, 2021).

The heavyweight title plummeted in importance and equity as it was vacated 8 times between October 1999 and October 2000 (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017; Tanabe et al., 2022). During this time the title was also placed on Hollywood actor David Arquette (Flair, 2004). This much-maligned storyline brought so much public shame onto Arquette that his journey to become a legitimate independent professional wrestler in the 2010's was immortalized in the 2020 documentary *You Cannot Kill David Arquette* (Arquette, 2020). This move was done as a co-promotion for the 2000 WCW-theme feature film *Ready to Rumble*, which bombed at the box office, making \$12.5 million on a \$24 million budget (Arquette, 2020; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Russo also booked the title onto himself, before vacating it (Flair, 2004). During this time storylines became more chaotic, characters became overwhelmingly sophomoric, constant twists, swerves, non-finishes, chaotic brawls, and interference in matches further eroded public interest (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Viewership plummeted throughout 1999 and 2000 (Meizner, 2022). When Kevin Sullivan was returned to the position of booker, several disaffected wrestlers walked out of WCW rather than work for him, including Chris Benoit, Eddie Guerrero, Shane Douglas, Perry Saturn, and Dean Malenko (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). In early 2000, Chris Benoit won the WCW championship, by defeating Sid on pay-per-view, only to toss the physical belt in the trash can backstage and leave with the other members of the Radicalz stable for the WWF (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018).

In view of the plummeting ratings, Bischoff was brought back to WCW at a vastly expanded fee only months after his departure (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Russo walked out of WCW in January 2000, prompting Sullivan's return to the booking chair and the succeeding walk-outs, only to have Bischoff and Russo both return in March 2000 (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). According to Bischoff, his primary duty upon returning to WCW was to edit the Lead Writer Russo's storylines (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Russo's time as an on-screen character was universally panned. WCW would face eroding public interest throughout the year 2000 (Evans, 2021). Matters came to a head at the *Bash at the Beach* pay-per-view event on 9 July 2000 (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). In front of roughly 6,500 spectators at the Ocean Center in Daytona Beach, any semblance of professionalism by Russo

collapsed on live television (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Thompson & Jarrett, 2021). Hogan had invoked his contractually guaranteed creative control to win the WCW title from Jeff Jarrett that night, prompting Russo to order Jarrett to enter the ring and lay down on his back, contrary to the match Jarrett and Hogan had planned (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Thompson & Jarrett, 2021). Russo would throw the title belt in the ring and Hogan would pin Jarrett with a single foot (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Thompson & Jarrett, 2021). This prompted Hogan to furiously chastise Russo on the microphone and walk out of the building with the title; Bischoff walked out alongside Hogan in protest of the utter lack of professionalism by Russo (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Thompson & Jarrett, 2021). Matters were made worse when Russo, secure in knowing that Hogan had left the building, returned to the ring and cut a profanity-laden promo deriding Hogan and declaring another title bout would be held later in the evening (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). This promo was the subject of a defamation of character and breach of contract lawsuit by Hogan against Turner Broadcasting and Russo, which ultimately led to a handsome payout for Hogan (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). This incident, in addition to being perhaps the peak of unprofessionalism in modern sports entertainment history, shattered the fourth wall and further damaged WCW's credibility. Russo's contract was bought out in October of 2000 by Turner Broadcasting after another series of on-air and backstage meltdowns (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Evans, 2021). It was also in October of 2000 that talks began in earnest regarding the sale of WCW to the WWF (Evans, 2021).

#### 5.10.g.v Get the F Out and the IPO In

While WCW would struggle throughout 1999 and 2000, the WWF would continue its meteoric rise as a pop culture juggernaut across modes of media (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Though WCW was waning in popularity, the presence of the competition kept the WWF on a full throttle creative direction, bolstered by talent acquisitions, an expanding cadre of young talents, and a budding developmental system (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This cocktail of ever-growing market share within the professional wrestling space and the undeniable cable ratings dominance used the WWF towards a plan to go public (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This initial public offering of stock would expand the McMahon family's wealth exponentially (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

Austin's popularity only increased throughout 1999, but it was soon matched by that of the newly babyface The Rock (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The Rock would emerge as a massively popular babyface with his memorable trash talk and overwhelming charisma (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). In November 1999, Austin would need to take the better part of a year off to complete neck surgery and rehabilitation (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). During Austin's sabbatical, the Rock became the top star in professional wrestling, with popularity equal to Austin's at the time (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The Rock and Foley completed a memorable tag-team run in 1999 as "The Rock and Sock Connection" throughout mid-1999, capturing the tag-team titles thrice and performing in the most watched segment in WWF history known to fans as "Rock, This is Your Life!" (Thompson & Prichard, 2016; Tanabe et al., 2022) Foley would emerge as a wholly new kind of figure in professional wrestling when his autobiography *Have a Nice Day: A Tale of Blood and Sweat Socks*, exploded as the top-selling book in the world, topping the *New York Times* bestseller list for non-fiction (Thompson & Foley, 2022). Foley would use this as a launching pad to a literary career of some acclaim, writing several more best-selling memoirs, well-received novels, and popular children's books (Thompson & Foley, 2022). Elsewhere in print media, top selling magazines of everything from *TV Guide* to *Playboy* featured WWF performers (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). WWF performers were featured as guest stars on several popular television shows on various networks (Reid, 2022; Elfring, 2018).

The tag-team division flourished with talents who would eventually become singles world champions as well. Teams like Edge & Christian, The Hardy Boyz, The Dudley Boyz and the Acolytes/Acolyte Protection Agency would post 7 singles world champions among their 8 members (Thompson & Ross, 2019; Tanabe et al., 2022). The undercard filled with savvy veterans leaving the fledgling ECW and dying WCW rosters (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Lighter wrestlers with high in-ring artistic acumen became a focus of the programming when WCW/ECW transplants like Jericho, Benoit, Guerrero, Saturn, Malenko, Lynn, and Tajiri joined the promotion (Thompson & Ross, 2019). The WWE invested heavily in developmental partnerships during this time as well (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Beginning in 1999, the WWF partnered with Jim Cornette's Ohio Valley Wrestling (OVW) as its official developmental territory where future stars would hone their craft before coming to the WWF (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Jim Ross was hard at work recruiting the next wave of stars with a recruiting class that included Brock Lesnar, John Cena, Dave Bautista, Randy Orton,

Shelton Benjamin, and Charlie Haas (Thompson & Ross, 2019). The WWE would continue its relationship with OVW from 2000-2008 (Thompson & Ross, 2019). The WWE would eventually create a concurrent development program at Florida's Deep South Wrestling from 2005-2007 (Leatherland, 2022). In 2009, the WWE launched Florida Championship Wrestling as a platform to hone the next generation of WWE stars (Leatherland, 2022). In 2012, the FCW platform began a long-term residency at Full Sail University, and was rebranded as NXT (Sidgwick, 2017). This territory was used to train novice wrestlers and to adapt established wrestlers to the WWE style (Sidgwick, 2017). Alumni of this training and/or finishing program include Brian Danielson, Roman Reigns, Damien Sandow, Drew Galloway, Jack Hager, the Usos, Jinder Mahal, the Bella Twins, Naomi, Wade Barrett, Tyson Kidd, Seamus, Seth Rollins, Kevin Owens, The New Day, Natalya, Paige, Bray Wyatt, Finn Balor, and Claudio Castagnoli (Sidgwick, 2017).

The WWF also saw the rise of two massively popular female stars with Rena "Sable" Mero and Joanie "Chyna" Laurer (Thompson & Ross, 2019; Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Chyna had come into her own as a massively popular wrestler (Thompson & Ross, 2019). According to Ross, Chyna preferred to only wrestle men as it legitimized her status as a top talent (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Throughout 1999 Chyna would go on to break a number of barriers, becoming the first woman to compete in the Royal Rumble, the first woman to compete in the King of the Ring tournament, the first female to win a men's battle royal, and the first female #1 contender to the WWF championship (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Ross also confirmed that Chyna had been a 7-figure talent at her peak at this time (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Chyna would go on to become the first woman to win a men's WWF championship by capturing the Intercontinental title from Jeff Jarret at SummerSlam 2000, in her first of two reigns (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Sable had been the "blonde bombshell" valet of her former husband Marc Mero, only to see her popularity dwarf his own (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Her rise in popularity and rivalries with established female wrestlers Jackie Moore and Luna Vachon lead to the reinstatement of the WWF Women's Championship (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Moore would first win the reconstituted title, prior to surrendering it to Sable, a comparative wrestling novice, two months later (Thompson & Prichard, 2016; Thompson & Ross, 2019). Moore would follow in Chyna's footsteps by capturing the men's cruiserweight title in 2004 (Tanabe et al., 2022). Sable and Chyna would both pose in nude spreads in bestselling editions of *Playboy* magazine, as



would many WWF/WWE performers in the late-1990's and 2000's (Thompson & Ross, 2019; Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The creation of this division led to a renewed interest in women's professional wrestling by WWF fans. Other female wrestlers like Debra McMichael, Stacy "The Kat" Carter, Lisa "Ivory/Tina Ferrari" Moretti, Amy "Lita" Dumas, Trish Stratus and future WWE Chairwoman Stephanie McMahon would hold this title in this era (Tanabe et al., 2022). Though the title would not be pushed as co-equal to the men's titles until the mid-2010's, this era of female stars paved the way for the future revolution (Thompson & Ross, 2019; Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

The Rock would win the 2000 Royal Rumble, and finally claim his long-awaited babyface WWF title by pinning Triple H at *Backlash* and Mr. McMahon himself at *King of the Ring* 2000 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016; Tanabe et al., 2022). Triple H would emerge as the top heel of the era, a role he would revel in throughout the rest of his in-ring career (. Triple H would also eventually begin a romantic relationship in 2002 with Stephanie McMahon, despite having been in a storyline relationship with her since late-1999 (Thompson & Ross, 2019). They would marry in 2003, and accusations of political nepotism in Levesque's favor would dog him for the remainder of his in-ring and executive career (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Triple H defeated Foley for his first WWF title on the 23 August 1999 edition of Raw, the first of Levesque's 14 reigns (Thompson & Ross, 2019; Tanabe et al., 2022). Levesque would remain a top performer with the WWE, never leaving the promotion (Thompson & Ross, 2019). He founded and became the creative force behind NXT, and is credited with being the architect of the rise of the viable third brand of WWE programming (Thompson & Ross, 2019). While still a part-time wrestler, Levesque rose through a number of executive roles, including head of development, Chief Operations Officer, and Head of Talent relations (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Following Vince McMahon's retirement in 2022, he was elevated to the Executive Vice Presidency of Creative and Talent Relations; ostensibly making him McMahon's successor as the creative leader of the WWE and the industry as a whole, a move made permanent following McMahon's resignation in 2024 (Thompson & Ross, 2019; Reuter, 2022; Safdar, 2024).

The WWF would push their lead in the ratings war to Thursday nights by debuting *Smackdown* on network television UPN on 26 August 1999 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This program ran opposite WCW Thunder and proceeded to dominate the ratings throughout

the remainder of Thunder's run (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Smackdown would run on Thursday or Friday night over the next twenty years on UPN, the CW, My Network TV, SyFy, and USA Network (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). On 4 October 2019, Smackdown debuted on Fox as part of a 5-year deal between the WWE and the network worth over \$1 billion (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Smackdown's live Friday-night format on Fox would propel it to supplanting Raw as the flagship program for the WWE thereafter (Thompson & Ross, 2019).

All of these programming decisions, legacies, and rising crops of stars began in the 1999 push towards the IPO. The WWE would go public on the NASDAQ 19 October 1999 (Duggan, 2022). The WWF was listed as WWFE on the stock index, perhaps a harbinger of the coming 2002 rebranding (Duggan, 2022). A year later the WWE would be listed as common stock on the New York Stock Exchange beginning on 25 October 2000 (Duggan, 2022). Austin and The Rock would join Vince and Linda McMahon to ring the opening bell of the NYSE that day (Duggan, 2022). From that day forward, the WWE would be responsible to investors as a fiduciary to maximize stock prices and inevitably avoid controversy.

The IPO of WWF stock happened just days after Russo's departure from WCW (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Evans, 2021). WCW had become a dumping ground for piling losses from other Turner divisions prior to the final closing of the merger with AOL-Time Warner (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Evans, 2021). The intercompany allocations, where the losses of some divisions are piled onto soon-to-be closed-down or sold subdivisions ballooned WCW's losses in 2000 to roughly \$60 million (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). By this point Ted Turner had long-since lost control of his namesake media empire and could no longer preserve WCW as a cornerstone of Turner programming (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Bischoff mounted an effort to save WCW, partnering with Fusient Media and the co-founders of ESPN Classic (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Evans, 2021). Fusient had capitalized an investment of \$67 million to acquire WCW and the associated intellectual property rights (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Evans, 2021). Bischoff had planned a hard reset of the television product and sought to rebuild the promotion (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). The death blow of WCW was struck by Turner Broadcasting head Jamie Kellner (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Evans, 2021). On 17 March 2001, Kellner canceled all WCW programming

from the Turner networks (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Evans, 2021). It was explained to the media that TNT and TBS sought to appeal to “higher end” advertisers, in an obvious allusion to wanting to avoid Association of the Turner brands with their working class fanbase (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Evans, 2021). Kellner and Turner programming president Brad Siegel were quoted in the *New York Times* article about the cancellation as “It was the first programming move made under Mr. Kellner’s leadership and is an indication that he wanted to attract more affluent viewers to TNT and TBS” (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Evans, 2021). Despite WCW’s massive drop in popularity, it was still the most popular original programming on TNT or TBS, with the exception of NBA or MLB playoffs (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). WCW had also grossed \$125 million in 2000 despite its abysmal artistic direction (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Evans, 2021). Kellner’s decision to cancel the programming led to the cancellation of the Fusient deal (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Evans, 2021). Kellner and Turner programming executives remarked that professional wrestling did not fit the profile of demographic appeal to attract advertisers for the “affluent suburban areas” (Evans, 2021).

The sale of WCW to the WWF was officially sold on 23 March 2001 (Evans, 2021). The WWF had bought their former competitor, their tape library, and all associated intellectual property for a seemingly poultry sum of \$4.1 million, and an agreement to purchase \$20 million in future advertising (Evans, 2021; Prichard, 2016). The promotion had risen from the Mid-Atlantic territory in defiance of McMahon’s expansion to become the top promotion in the world. Now, only a few years off from being a jaw-dropping corporate turnaround, it was sold for a pittance. The 288th and final episode of Nitro was dubbed “A Night of Champions” (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017). It emanated from Panama City, Florida as a live simulcast alongside WWF Raw on 26 March 2001 (Thompson & Schiavone, 2017; Thompson & Prichard). The show opened with US Champion Booker T defeating Scott Steiner to become WCW Champion as well (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). It also saw Rey Mysterio and Billy Kidman claim the relatively new cruiserweight tag-team titles (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). The final match on WCW Nitro saw Sting take on Ric Flair in a match to honor the legacy of the promotion (Flair, 2004).

Following the final episode of Nitro, the WCW brand and many of its wrestlers came aboard the WWF (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Most of WCW’s top stars had guaranteed contracts

with Turner Broadcasting itself that promised to continue paying them to sit at home until their expiration (Thompson & Ross, 2019). The WWF allowed wrestlers whose prices could not or did not wish to buy out to sit and collect that Turner money (Thompson & Ross, 2019). The centerpiece of WWF programming in 2001 was the “Invasion/Alliance” angle, wherein an alliance of former WCW and ECW stars invaded the WWF (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). At Wrestlemania X-7, Steve Austin had turned heel against the Rock in the main event to win the WWF title (Thompson & Ross, 2019). The event took place from Houston’s Astrodome, and it seemed that none of the 67,000 in attendance or the more than 1,000,000 who paid to watch from home were interested in jeering Austin (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Austin’s heel turn was widely rejected by fans, and for the first time in the Attitude Era, business began to take a downturn (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Austin would lead the invasion as a former WCW and ECW star (Thompson & Ross, 2019). The angle’s momentum petered out quickly with fans (Thompson & Ross, 2019).

The year 2001 did, however, see some historic moments. WWF star Kurt Angle became the first person to win both the WWF and WCW titles in the same calendar year (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Angle is a Pittsburgh-born Olympic gold medalist in Freestyle wrestling who debuted on 3 March 1999 and swiftly emerged as one of the top stars of the era (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Another trainee of Tom Prichard, Angle would emerge as arguably one of the top performers of the 21st century and mastered the storytelling craft in an astoundingly short time (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). His character ebbed and flowed between pathologically intense and goofy comedy (Thompson & Angle, 2021). His in-ring performances were viewed among industry professionals as some of the best in a generation (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Angle had been signed to the WWF in 1998 and emerged as a top heel in late-1999 and early 2000 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Angle would defeat the Rock for the WWF Championship at the *No Mercy* pay-per-view event in October 2000 (Tanabe et al., 2022). In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the WWF hosted Smackdown on Thursday 9/13 in the first major gathering in the US since the attacks (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). In response to this, Angle, a star-spangled Olympic hero, was tapped to become WWF champion a few weeks later and the WWF eliminated the Raw is War branding and restored the name *Raw* (Thompson & Angle, 2021; Tanabe et al., 2022). Angle would emerge as the leading of the WWF until an unceremonious exit in 2006, which

lead to a highly acclaimed career as the top performer for TNA/Impact and NJPW (Thompson & Angle, 2021).

In a shock to no one, the WWF forces defeated the Alliance in a “Winner Take All 5-on-5 tag-team elimination match” at the Survivor Series pay-per-view event for 2001 on 18 November 2001 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The main event concluded with The Rock pinning Austin to save the WWF (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Earlier in the Survivor series card, the respective secondary singles titles and tag-team titles had been unified on Edge and The Dudley Boys respectively (Thompson & Ross, 2019). The WWF and WCW titles were unified on 9 December 2001 in a four-man tournament that saw Chris Jericho defeat The Rock and Austin consecutively to become the first-ever undisputed world heavyweight champion of professional wrestling (Jericho & Fornatale, 2012). This was the most unified title since the retirement of Frank Gotch in 1913. Jericho, a New York-born Canadian, had emerged in the international territories in the early and mid-1990’s (Jericho, 2007). He exploded into international prominence in the WCW cruiserweight division, creating some of the most memorable content in the division’s history during his run as champion (Jericho, 2007). After being faced with WCW’s glass ceiling, Jericho joined the WWF and became a top star with his combination of offbeat promos, kitschy hair metal rocker persona, and masterful in-ring storytelling (Jericho, 2007).

Fan interest would drop in the WWF throughout 2001-2003 (Thompson & Ross, 2019). A number of factors were at play in that downturn. The lack of competition from any other national brands lead to an erosion of popular storyline creation (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Austin’s heel turn was poorly received by fans (Thompson & Prichard, 2016; Thompson & Ross, 2019). The Rock had begun his film career in 2001 with a supporting role in *The Mummy Returns* (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Early 2002 would see the return of Flair, Hogan, Nash and Hall to the WWF. Flair joined in a non-wrestling role as McMahon’s storyline co-owner, leading to a feud between the two (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). McMahon introduced Hall, Nash and Hogan as the nWo, which would feud with the Rock and Austin en route to Wrestlemania X8 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Wrestlemania X8 would sell over 850,000 pay-per-views for the live event in front of more than 68,000 onlookers at Toronto’s SkyDome on St Patrick’s Day 2002 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The card was billed to have four main events on WWF programming: The Rock vs Hogan,

Austin vs Hall, The Undertaker vs Flair, and Triple H vs Jericho for the Undisputed title (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The 12-match card saw Hogan and the Rock engage in an instant classic that is regarded as one of the great artistic and commercial triumphs in professional wrestling history. As it had multiple times in WCW, the nWo would soon take on bloated membership, adding first-time members Booker T and Shawn Michaels before disbanding (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

The following night on Raw, Brock Lesnar would debut (Thompson & Ross, 2019). The South Dakota-born performer sported an impossible physique, a blonde crew cut, and a freakishly athletic form of over 150kg (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Lesnar had been an NCAA and NJCAA national heavyweight wrestling champion (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Under the guidance of Paul Heyman and Jim Cornette in OVW, he had emerged as a blue-chip prospect (Thompson & Ross, 2019). With palpable charisma, Lesnar was tapped to be the next big star (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). At the SummerSlam 2002 pay-per-view event, Lesnar would pin the Rock for the Undisputed WWE championship (Thompson & Ross, 2019; Tanabe et al., 2022). It took only 160 days after his main roster debut for Lesnar to become the top man in the industry (Thompson & Ross, 2019). This would be the first of 12 reigns (and counting) for Lesnar as the primo uomo of a professional wrestling organization (Tanabe et al., 2022). By 2004, he would leave the WWE at the peak of his popularity to pursue other athletic endeavors, highlighted by earning a position as a gridiron football player in the NFL Europe developmental league and winning the UFC Heavyweight championship (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Lesnar was the top drawing UFC fighter of all-time, prior to the rise of Irish superstar Conor McGregor (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). In 2012, Lesnar returned to the WWE and would return to his position as one of the top stars of the promotion for another decade (at the time of this writing) (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

By summer 2002, the WWF/WWE was swiftly losing top star power and struggling with brand identity (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). On 5 May 2002 the McMahon and company lost the rights to the brand “WWF” in an English courtroom after 3 years due to a copyright lawsuit filed by the World Wildlife Fund, a British animal conservation founded in 1961 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The company would rebrand as “World Wrestling Entertainment” and “WWE” thereafter with an accompanying logo change (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The rebranding campaign included the tagline, “Get the F Out!” (Thompson

& Prichard, 2016) This change also coincided with changes at the top of the card. Lesnar's initial push was largely due to the loss of top performers (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Austin had walked out of the company due to creative differences in June (Thompson & Ross, 2019). The Rock was receiving a slew of offers to become a leading man in Hollywood following the success of *The Mummy Returns* and his proven drawing power at the cinema and professional wrestling box office (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Neither the Rock, nor Austin would ever wrestle a full-time schedule for the WWF/WWE again.

Hoping to recapture some of the competition-based creative magic of the Monday Night Wars, the WWE announced a split of Raw and Smackdown as competing brands with independent rosters of performers (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The initial "WWE Draft" took place on 25 March 2002 from the Bryce Jordan Center on the Campus of Penn State University (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Though almost immediately it became apparent that the same writing team would structure both shows, the brand split would continue for another 20 years at the time of this writing (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). With the Raw and Smackdown rosters respectively anchored by Triple H and the Undertaker, young stars like Angle, Jericho, Lesnar, Guerrero, Benoit, Booker T, Big Show, Randy Orton, Batista, Edge, John "Bradshaw" Layfield, Mark Henry, CM Punk, Jake Hager, Dolph Ziggler, Rey Mysterio, Rob Van Dam, and John Cena, would rise to prominence in what is now called the "Ruthless Aggression Era" (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Along with them Ric Flair and Shawn Michaels would see career renaissances during this era, while Bischoff and Heyman would return as on-screen performers and eventually executives (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The WWE would also debut as a third brand with an ill-fated resurrection of ECW from 2006-2008 and the rise of NXT from 2012-present (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

The spiritual end of the Attitude Era would come at Wrestlemania XIX. The event took place from Safeco Field in Seattle (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). There was no associated announcement, but Austin would engage in his final match due to continued complications from his neck injuries (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Austin would take on the Rock, a featured match that was originally planned to be the main event (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Johnson had starred in *The Scorpion King*, a spinoff of *The Mummy Returns* during his mid-2001 hiatus, and with his upcoming film *The Rundown* he would clock three consecutive films debuting at #1 at the box office (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Johnson and Austin

would have their third main event at Wrestlemania, in front of over 54,000 spectators on 30 March 2003 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Due Austin having nearly died a day prior due to massive dehydration, the bout was moved from the final match on the card to the penultimate slot (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Austin would return the favor to the Rock and give the Rock the victory in accordance with the traditions of the business. While Austin would continue with the WWE in a non-wrestling role, Johnson would wrestle his final match a month later at the *Backlash* pay-per-view event, losing in the main event to a debuting Goldberg (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Johnson would return to Hollywood and become the top grossing, highest paid, and most prominent film actors of a generation (Forbes, 2020). Johnson would also become a successful producer of film and television with his company Seven Bucks Productions (Seven Bucks, 2022). This includes an autobiographical NBC series titled *Young Rock* which details his childhood and rise to prominence in the professional wrestling industry (Seven Bucks, 2022). The Rock would make several comebacks to the WWE, most notably a three-year rivalry with John Cena spanning Wrestlemania 27-29 (Kreikenbohm, et al., 2001). In 2023, the Rock granted the XFL a second resurrection by buying joining an investment group that bought it out of bankruptcy, successfully produced a third season and merged it with the competing USFL to form the United Football League (UFL) (Bibey, 2023; Dixon, 2024). On 23 January 2024, The Rock was announced as a new board member for TKO Group Holdings, in a deal that saw him granted 100% ownership of “The Rock” name and brand (Valinsky, 2024). Austin would make his long-awaited comeback to the WWE at Wrestlemania 38, in the main event match of the first night of the event (Kreikenbohm, et al., 2001). From Texas Stadium in Dallas before over 77,000 attendees, Austin claimed a victory in a memorable No Holds Barred match against Quebecois virtuoso Kevin “Owens” Steen (Kreikenbohm, et al., 2001). Austin’s return match was unabashedly beloved by fans.

#### 5.10.h Public Trading and Parent Companies - The American Professional Wrestling Model in the Early 21st Century

Since the WWE’s IPO in 1999, the artistic expression of professional wrestling has been affected by the fiduciary duties of the company to shareholders (Duggan, 2022). The largely uncontested top promotion in the world and undisputed top promotion in the United States had little impetus to push the creative envelope or court controversy (Duggan, 2022). Such controversies could negatively affect stock prices and lead to lawsuits from shareholders



(Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). WWE restructured their marketing appeal back to the Hulkamania Era family entertainment business model in 2008 (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). On 22 July 2008, all WWE programming would be conducted under the “TV-PG” ratings guidelines, meaning that it needed to be suitable for ostensibly all ages as family entertainment (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This also coincided with Linda McMahon’s entry into politics (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This move was widely lamented by hardcore and die-hard fans weaned on the wildness of the Attitude Era (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This also included bans on the use of blood, one of several such bans in professional wrestling since the 1980’s (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). This era lasted for over 14 years, until the WWE returned to a TV-14 rating as of 18 July 2022 in response to competition from AEW’s TV-14 programming on TNT and TBS (Canton, 2022).

Throughout much of the “PG Era” the WWE struggled with a perceived loss of goodwill among fans (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). A prevailing perception among fans and critics contended that the WWE was intent on pushing performers as top babyfaces through somewhat Pavlovian reactions to strong booking. Exacerbating matters was the issue that these new babyfaces followed the kid-friendly Hogan Era “white meat superhero babyface” model of professional wrestling hero, which teenage and adult fans had been rejecting since the mid-1990’s (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). This created a persistent schism in fandom, pitting frustrated older fans in the formerly dominant adult demographics against the younger-skewing audiences at which the product was now targeted (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). These babyfaces were rejected by large and vocal swaths of fans, while organic fan favorites were persistently overlooked (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018). Much of the responsibility for this was assigned by fans and critics to obstinance on the part of McMahon (Thompson & Bischoff, 2018).

This manifested in the 2000’s with the rise of John Cena, and in the 2010’s/2020’s with the push of Roman Reigns. The Massachusetts-born performer had been an All-American collegiate gridiron football player at Springfield College and a bodybuilder, which combined with his chiseled matinee idol looks, charisma and charm made him a clear prospect for the WWE (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). After tryouts in 2000, Cena was signed to the WWF with a developmental contract in 2001 and began training at OVW (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Cena would debut on the 24 June 2002 edition of Smackdown in a losing effort to

Kurt Angle (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Shortly thereafter he would adopt a white rapper gimmick called “The Doctor of Thuganomics” (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Cena would first be a heel, and then a babyface under this persona, which would be a hit with children and the female audience through much of his run that would accrue 16 reigns as the leading man of WWE (Thompson & Prichard, 2016; Tanabe et al., 2022). Cena’s rising star was resented by more mature fans who found his squeaky-clean image to be gag inducing and his ring work (perhaps somewhat unfairly) sub-par (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). These older fans preferred more wrestling-heavy and edgy characters who had not been seemingly anointed against their wishes by McMahon (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Arenas across the world would have dueling “Let’s go Cena” and “Cena Sucks” chants (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The promotion launched its own film studio in 2002, currently titled WWE Studios, which produced dozens of feature films, television programs, documentaries and digital content for the WWE and its associated performers. After cutting his cinematic teeth in many WWE Studios films, Cena would go on to become an A-list film and television actor in Hollywood (Thompson & Prichard, 2016).

In the 2000’s this was represented by Paul “CM Punk” Brooks, a rebellious independent wrestling star who rose through the Ring of Honor ranks as a hit with fans and critics (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Brooks’ “Chicago Made Punk” character advocated a “straight edge” lifestyle by abstaining from drugs and alcohol, which combined with his superlative ring work, snarky witticisms, and clever promos made him a hit with the alternative wrestling segment of the audience (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Cena and Punk would parlay this into a memorable and critically acclaimed feud, with Punk solidifying his status as a folk hero among his segment of the fan base by cutting the famous “Pipebomb Promo” on the 27 June 2011 edition of Raw (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). In that promo Punk aired his grievances with the promotion and broke WWE protocol against the use of the term “wrestler” by stating unequivocally, “I am the best wrestler in the world” (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Punk would beat Cena and temporarily walk out of the WWE at the 17 July 2011 *Money in the Bank* pay-per-view event in a performance that won both men “Match of the Year” honors (Thompson & Prichard, 2016). Punk would grow frustrated with the creative direction of his character and quit the WWE in January 2014, engaging in a 7-year hiatus from professional wrestling that included an 0-2 UFC stint, before a long-awaited return for AEW (Thompson & Anderson, 2019). He became AEW’s champion in 2022

(Tanabe et al., 2022). Some months later, amidst injuries, controversial comments, personality conflicts with colleagues, and workplace fisticuffs, Punk was stripped of the AEW title and indefinitely suspended pending a contractual buyout capping a bizarre 13-month run (Killbane, 2022). Brooks returned to AEW programming on the debut of *AEW Collision*, the promotion's new one-hour Saturday night primetime television show on 17 June 2023 (Barrasso, 2023). Brooks would be terminated for cause from AEW 77 days after his return, stemming from a widely reported allegations of a backstage attack of "Jungle Boy" Jack Perry and an attempted attack Tony Khan at the *AEW All In* pay-per-view event at London's Wembley Stadium (Brookhouse, 2023). Brooks returned to WWE at the *Survivor Series: WarGames* in Chicago on 25 November 2023 (Insider The Return, 2023).

This pattern of McMahon over pushing an inorganic top babyface repeated itself with the rise of Leati "Roman Reigns" Anoa'i (Roman Reigns, 2022). Reigns was a performer with matinee idol looks who had been conference all-star in gridiron football for Georgia Tech before playing professionally for the Edmonton Eskimos in the CFL (Roman Reigns, 2022). Reigns is a member of the Anoa'i-Maivia Samoan Wrestling Dynasty and was a relative of several Hall of Fame talents including Johnson, Yokozuna, Rikishi, Ava and Sika (The Wild Samoans) among others (Busch, 2022). Reigns debuted as a heel in "The Shield" faction alongside Jon Mosley and Seth Rollins and the trio proceeded to run roughshod over the WWE for several years (Kelly, 2022). Reigns was groomed throughout to be in the early 2010's (Kelly, 2022). Reigns was assigned a massive babyface push at the conclusion of the Shield storyline, but was largely rejected by fans (Kelly, 2022). Nevertheless, Reigns was positioned as a top star and despite one of the strongest pushes on record, to the limitless frustration of fans (Kelly, 2022). Fans would grow so frustrated that even Reigns' real-life triumph of Leukemia did not sway the rancor of the audience (Kelly, 2022). Fans had instead gravitated towards undersized wrestling wunderkind Brian Danielson.

Danielson is a Washington-born performer who had attended Shawn Michaels Texas Wrestling Academy before receiving additional finishing training from English technical wizard William Regal and hard-boiled Irishman David Finlay (Brian Danielson, 2022). Danielson would shoot to fame in Ring of Honor as their champion and leading man, as well as in international and on independent promotion, developing a reputation for being arguably the best wrestler in the world throughout that period (Brian Danielson, 2022). Danielson

would arrive in the WWE in 2009 (Brian Danielson, 2022). Despite the stigma about his diminutive size and on-and-off vegan diet, Danielson would explode to fame through his cutting promos, irrepressible charisma, wide character range, and being arguably the best in-ring performer of his generation (Brian Danielson, 2022). Despite claiming his first WWE world title in 2011, Danielson was not made the focal point of WWE programming (Brian Danielson, 2022).

Danielson's biggest push came as a result of his "Yes!/No!" Catchphrases and gestures (Sam, 2019). These monosyllabic phrases and simple gestures of double pointing to the sky or waving derisively were carried on by enthusiastic choruses of fans in arenas across the world (Sam, 2019). In 2013-2014, fans frustrated by WWE creative would consistently highjack programming, demanding Danielson's elevation to the position of primo uomo of the promotion (Sam, 2019). By February 2014, with Punk's walk-out and fans' rejection of returning wrestler-turned-Marvel Avenger Dave Bautista as the Royal Rumble Winner, the "Yes Movement" reached its zenith with "Occupied Raw" (Sam, 2019). For months Triple H and Stephanie McMahon had occupied the role of heel authority figures in their "Authority" stable, and labeled Bryan a "B+ Player" and costing him his newly won undisputed WWE title at SummerSlam (Sam, 2019). The 10 March 2014 edition of Raw saw Danielson fans in the ring and refusing to leave until Danielson was granted a match against Triple H at Wrestlemania XXX with the promise of a place in the Main Event title bout between Orton and Bautista with a victory (Sam, 2019). Danielson would defeat Triple H, Bautista and Orton (notably 3 of the 4 members of the Evolution stable) at Wrestlemania XXX and claim his place as leading man of the promotion (Sam, 2019). Shortly thereafter concussion issues would force Danielson into medical retirement into a non-wrestling onscreen role, until in 2018 when he passed concussion protocol and facilitated another title run (Sam, 2019; Brian Danielson, 2022). Danielson would leave the WWE on good terms in 2021 to pursue fresh artistic pursuits in AEW, New Japan and other promotions (Brian Danielson, 2022).

Meanwhile, after Danielson's injury, the WWE pushed Reigns as the top star of his generation, much to the chagrin of fans (Kelly, 2022). By 2020, fans had so roundly and decisively rejected Reigns as a babyface for so long that he was made a heel under the moniker of "Tribal Chief," with his cousins the Usos as his toadies (Kelly, 2022). Reigns then embarked on the longest sustained run as a heel champion in the promotion's 60+-year

history (Tanabe et al, 2022). Though fans found Reign's heel character more interesting, his years-long run as champion and nearly decade-long feud with Brock Lesnar further eroded public interest (Kelly, 2022).

The WWE launched its own paid streaming video platform featuring its amalgamated video library called the WWE Network on 24 February 2014, peaking with 2.1 million subscribers in 2018 (WWE Network, 2022). The debut of the WWE network also included the addition of a new logo, a smoother, streamlined version of the slash logo which had been the model for the promotion's logo since 1997 (WWE Network, 2022). The WWE signed a 5-year deal worth over \$1 billion to host the WWE Network's US Domestic content on NBC Universal's Peacock streaming network (WWE Network, 2022). This partnership has been massively successful for all involved (Hayes, 2022). In January 2024, WWE inked a 10-year, \$5 billion deal with streaming giant Netflix to broadcast the weekly live *Monday Night Raw* program, as well as the international rights to *Smackdown*, *NXT*, Premium Live Events, and the archival streaming content of the WWE Network (Sciaudone, 2024). WWE programming further expanded its reach in 2023, by securing a deal to broadcast *NXT* on the CW Network for an additional \$25 million per year (Thurston, 2023). Effectively, as of 2025, the WWE will be receiving nearly \$1 billion per year in media rights fees alone. The promotion has also created a massive footprint in the digital media space, as it has one of the top ten channels on YouTube, and an inter-platform total of over 1 billion social media followers (Altman, 2019; McDaniel, 2022). The worldwide corporation now has revenue totaling over \$1 billion per year (Gone, 2017).

The responsibility to stockholders has also affected scandals relating to WWE and its performers. Multiple wrestlers have seen their images scrubbed from WWE programming as a result of a public scandal including Hogan, Flair, Snuka and Benoit (Pena, 2022). Hogan and Flair eventually had their images restored to WWE programming (Pena, 2022). Public demonstrations of diligence against those scandals have led to a number of positive changes for the Connecticut-based promotion. In the aftermath of the sudden death of Eddie Guerrero and the Chris Benoit double murder-suicide, the company responded to public outcry over drug and steroid use within the industry, by instituting an improved a random drug-testing "Wellness Policy," which included tier punishments of 30-day and 60-day suspensions for first and second violations and outright dismissal after a third (Sidhu, 2011). In response to

the Benoit tragedy and public criticism related to drug abuse-related premature deaths of many wrestlers, the WWE has also covered substance abuse rehabilitation fees for former performers since 2007 (Talent, 2022). In 2010, blows to the head with steel folding chairs, pile drivers, and certain moves were banned due to public concern over concussion awareness (Hall, 2010). This led to a years-long lawsuit filed by over 60 former WWE performers from the 1980's and 1990's claiming that the promotion was responsible for concussion-related health issues caused by their performances in 2016 (AP, 2021). This lawsuit was ultimately dismissed in 2018 and its final appeal to the Supreme Court was rejected in April 2021 (AP, 2021). In response to this lawsuit, the WWE also issued concussion protocol procedures, which included mandatory suspension and medical clearance after potentially traumatic brain injuries (Talent, 2022).

Perhaps the most notable investor-related corporate shift for the WWE came in the summer of 2022. An anonymous letter to the Wall Street Journal and the WWE's Board of Directors alleged that founder Vince McMahon had engaged in multiple extramarital affairs with former WWE employees and paid millions for non-disclosure agreements regarding this conduct (Hunter, 2022). Though McMahon personally paid for these NDA's, because they were related to WWE business it was determined that they should have been logged as company expenses, along with over \$5 million in appearance fees paid to Trump for his role in and around Wrestlemania 23 (Hunter, 2022). The WWE Board of Directors launched an investigation into this conduct amid the media firestorm. In total, McMahon was found to have failed to report over \$19.4 million in expenses (Hunter, 2022). McMahon would eventually step down as CEO and Chairman of the company in the wake of the scandal (Hunter, 2022). Stephanie McMahon, long groomed to be her father's successor, was named Co-CEO and Chairperson of the Board with longtime executive Nick Khan as Co-CEO (Hunter, 2022). Levesque would be elevated to the leadership of Talent Relations and Creative for the promotion (Hunter, 2022). Owing to the artistic and commercial successes of early NXT, Levesque's leadership of creative was met with jubilation by fans. Levesque immediately mounted a vigorous campaign to expand international developmental territories, acquire top unsigned or released talent, and eliminate many of the oft-lamented ancillary aspects of WWE presentation required under the elder McMahon's regime. The adjustments in leadership stabilized and improved WWE stock prices (Hunter, 2022). However, Vince

McMahon retained major ownership and majority voting power over WWE stock (Hunter, 2022).

On 5 January 2023, McMahon would return from his hiatus and unilaterally elect himself Chairman of the Board of WWE (Valinsky, 2023), causing a 17% boost to the company's stock price. In the weeks thereafter, several members of the WWE Board of Directors would be fired and replaced by McMahon and two handpicked executives (Weprin, 2023). Stephanie McMahon resigned from her position as co-CEO and left WWE, while her husband, Paul "Triple H" Levesque remained as Chief Content Officer and the artistic leader of the promotion (Weprin, 2023). In March 2023, McMahon signed a new two-year contract as chairman of WWE for a minimum payout of \$2.4 million, plus lucrative incentives based around potential sale of the company and performance bonuses (Rizzo, 2023). Upon McMahon's apparent hostile reconquista of his own company, speculation ran rampant that he had returned with the intent to sell the WWE (Thomas, 2023). On Monday, 3 April 2023, WWE made two major announcements: firstly, the prior weekend's 39th installment of Wrestlemania from SoFi Stadium in Los Angeles has been a record-breaking success; and secondly was the stunning revelation that WWE had agreed to sell 51% controlling interest to Endeavor Group (Rueter, 2023; Dixon, 2023). However, the multi-billion-dollar deals did not erase McMahon's issues stemming from the misconduct investigations. American federal law enforcement executed a search warrant on McMahon's Connecticut home on 17 July 2023 and served McMahon with a subpoena issued by a federal grand jury and ongoing investigations on McMahon by the government authorities and the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) regarding his hush-money payments and the ensuing decades-long cover-up (Wood, 2023). News simultaneously broke that McMahon had been on indefinite medical leave following a spinal surgery, though it was confirmed that he would maintain his title as WWE Chairman. Following the IPO of the merger company, McMahon was named Executive Chairman of TKO Group Holdings and his net worth reached a personal best \$3.2 billion (Ochoa, 2023; Forbes, 2023). This net worth represents a mind-boggling 639,900% return on the \$500,000 McMahon paid his father for the Capitol Wrestling Corporation some 41 years prior (The Story, 2022; Forbes, 2023; Hornbaker, 2015). On 25 January 2024, a former female employee of WWE sued McMahon and WWE in civil court, alleging further severe sexual misconduct by McMahon and other WWE employees (Safdar, 2024).

McMahon denied the allegations and resigned from all positions in and relating to TKO on 26 January 2024 (Coppinger, 2024).

The story of Endeavor had played out alongside American professional wrestling since the waning years of the 19th century, when the William Morris Agency (WMA) was founded in 1898 and merged with the Endeavor Talent Agency in 2009. Ari Emmanuel, Hollywood agent and the bombastic co-founder of Endeavor, would emerge as leader of the new company, which would later consolidate other talent agencies in the coming years. The merger between a Hollywood talent agency, the biggest brand in mixed martial arts<sup>60</sup>, and the most successful professional wrestling promotion in history creates a bizarrely balanced sports entertainment nexus in the era of corporate conglomeration. The merged company was christened TKO Holdings Group and will be listed on the stock exchange for public trading in latter 2023 as “TKO” on the New York Stock Exchange (Sherman & Calia, 2023). The new company was purportedly valued at \$21 billion (Sprung, 2023). The structure of the company placed the triumvirate of controversial entrepreneurs is helmed with Emmanuel as CEO of the group, McMahon as Chairman of the WWE and White as President of UFC. Upper management would feature an 11-member board, composed of five WWE executives and six Endeavor executives. Significantly, Paul “Triple H” Levesque maintained his position of Chief Content Officer where he “oversees the Company’s Creative Writing, Talent Relations, Live Events, Talent Development and Creative Services departments (WWE Boards, 2023).” Levesque has been flanked in that role by longtime tag-team partner Shawn Michaels as Executive Vice President of Talent Development Creative since September 2022 (Brookhouse, 2022).<sup>61</sup> The merger was finalized on 12 September 2023 with a group of luminaries from TKO on-hand to ring the opening bell of the NYSE including Emmanuel, McMahon<sup>62</sup>, White, Levesque, WWE President Nick Khan, alongside top WWE women’s performer Bianca Belair and UFC legend/professional wrestling fanatic Daniel Cormier (Miller, 2023). The stock began trading at \$102 and finished the day at \$103.05, for a total valuation of over \$21 billion (Becker, 2023; Yahoo Finance, 2023).

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<sup>60</sup> The intertwined histories of professional wrestling and mixed martial arts is discussed at length in Subsection 3.3.b.

<sup>61</sup> The clumsy symbolic irony of an iconic Gen X act like the living members of D-Generation X selling out to become corporate executives is worthy of either a clever academic paper or a 500-word clickbait wrestling blog, depending on the writer.

<sup>62</sup> On an apparent ceremonial return from medical leave, while under federal investigation.



New Japan Professional Wrestling is currently the second-leading professional wrestling company in the world. On 1 February 2005, Inoki sold controlling interest in NJPW to video game manufacturer Yukes (Njpw, 2022). Inoki's departure came amidst internal power struggles over the direction of NJPW, leading to Inoki founding the "Inoki Genome Federation," a professional wrestling, MMA and combat sports promotion (Thompson 2022; Yukes, 2019). Yukes is a publicly traded company in Japan that notably makes video games for the WWE, the UFC and AEW. In 2012, Japanese entertainment and gaming conglomerate Bushiroad purchased controlling shares of NJPW, eventually claiming 85% ownership, with 10% and 5% being owned by television holdings company TV Asahi and Japanese talent management company Amuse Inc (Clark, 2012). TV Asahi would be instrumental in the creation of *NJPW World*, New Japan's paid video on-demand streaming service, which features New Japan, CMLL and AEW programming (Njpw, 2022; World, 2022). Elsewhere in Japan, respected promotions Pro Wrestling NOAH and DDT Pro-Wrestling have been conglomerated under publicly traded internet advertising company CyberAgent (Richards, 2020).

Other American professional wrestling companies have come under conglomerate ownership in the 21st century as well. TNA/Impact was founded by Jeff and Jerry Jarrett in 2002 to break the WWE's monopoly over professional wrestling (Thompson & Jarrett, 2021). Within months the then-pay-per-view-only company was floundering and hemorrhaging money, until it was bought out by private energy conglomerate Panda Energy (Thompson & Jarrett, 2021). Panda purchased 72% interest in the promotion in October of 2002, eventually buying Jarrett out completely in 2015 (Thompson & Jarrett, 2021). Panda Energy oversaw TNA/Impact's product, to the increasing chagrin of many professional wrestling fans and industry professionals (Thompson & Jarrett, 2021; Thompson & Bischoff, 2018; Thompson & Prichard, 2016). The younger Jarrett has claimed on his *My World* podcast that the struggles between Impact and Panda were due in large part to the ignorance of upper management in the energy conglomerate to the inner workings of the niche entertainment industry and the importance of particular artistic talents (Thompson & Jarrett, 2021). In 2018, Panda sold controlling interest in Impact to Canadian media conglomerate Anthem Sports & Entertainment (Thompson & Jarrett, 2021; Djeljosevic, 2020). Anthem would enter into a tumultuous IP sharing and co-promotional agreement with Jarrett's Global Force Wrestling in

2017, resulting in a lawsuit with Jarrett that was eventually settled in 2021 (Thompson & Jarrett, 2021; Djeljosevic, 2020). Anthem also created Impact Plus, the TNA/Impact paid video on-demand streaming service on 28 April 2019 (Djeljosevic, 2020).

Ring of Honor Wrestling has been a widely respected American promotion since its inception in 2002 (MacDonald, 2021). Ring of Honor was originally founded by Rob Feinstein as a distribution property for his company RF Video (MacDonald, 2021). The promotion hoped to fill the niche for fans of artistically spectacular professional wrestling in the wake of the closure of ECW. ROH Wrestling debuted on 23 February 2002 (MacDonald, 2021). It would become an underground hit and served as the launching pad for many top stars like Brian Danielson, AJ Styles, Sami Zayn, Kevin Steen, Samoa Joe, Claudio Castagnoli, Nigel McGuinness, Brian Kendrick, CM Punk, and among many others (MacDonald, 2021). Carly Silken took over as the promotion's leader in 2004 and oversaw what is regarded as a golden era of ROH programming (MacDonald, 2021). In 2009, ROH inked a two-year national cable television deal with HDNet (MacDonald, 2021). On 21 May 2011, ROH was sold to future-Fortune 500 broadcasting conglomerate Sinclair Broadcast Group (MacDonald, 2021). Sinclair would continuously run ROH television tapings, live events and pay-per-views until the promotion went on indefinite hiatus in December 2021 following substantial financial losses relating to the COVID-19 pandemic (MacDonald, 2021). On 2 March 2022, AEW founder Tony Khan announced his acquisition of Ring of Honor's promotion, IP and video library. ROH would return as a secondary brand under Khan's AEW banner (Barrasso, 2022).

While AEW itself is not owned by a parent company, it exists as a part of a constellation of companies owned by Pakistani-American tycoon Shahid Khan and his son Tony. The elder Khan was a self-made billionaire, emigrating to the United States, earning an engineering degree, and rising through then small American automotive parts manufacturer Flex-N-Gate in 1980 (Siddiqui, 2020). Under the elder Khan's guidance, Flex-N-Gate would become a top global manufacturer of automobile bumpers with 25,000 employees, 69 plants, nearly \$9billion in annual sales, and a net worth of over \$7.6 billion for its founder (Siddiqui, 2020). Khan diversified into sports, purchasing the NFL's Jacksonville Jaguars and EPL's Fulham FC (Siddiqui, 2020). The elder Khan's American-born son Tony grew up as a die-hard professional wrestling fan (Douglass, 2022). After completing his undergraduate degree at his family alma mater, the University of Illinois, the younger Khan would become a sports

executive for the Jaguars in 2012 and Fulham in 2017 (Douglass, 2022). The younger Khan is also the owner of Boston-based sports analytics firm Tru Media Networks. Khan's interest in promoting professional wrestling led to a co-promoted independent professional wrestling event titled *All In* (Douglass, 2022). The event would be broadcast live on 1 September 2018 from the Sears Center near Chicago in front of over 11,000 fans (Kreikenbohm et al., 2001). The event was a co-promotional effort between NJPW, the NWA, and ROH (Douglass, 2022). The event was a critical and financial success, selling over 50,000 pay-per-view buys (Douglass, 2022). The event proved to be a proof-of-concept for the younger Khan's professional wrestling promotion. The promotion was launched under the auspices of the younger Khan's management with the elder Khan as co-owner and investor in the company.

The younger Khan announced the launch of his own promotion "All Elite Wrestling" on 1 January 2019 (Sidgwick, 2021). The younger Khan would serve as the undisputed leader of the promotion, with several veteran wrestlers and industry professionals as Vice Presidents to guide the growth and management of the promotion including Cody Rhodes, Matt and Nick Jackson, Pat Buck, Sonjay Dutt, Q.T. Marshal, Kip Sabian, and Christopher Daniels (Sidgwick, 2021). WarnerMedia announced the return of professional wrestling to TNT after an 18-year hiatus on 15 May 2019 (Sidgwick, 2021). On 2 October 2019, *AEW Dynamite* debuted and drew over 1.4 million viewers (Sidgwick, 2021). This programming would go head-to-head with NXT's 8-10PM Wednesday night program on USA Network (Thurston, 2021). The programs ran in direct competition for 75 weeks, with Khan's upstart promotion outdrawing the WWE's C-show on 63 occasions (Thurston, 2021). NXT was moved to Tuesday nights, and the abbreviated "Wednesday Night Wars" ended (Thurston, 2021). AEW expanded its programming to TBS with Friday night *Rampage*, Saturday night and the YouTube exclusive development series *Dark* (Watch-AEW, 2022). AEW's domestic broadcasting contract with WarnerMedia (now WarnerMedia-Discovery) international television footprint also included ITV in the UK and Sky Deutschland in Germany, along with several other international distribution deals (Watch-AEW, 2022). AEW has made a number of strategic steps forward using proven tactics from other companies, including a talent-sharing agreement with NJPW, a video game titled *AEW Fight Forever* with Yukes, a dedicated soundstage for *AEW Dark* tapings at Universal Studios in Orlando, and a short-lived in-house developmental system titled the "Nightmare Factory" (Wheatley, 2021; Middleton, 2022; Rumsey, 2022; Gunier, 2020) The promotion has also licensed app games

and engaged in the high profile signings of a number of former WWE stars, alongside highly touted international and independent talents (AEW Games, 2021; Sidgwick, 2021). The promotion currently runs four pay-per-views per year (Thompson & Ross, 2019). Since its inception, the promotion has been viewed by critics and many fans as the first legitimate mainstream alternative and competitor to the WWE since the closure of WCW (Thompson & Ross, 2019). The artistic product of AEW is widely acclaimed by critics and the flagship programming had regularly topped 1 million live viewers throughout its first two years of broadcasting (Raghuwanshi, 2022). The programming is also acclaimed for showcasing international talents, revitalizing undervalued mainstream performers, highlighting female-identifying performers, rejuvenating the careers of respected veterans, platforming international talents, and honoring the multi-faceted history of professional wrestling as a whole (Thompson & Ross, 2019). As a part of the Khan Organization of companies, AEW is backed by billions of dollars in potential financing alongside a wealth of sports and media partnerships from adjacent Khan-owned enterprises. AEW successfully ran its first stadium performance with the 2023 edition of its *AEW All In* pay-per-view event in the famed Wembley Stadium in London on 27 August 2023 sold 81,035 tickets.<sup>63</sup> (Elizabeth, 2023) In October 2024 it was announced that AEW and their television partner Warner-Discover had reached a multi-year media rights deal which could yield the promotion \$185 million per year if all performance incentives are reached, while providing a broadcast home on the multitude of WBD television networks and a long-anticipated streaming home on Max (Otterson, 2024). This all-but-guarantees that the WWE will no longer wield monopolistic/monopsonistic sway over the North American professional wrestling marketplace

Even the emerging market of niche domestic professional wrestling exists as a part of corporate (North) America. Top independently owned professional wrestling companies in the United States and other countries use the Triller-owned subscription digital media platform FITE to broadcast (About FITE, 2022). FITE's platform has made a number of professional wrestling companies financially viable (Thompson & Bischoff, 2022). Dozens of promotions use FITE for their global distribution platform (Thompson & Bischoff, 2022).

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<sup>63</sup> The methods of calculating live attendance for a professional wrestling event are a matter of some debate within the industry, particularly regarding record crowds. The WWE's record of 101,763 attendees for *Wrestlemania 32* in Arlington, Texas includes staff and stewardship. WCW and New Japan Pro Wrestling drew over 150,000 spectators both nights, to the co-promoted *Collision in Korea* event in Pyongyang in 1995, though it is unknown if the audience paid anything at the gate.

Among the most prominent promotions on this platform are Game Changer Wrestling (GCW) and the resurrected NWA. GCW has emerged as the spiritual heir to ECW's chaotic style or promotion since owners Brett Lauderdale and former co-owner Danny Demanto purchased the former Jersey Championship Wrestling in 2015 (Leatherland, 2022). After languishing for years as a network of independent promotions, the trademarks and intellectual property of the National Wrestling Alliance were purchased by Smashing Pumpkins frontman Billy Corgan on 1 October 2017 (Blattberg, 2022). The brand distributed video on YouTube from 2017 until the launch of its flagship program, *NWA Powerrr*, on FITE in 2019 (Blattberg, 2022). On 14 April 2021, FITE was acquired by digital media and combat sports broadcaster TrillerNet (Baysinger, 2021).

Indeed, corporate oversight provides a complex dynamic to professional wrestling's history. What was once a business of lawlessness, violence and carnal-ism, now operates under the auspices of respectable corporations. Multiple Fortune 500 companies either fund, broadcast, partner with, produce, or own professional wrestling content. While the eroding stigma of professional wrestling as working class entertainment persists to some degree, the evolving dynamics of media consumption dictated a change in the programming methodology of content distributors. Live ratings for the WWE have eroded throughout the 21st century, as have the ratings for all broadcast television (Thompson & Bischoff, 2022). The rise of DVR, streaming services, and social media have all atrophied the ratings of television programming across all genres and networks, though the closely guarded aggregates of total viewers often paint a rosier picture of how much particular content is consumed on the viewer's own schedule (Katz et al., 2022). Professional wrestling occupies a programming hinterland between live sports and original narrative entertainment that proves difficult to categorize, but relatively easy to program. The reason for this is relatively simple, if slightly nuanced in its expression: professional wrestling fans want to watch professional wrestling; if you broadcast good professional wrestling, professional wrestling fans will show up to watch. The complex artistic nuances of the art form, combined with intergenerational demographic appeal and a year-round appetite for fresh content, perpetuates a sustainable market for professional wrestling in American media. The media presence of broadcast professional wrestling serves, as it always has, as an advertisement to be a part of the live experience of the art form. As of the time of this writing, there is an expanding number of viable professional wrestling companies where performers can both hone their craft and earn a

living for the first time since the 1980's. Despite the presence of content conglomeration, appetites for professional wrestling's many subgenres are being filled through the apparatuses of new digital media.

The modern art form of American professional wrestling emerged a century prior to this writing with the ban of competitive catch-as-catch-can wrestling. The professional wrestling industry finds itself at an inflection point. New viable promotions are emerging en masse and continue to attract rabid fan bases for artisanal narrative stage combat across the world. For the first time in over a century, no members of the McMahon family are promoting sporting entertainment. The WWE has morphed into a massive wing of a single multibillion-dollar conglomerate that unifies multi-platform Hollywood production, combat sports, and professional wrestling is the final realization of *sports entertainment* as a transcendent cultural, economic, historical, and artistic phenomenon. Now, with new leadership and the top, a massive expansion in the number of viable promotions, generations of passionate performers producing on every available platform, an explosion of content accessibility, ever-expanding legions of fans around the world consuming the ever-evolving artistic presentation, and a small army of writers documenting events, storylines, gossip, analysis, criticism and occasionally scholarship on professional wrestling; the violent melodrama seems primed for a renaissance.

#### 5.10.i The Levesque Era: The American Dream in Professional Wrestling Today

The spiritual declaration that a professional wrestling renaissance had begun came at *Wrestlemania 40*. The WWE leaned heavily into a soft rebrand under Levesque's leadership at the event in Philadelphia on 6 & 7 April 2024 (Tessier, 2024). This included Stephanie McMahon, Levesque's wife who had been ousted from her role as WWE CEO by her father the previous year, declaring it the "Paul Levesque Era" and symbolically passing the torch to the company's new leadership (Lambert, 2024). Throughout the week-long festivities surrounding the promotion's signature event, Levesque was reverentially touted as the company's creative leader. This was the first *Wrestlemania* without Vince McMahon at the helm, and it proceeded to break records for live attendance, gate, social media engagement, sponsorship dollars, and viewership (Tessier, 2024).

It was also touted as a generational creative success with “The American Nightmare” Cody Rhodes claiming the position of primo uomo of the WWE by ending Roman Reign’s record run as a heel champion (Pattle, 2024). Reigns passing of the torch came in a main event that linked the lineages of leading characters from the prior eras of the WWE’s history, including Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson from the Attitude Era, the Undertaker from the Real American Era and beyond, John Cena from the Ruthless Aggression Era, and Reign’s career rival Seth Rollins from the NXT Era to now. With the weight of that history woven into a single stunning match, Rhodes became the first standard bearer for the Levesque Era. In the lead-up to the match, The Rock had returned to the WWE to use his celebrity and wealth to usurp Rhode’s hard-earned opportunity to finish his story and become the WWE Champion. The Rock’s real-life appointment to the TKO Board led him to create a vicious new “Final Boss” persona. Much the way Flair did in his final match in 2022, the Rock carried a non-linear, non-canonical championship belt with him throughout the event known as the “People’s Championship” to demonstrate his role as a leading character in the story. Indeed, when Rollins, Rock, Reigns and Rhodes entered the ring for their tag-team match on the first night of the event, Rhodes was the only one not carrying a championship belt, demonstrating his aspirational pursuit of that status. Rhodes moniker as “The American Nightmare” came to symbolize the class struggle in American life against a rigged game of prosperity in American life, wherein the wealthy and their cronies seem to keep everything for themselves despite what the people want. Rhodes is the son of former NWA champion “The American Dream” Dusty Rhodes, and Cody’s struggles to reclaim his father’s dream is reflective of the generational struggle of Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z to reclaim the American Dream that their parents and grandparents promised. In tear-jerking fashion, and against all odds within the performance, Rhodes overcame the rigged game to symbolically reclaim the American Dream at an event that symbolized and celebrated the reclamation of professional wrestling. It was at that cultural moment that over 70,000 live spectators and tens of millions of viewers worldwide roared with approval as the latest professional wrestling hero clad in the stars and stripes ascended to his kayfabe destiny and gave a grateful sigh of relief that our hope was not in vain, and dared us to dream that we too may so rise.

## 6.0 Working Glossary: The Annotated, Abridged, Essential Dictionary of American Professional Wrestling Terminology

As the goal of this study is to demonstrate the nuanced significance of American professional wrestling, it is essential to this process that the basic terms of the insular performance sport industry be clearly stated and explained. Some sections of this study will delve into the nuance, origins and evolutions of these terms. Some of the terms are pejoratives of particular people or non-ethnic groups, but they are so ubiquitous to the parlance of professional wrestling that it is difficult to explain with those terms. Slight variations in the meanings of the terms listed exist among members of the professional wrestling industry from different regions or generations. There are also additional terms not listed here that are not germane to the artistic, economic and cultural discussions herein. Most professional wrestlers use such terms when describing events outside of the wrestling subculture. The names of specific wrestling moves and maneuvers have been omitted because they are part of the medium and not necessarily significant in understanding the essential structures of narrative. Some of those terms will be discussed in the section describing the physical storytelling in the study.

This section provides an exploration of wrestling vernacular, the essential aspects of performance must be established. The nuance of these aspects will be discussed at great length hereafter. It is important to understanding the craft that young wrestlers are taught that the essential skills they need in professional wrestling:

To *get over* as a *heel* or a *babyface*, the most important things for a young wrestler to do properly are *bump*, *sell*, *feed*, and **listen**. In the old days, it would have also been a requirement to *keep kayfabe*, though this has virtually entirely passed. And if they *get over*, then you can *get on* at better promotions, really learn to *work*, and hopefully *get signed* someday.

This statement, a kaleidoscope of jargon to an outsider, is essential to understanding the various aspects of the artistry in professional wrestling. As such, this section will provide annotated discussions of the many necessary terms used in the craft. This will enrich the understanding of the complexities of that craft and allow broader comprehension sources



about professional wrestling. While this is not a complete dictionary of professional wrestling terminology, as an annotated glossary, it will make the contents of this study more accessible.<sup>64</sup>

Agent - noun

Derivatives - Producer, Road Agent, Coach

In professional wrestling there is a subset of the creative branch that is in charge of mentoring and supervising the talents. The name of this position varies wildly between promotions however, the responsibilities are very similar. These agents are responsible for helping talents to organize the layout of their matches and promos. It is also the responsibility of those agents to coordinate with one another to prevent overlap in their storylines and presentation. Agents are often veteran or retired wrestlers who serve as mentors to the younger talents to whom they are assigned. Agents are also often members of booking committees or creative teams. Depending on the organization, an agent may also be called a “road agent,” a “coach,” or a “producer.”

Attraction - noun

An *attraction* is either a wrestler or planned event trusted to bring in fans for the sake of spectacle (Prichard, 2018). This is common with physical giants or ornate gimmicks, such as Andre the Giant, Yokozuna or The Undertaker. Likewise, many gimmick matches are used as special attractions to drive the draw.

Babyface - noun, adjective

Derivatives - Face

This term refers to any character who is intended to be a traditional hero (Shoemaker, 2014). It is commonly shortened to “Face.” Both versions of the term are most often used as nouns to describe individuals. They are also used as adjectives to describe morally and ethically upright actions taken by a character. These characters are meant to actively seek the approval and admiration of the audience. It is also expected for this character to be a good role model and inspire others to do good. A babyface is expected to be respectful of and kind to others,

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<sup>64</sup> Derivative terms are organized by relationship to the most broadly used term with a similar or related meaning, rather than alphabetization. This often includes reduced or slang forms of the said derivative terms.

and to engage in fair play. The term originated as younger, more handsome men were sought for the roles of heroes, while older and uglier men tended to be cast as villains. There were and are many exceptions to this norm. These terms are also most commonly used in the American professional wrestling vernacular. Other synonymous or similar terms exist in other international professional subcultures, like “blue eyes” in British professional wrestling, or “technicos” in Mexican lucha libre.

Backstage - noun/adjective

This term is used in the same way as in standard theatrical productions (Oz, 2012). It can also be used as an adjective to describe the goings on behind the scenes.

Beg off - verb

This is a common practice by heels. It involves a babyface gaining the advantage in the fight, and then the once-proud heel begging them for mercy, often from a blended knee (Albano et al., 2000). This creates an ethical conundrum for the babyface, whose kind nature is antithetical to continuing to attack a surrendering adversary, despite the ravenous crowd demanding that he/she/they do so. This process is most often a ruse by the heel so that they can attack the morally befuddled babyface and regain the advantage in the bout. This unscrupulous display of trickery only serves to further incense the audience.

Blade - noun/verb

Derivatives - Sword, Gig, Juice, Color, Blood, Roadmap, Crimson Mask.

In the art of professional wrestling the term “blade” means to cut oneself during a match (Oz, 2012). This process is alternately called “getting juice” or “getting color.” This is done to create more visual drama in the match. Because cuts that occur from blows are often unpredictable, this method of controlled bleeding was invented in (whenever) by (whomever). This effect is created by wrestlers slashing small cuts horizontally at the center of their foreheads. This is usually done with a small piece of razor blade wrapped in tape, which wrestlers sneak to and from the ring. At the appropriate time, a wrestler will retrieve their blade and make their cuts on their forehead. Wrestlers occasionally ask their opponents to gig them, but this is an exception to the rule that denotes tremendous trust in one’s performance.

This practice is believed to date back to at least the 1930's, though the secretive history of professional wrestling prevents exact confirmation (Bateman, 2019). The invention of the practice is credited to Kirby Watkins (Bateman, 2019). Watkins was a former armed forces wrestling champion who had several run-ins with the law for grifting and petty crime in his post-military life (Bateman, 2019). Watkins would make a name for himself in the professional wrestling business as "Sailor Watkins" in various promotions.

Alternate names for the razor fragments include *sword* and *gig*. *Gig* can also be used as a verb meaning to cut in this fashion, as can *zip*, *blade*, or *juice*. When wrestler's blade often or do not properly treat their cuts, this process can leave scars. The scars left behind from this are commonly called "gig marks." If the center of a wrestler's forehead becomes too scarred and cannot be cut horizontally, sometimes blading is done vertically. A collection of crisscrossing gig marks on a wrestler's forehead is called a "roadmap." Ideally, this process will create the visual effect of a "crimson mask" where the entire face is dramatically covered in blood. This process is considered a rite of passage by some within the industry. It is also a controversial practice which many promotions have outlawed due to ethical concerns related to self-mutilation, and potential health issues caused by the practice.

Booker - noun

Derivatives - The Book, the Pencil, Booking Committee, Creative

Perhaps the most important and controversial position in a professional wrestling organization is the "booker" (LeBell & Shoemaker, 2003). A booker serves as the matchmaker and operational creative boss for a promotion. A booker will also serve as the go-between for the promoter, the production crew and the performer roster. A booker also tends to have final say over which wrestlers will be allowed on a promotional roster *and* how those wrestlers will be used creatively in kayfabe particular to that promotion.

Sometimes promoters are also the booker for their promotion. This was the case with Vince McMahon, who held the ultimate say over the creative direction of the product until the sale of WWE and his (apparently) ultimate dismissal in 2024. Likewise upstart owner/promoter Tony Khan serves as the booker and head of creative for All Elite Wrestling. Historically, however, most major promotions separate these roles, or at least delegate them to a certain

degree, as the role of owner has other responsibilities that supersede the importance of minute details in storylines.

Booking is often a collaborative effort between several members of a booking staff or committee who all contribute and coordinate ideas in a promotion. This type of coordination gives more attention to specific members of the rosters and the angles they populate. This type of coordination also (ideally) prevents angles from being overly repetitive and similar in the same program. These committees are composed of producers, former performers, and writers. Most of the time, there is a single head of the committee tasked with having the final say over creative decisions. When an individual is tasked with being the booker, or the head of a booking or creative committee, they are said to have “the pencil” or “the book.”

Bookers are also required to keep producing compelling stories over time with no official or expected end date. Because of its ongoing episodic nature, professional wrestling requires ongoing creative direction. It is in this context that the classic characterization of professional wrestling as a violent soap opera is perhaps most apt. While the characterizations are usually also similarly melodramatic, the key similarity between daytime soap operas and professional wrestling is in how their creative output is structured. Both wrestling and soap operas must continually produce additional creative content into ongoing stories centered around a fictional world. In soap operas this is usually a business or city, while in professional wrestling it is a fictitious wrestling league. Much like a daytime soap opera will produce over 200 one-hour episodes per year, a major professional wrestling company will produce over 200 hours of prime time content per annum. Currently, the WWE currently produces over 350 hours of weekly content for US television per year (not counting international, web and streaming content), while AEW chips in with another 150 hours per year. Bookers and their creative committees must produce content for all of that time. Another similarity is the modus operandi of storytelling, with long dramatic conversations in soap operas serving as a counterpart to wrestling matches.

The position of booker is also the most scrutinized in the art of professional wrestling. The booker is the person to whom every other member of an organization may pass the proverbial buck for any mishaps or dissatisfaction. Performers dissatisfied with their position in the creative scheme of a promotion will deride and bury the booker to colleagues, management,

or (often anonymously) to the wrestling media. Wrestlers are If the draw declines, blame is often laid at the booker's feet. Because kayfabe is now publicly known, fans and performers alike openly question creative choices, leading bookers to being publicly characterized to some position on a spectrum of pariah to messiah in the eyes of certain members of the niche media or the fan base.

### The Boys

Derivatives - Locker Room/Dressing Room, The Girls

This term refers to the collective community of professional wrestlers (Phillips, 2022). The term refers specifically to professional wrestlers, though other performers are often grouped in as well. Because the cast of professional wrestling was dominantly male for generations, the term became common slang. It may have also referred to the often juvenile shenanigans and hijinks common among members of the community. Being accepted "one of the boys" means to be inducted into the insular fraternity of professional wrestling. This acceptance into a tight-knit-if-eccentric community of like-minded performers, is considered a tremendous honor. In recent years, as the appeal and prestige of women's wrestling has increased, a secondary term of *The Girls* has become common when referring to the female roster collectively. The terms "Locker Room" or "Dressing Room" can also be used to describe the collective community of performers.

These collective communities are notoriously competitive and were once extremely insular. While every member of the locker room is required by professional ethics to cooperate with one another in performance, they are also in open competition with one another for lucrative top positions. This can create an environment of cutthroat politics. Likewise, these communities are famously hostile towards outsiders. Owing in part to the multi-generational kayfabe conspiracy, wrestlers were protective of the vital trade secrets. Because the success of the business was built on trust and tradition, locker rooms developed complex common (though unofficial) codes of conduct for their members. Most of these codes center around how a wrestler demonstrates *respect*, as defined in the parlance of the industry.

### Breaking In - noun

The process of joining the professional wrestling industry is known as "breaking in" or "breaking into" the business (LeBell & Jacobs, 2003). This can be for performers (wrestlers,

referees, managers, valets, announcers, etc.) or for contributors (technical crew, productions promoters, writers, etc.)

#### Bring It Home - verb

In wrestling, when it is time to enter into the finish of a match, the performers are told to “bring it home” (LeBell & Jacobs, 2003). This message is carried from the timekeeper to the referee to the wrestlers. In some modern promotions, referees are given earpieces and the signal to bring it home, along with time cues is given directly to the referee and the wrestlers. In general contexts, members of the professional wrestling community use “bring it home” to describe finishing or concluding something.

#### Building - noun

This term refers to any facility where a wrestling show emanates (LeBell & Jacobs, 2003). It can be as small as a fire hall or as large as an open-air stadium.

#### Bump - noun, verb

The term “bump” in wrestling means to fall and land safely (Albano et al., 2000). It can be used as a verb meaning to safely land, or a noun describing the fall and landing together. This is typically the first thing taught to a wrestler in their training. There are a variety of bumps that are applicable to a number of different kinds of falls in the ring. The most basic maneuver is the “flat-back” bump which consists of falling directly backward and landing on the shoulders with an outstretched area, chin tucked, with an elevated coccyx, while both hands simultaneously slap the mat. Saving the technical discussion of how various bumps are executed, here is a list of basic bumps that a professional wrestler will learn: circle bump, t-bump, face bump, side bump, etc. Most bumps are most safely taken in the center of the ring.

When a non-wrestler participant is knocked to the ground during a match, it is qualified as a “ref bump” or a “manager bump.” When a wrestler lands on anything but the ring, for example, a “floor bump” outside of the ring, or a “table bump” if hurled through a table. A “big bump” is often used to describe a fall taken from an elevated platform. For larger competitors, typically super-heavyweights, bumping is often rarely done, so as to increase the

significance of the bump when it happens. If a wrestler takes many bumps in their matches to get themselves or their opponent over, they are colloquially called a “bump machine.”

Bury - verb

Derivatives - burial, buried

The term bury has two significant but distinct meanings. Both meanings can also be used in the noun and adjective derivatives listed above, but it is most commonly a verb. In the ring, it means to have a wrestler suffer many decisive defeats, thus reducing their value as a character and/or performer (Shoemaker, 2014). Oftentimes, being buried is a means of punishment for bad behavior (Shoemaker, 2014). The secondary verb use means to say negative things about someone or something. This can happen publicly in a promo or interviews, or privately among peers, friends and management.

The Business - noun

Probably the most common way that the art and industry of professional wrestling is referenced is as *The Business* (LeBell & Jacobs, 2003).

Buy Rate - noun

The “buy rate” is the number of households which purchase a pay-per-view event (Wrestling Dictionary Terms, 2022). In wrestling this term is an important indicator of drawing power in major promotions. It all provides the gross draw of a pay-per-view event based on the purchase price multiplied by the buy rate.

Card - noun

Derivatives - move up the card

The card is a list of matches for a particular show (LeBell & Jacobs, 2003). If a wrestler is being featured more prominently on that show, they are said to be “moving up the card.”

Carny - noun/adjective

Carny is a term used broadly in English to describe anyone employed by a traveling carnival (Wrestling Dictionary Terms, 2022). The term has certain negative connotations, as carnies are believed to be purveyors of rigged games and false or misleading tales about mediocre

attractions. This term has also often been used to describe particularly manipulative or untrustworthy individuals in the professional wrestling industry since the Carnival Era of the early 1900's. It is made doubly apt as the wrestling matches in the carnival era were mostly rigged, much like the carnival games. The term is also used as an adjective to describe anything that is a work. It can also be used as a type of pig Latin particular to professional wrestling wherein the sound "iz" is added into words to disguise their meaning. For example, "This gizuy is a mizark wizith a hizot wizife," translates to "This guy is a mark with a hot wife."

Developmental - noun/adjective

A developmental is a smaller wrestling promotion that serves as a farm league to train and polish wrestlers for an affiliated major promotion (Prichard, 2018). This became more common in the modern wrestling era as the number of viable regional promotions shrank. In prior eras, wrestlers would cut their teeth in different regions, but when these regional promotions began to fail, a select few survived as subsidiaries of wrestling conglomerates. Being signed to developmental is considered one of the great achievements a wrestler can reach in the modern era.

Dirt Sheet - noun

Derivatives - 5 Star Match, Star Scale, PWI 500

Related - Apter Mags

From the 1970's and up through today professional wrestling journalist and photographer Bill Apter was considered the leader in reporting on professional wrestling (Shoemaker, 2014). The founder of *Pro Wrestling Illustrated (PWI)*, Apter is considered a pioneer of professional wrestling print media. One of the most significant events of the year in wrestling is the publishing of the PWI 500, a ranking of the 500 best male wrestlers across all promotions and countries in the world; PWI also publishes related rankings relating to wrestling subdivisions like women's wrestling, tag-teams, etc. Apter, and those who follow his school of wrestling journalism, reports the events of wrestling in kayfabe, meaning that the magazine focuses on the on-air stories wrestlers and wrestling organizations portray. These magazines are widely called "Apter Mags."



The term “Dirt Sheet” is a pejorative term for a specific sub-group of tabloid periodicals dedicated to the behind-the-scenes news in the professional wrestling industry. These publications emerged in the American professional wrestling subculture in the early 1980’s. The terminology refers to these periodicals being repositories of salacious gossip within the industry.

These publications are prone to punditry, as they typically do not separate the reporting of facts from providing editorial spin on those facts. For a time, it was considered taboo within the wrestling industry to have a copy of these materials, as they were justifiably seen as an existential threat to kayfabe. These publications are often criticized for reporting unconfirmed rumors, poor line-editing, speculative reporting, bias, and accusations of quid pro quo relationships with wrestling insiders who would trade their services as a source for positive press. However, these publications are extremely popular among die-hard wrestling fans and among members of the professional wrestling industry. They often shape public perception towards performers and

The most famous examples of this are The Wrestling Observer Newsletter, founded in 1980 by famed wrestling pundit and critic Dave Meltzer. Perhaps Meltzer’s most well-known contribution to wrestling lore is the creation of the “Star Scale” as a means to grade matches; stars are awarded based on Meltzer’s perception of the unlit of a match in 1/4–star intervals, and while the upper limit of the scale is unknown, though Meltzer considers anything he rates above a *5 Star Match to be an all-time classic*. Meltzer remains a polarizing figure among members of the professional wrestling industry, but has been awarded for archiving the happenings of the wrestling world. A contemporary publication of similar repute would be The Pro Wrestling Torch published by another noted wrestling critic and pundit Wade Keller. Keller has used similar star scales or letter grading systems to critique matches. Both the *Observer* and the *Torch*, along with Meltzer and Keller, have been widely chastised by many within the industry for criticizing professional wrestling without requisite expertise.

Both Apter Mags and Dirt Sheets give out year-end awards that are highly sought after by professional wrestling performers and contributors.

Draw - noun

The term draw is used in much of entertainment as it relates to bringing attention to a performance (Albano et al., 2000). It is used much the same way in professional wrestling. It was originally exclusively linked to live events, though now it has been extended into several subcategories. One of the primary examples is “to draw money,” meaning to solicit through one or more revenue streams a substantial amount of money.<sup>65</sup> Another use of this term is a “ratings draw” for cable or broadcast television. There is also a “pay-per-view draw” (which also now extends to streaming) for wrestlers who can attract enough audience engagement to pay to watch from afar. Notably the “merchandise draw” has become a major factor in the Modern Era, as who can sell the most t-shirts, toys, and other licensed items is a key metric for success in professional wrestling. It can also be used as a noun to refer to the exact number of fans in attendance, the live gate of a show, gross revenue, or television/streaming ratings.

Feed - verb

Derivatives - sandbag

In wrestling the term feed is primarily used to describe a part of the process of transitioning between moves (Shoemaker, 2014). Because wrestling moves are cooperative, wrestlers are trained how to “feed” into the next move without breaking the match’s momentum. Feeding effectively means to position oneself in and throughout the ring during the match so as to constantly be smoothly setting up the next move. For example, when a wrestler is slammed, they will sell on the mat while moving themselves into position to feed into the next move.

American wrestlers feed their left arm or leg during the match. This leaves the dominant hand free to sell. Ironically, it is the exact opposite in Mexican lucha libre. Feeding also describes jumping into moves or using weight sharing techniques to allow an opponent to safely lift, hold, carry and slam them. If a wrestler fails to feed correctly during a lift it is called “sandbagging.” If a wrestler sandbags their opponent intentionally, it is considered dangerous and unprofessional.

Fire - Noun

Derivatives - Babyface fire, fire up

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<sup>65</sup> For example, book sales on this study are not expected to draw a dime.

This term refers to the righteous anger of an embattled hero (Albano et al., 2000). When confronted with danger, rampant cheating or a seemingly overwhelming situation, a babyface will display “babyface fire” and to “fire up.” Babyface fire refers to the quality of charismatically displaying that righteous anger effectively in the ring. It is meant to show the wrestler’s infectious excitement, which tends to display at the moments of greatest tension and drama in a match. The verb phrase “to fire up” can mean to fight back against an opponent, typically with a series of strikes. It can also refer to making garish displays and gestures of excitement. Displaying this state of mind is one of the key steps in characters and matches successfully entertaining the crowd. The methods of displaying this characteristic are used to manufacture charisma or to enhance existing charismatic performers.

Follow - verb

Derivatives - Burn a card

Like in much of show business, professional wrestling, *follow* means to perform after another act (Michaels & Feigenbaum, 2006). Professional wrestlers also sometimes struggle to match the level of engagement as the match of segments which performed prior to them. When wrestlers have an outstanding performance early in the show and no subsequent matches or segments can match that level of engagement, they are said to have “burned the card.” As having the most interesting and exciting segments is considered a great way to move up the card into more lucrative positions.

Foreign Object - noun

This term refers to any object that can be used as a weapon during a wrestling match that is not already allowed by the rules of the match. In standard matches, no weapons are legal. Nevertheless, it is common for some wrestlers, typically heels, to artfully use the weapon without the referee’s knowledge. This can be any blunt object used to bludgeon an opponent. It can also be a number of powders, salts or mists used to blind an adversary. These items are also often passed to a wrestler by their second and returned to them thereafter. Perhaps the most iconic foreign object in professional wrestling is the steel folding chair, which serves as the weapon of choice for most performers.

Gas - noun/verb

Derivatives - on the gas, gassed up

The term *gas* is commonly used to describe blood doping used to improve a wrestler's physique (Shoemaker, 2014). This is commonly done with anabolic steroids or human growth hormone (Shoemaker, 2014).

Get On - verb

The phrasal verbs "to get on," "get on at" and "get (one) on" refers to a wrestler being hired by a promotion (Lebell & Jacobs, 2003). Most professional wrestlers are non-union freelance performers. This term could be a derivative of "get on a roster" but that is unconfirmed. Acting as independent contractors, wrestlers attempt to convince the management staff of promotions (primarily promoters and bookers) to hire them to wrestle. For example, a wrestler may send a tape of their matches and promos to try to get on a promotions roster. In conversation, the preposition "at" is added to specify a particular promotion. For example, "After his contract expired, Brian Danielson got on at All Elite Wrestling." The term is also used to refer to performers vouching for one another and offering recommendations to hire other freelancers. For example, "Bret Hart got his brother Owen on at WWF."

As their careers progress, most wrestlers are focused on getting on at better and higher profile promotions until they can be hired by a major US or international league.

Gimmick - noun, verb, adjective

Derivatives - Gimmick Match, Fernum

Gimmick is one of the most important terms in understanding the art form of professional wrestling. Used as a noun, a gimmick is primarily used to refer to a wrestler's character (Shoemaker, 2014). Most wrestling characters are one-dimensional caricatures that are easily visually identified. The lack of character depth allows for performers to use a costume to define their persona, and depending on their presentation, elicit the admiration or contempt of the fans. As time goes on, successful characters are given additional depth and backstory, eventually allowing them to become two- and three-dimensional characters. Public interest in the caricature is also largely related to the make-up, hair and costuming of the performer. Gimmicks are often shifted or changed in repackages and turns of various characters. In the noun form, gimmick can also be used to refer to an object that defines a character and is often used as a de facto weapon.

This is commonly used interchangeably with the term “foreign object (Shoemaker, 2014).” In the verb form, gimmick is used to explain the process of creating a special effect for wrestling, like a wooden table precut to brake safely when a wrestler is thrown through it.

As an adjective gimmick is used to refer to anything or person related to the character (Shoemaker, 2014). The adjective of gimmick is used interchangeably with adjective forms of “work” or “kayfabe.” For example, Kane and the Undertaker are gimmick brothers, while in reality they are simply good friends and longtime collaborators.

A gimmick match refers to any match where the rules of the bout have been changed and augmented to create a more interesting attraction (Shoemaker, 2014). These matches are often expected to be more violent than standard matches. It is also common for the specific gimmick matches chosen for a feud to be related to the happenings of the feud. Some promoters use these matches as a gratuity to drive interest. Types of gimmick matches are further discussed in the “Types of Matches” section later in the study.

#### Gorilla Position - noun

This term means the area where performers wait when they are next to perform (Phillips, 2022). Much of the time, this is just behind the curtain that separates the backstage from the audience and staging area. The term was derived from WWF lore, when long-time commentator and executive Robert Marella, better known by his ring name “Gorilla Monsoon.” Marella was a fixture of that position in the world’s most famous promotion for years as a backstage timekeeper and agent. Because of this, WWF personnel began referring to the spot as Gorilla Position, which has trickled down throughout the wrestling world. Alternately this area is sometimes called the “Go Position.”

#### Green - adjective

The term *green* is used to describe an inexperienced wrestler (Wrestling Dictionary Terms, 2022). It can be used to refer to a trainee, or anyone who has not yet learned how to navigate the artistic, political and interpersonal subculture of professional wrestling.

#### Hard Cam - noun

Derivatives - Hand cam

The stationary camera which films the wide shot of the matches (LeBell & Jacobs, 2003). Performers are expected to play to this camera during a filmed wrestling event. The hard cam is equated to millions of eyes, so wrestlers are taught to not upstage themselves by too often facing away from it. Turning one's face and selling to the hard cam is considered a vital part of being a successful performer in a major promotion. To allow performers to still play to all sides of the live crowd, many promotions also have a "hand cam," a mobile camera which follows the action from ringside. The footage from these two cameras are often edited together live or in post-production to seamlessly highlight the most exciting portions of the action, while minimizing or hiding any mishaps, botches or shortcomings. The larger the promotion, the more cameras tend to be involved.

Hardcore - adjective

Derivatives - Deathmatch, Extreme, Ultra-Violent

This subgenre of professional wrestling features wrestlers engaged in bloody bouts using a variety of improvised weapons and gratuitously dangerous obtuse torture devices (Shoemaker, 2014). Here is a limited list of common hardcore implements: trash cans, light tubes, cooking sheets, frying pans, road signs, fire extinguishers, tables, ladders, steel chairs, ring steps, television monitors, barbed wire, thumb tacks, beds of nails, kendo sticks, etc. Some within the industry refer to this subgenre as "garbage wrestling" because of both the amount of debris it creates and the perceived lack of artistic quality.

Hard Way - adjective/verb

When a wrestler is accidentally cut or otherwise made to bleed without blading, it is called a "hard way" (Bateman, 2019). This means to "get color the hard way," as opposed to the "easy way" which is to use the blade. These cuts are often deeper, more painful and take longer to heal from than those made by blading.

Heat - noun

Derivatives - heat magnet, go away heat, heat with (someone), hot, the heat, monster heat, booking heat, drawing heat, fade the heat, white hot

The term *heat* is fairly significant in the world of professional wrestling. It is used as a noun that has several meanings that are applied in different contexts.

Firstly, there is the use of the term within the context of a match. During a match, one of the standard stages of the process is called “the heat.” This is the portion of the match where a heel would traditionally appear to have a distinct advantage (Oz, 2012). Gaining this advantage, often by nefarious means, is phrased as “putting the heat on” someone. In situations without the traditional ethical binary of wrestling, the heat will still occur, but in this case the more dominant wrestler will have this extended period of advantage, making that wrestler an operational heel. During this portion of the match, the heel maintains an advantage over the babyface while simultaneously trying to manipulate the crowd into jeering him and/or cheering his adversary. This is usually the longest part of a 7-stage classical American match. It is also typically the middle phase of the match. This will be discussed in more detail in (insert section).

This is related to the second active use which is “crowd heat.” This references the level of interest and energy from the live audience (Shoemaker, 2014). This use of the term is not uncommon in other forms of live sports and entertainment. The hotter a crowd is, the greater the tendency segments have of getting over.

Another category of crowd heat is the amount of anger a crowd has towards the heels on the show (LeBell & Jacobs, 2003; Albano et al., 2000). While a babyface is meant to “pop” the crowd in raucous cheers, a heel is often encouraged to rile a jeering crowd almost to the point of riot. If the creative for a promotion has a show end with the heels winning by dastardly means or otherwise emerging in a dominant position, much to the furious dismay of the crowd; this is called “booking heat.” The philosophy behind booking heat is to rile the angry crowd so that they will return to the next show to see the villains get their comeuppance. The noun “monster heat” or the adjective “red/white hot” is applied to a wrestler who antagonizes a crowd to the point of frenzy. Incidents of monster heat have caused riots and lead to fans attempting to murder wrestlers. This is considered the best kind of heat to have because it is expected to draw money. Antithetically, “go away heat” is applied to wrestlers who are hated for being uninteresting or annoying to the point where fans ignore them and their tedium.

This type of heat drives down draws across the metric spectrum. Examples of the techniques used to attract heat are discussed in the chapter on the craft of professional wrestling. .

The third usage is mostly related to the interpersonal conflicts among performers and office personnel (Shoemaker, 2014). In this context, “heat” is used to mean a conflict. When two people have a grudge against one another, they are said to “have heat” with each other. It can also be used as a noun, for example, “There’s a lot of heat between them.” Heat can also be used synonymously with anger or general dissatisfaction. If someone “has a lot of heat on them” that usually refers to their being unpopular within the locker room or with management. In some situations, to avoid being the brunt of conflict, some individuals will “fade the heat” to someone else; this phrase is similar in usage to the idiom “pass the buck” or simply “place the blame.” If someone is referred to as a “heat magnet” it typically means that they are widely unpopular and/or are generally considered unlikeable.

Heater - noun

Derivatives - Heavy

This term refers to a variety of second most akin to a bodyguard. A heater is used to protect a wrestler while either intimidating or attacking their adversaries (Albano et al., 2000). These individuals are typically larger or otherwise more imposing than the wrestler to whom they are assigned. Antithetical to managers, a heater usually seldom speaks. In stables, heaters are often used in a role akin to an enforcer for the group.

Heel - noun, adjective, verb

This term is used to refer to villains and villainous actions among professional wrestling characters (Shoemaker, 2014). Heels are designed to be unlikeable. A traditional heel is expected to lie, cheat, and steal to accomplish their goals. They also tend to show open contempt for the audience and their adversaries. As a verb it can mean to do something contemptible, or to do something that seeks to inspire contempt from others. They are often both bullies and cowards. Heels are also typically more experienced performers who are better able to manage their performance colleagues. They are also expected to be in control of the proceedings for the majority of the time in the ring. The traditional heel is meant to be antithetical to the babyface. A heel is meant to “draw heat” from the audience to the degree where they inspire people to buy tickets simply to see them lose. A heel is also expected not



to be a role model. Some heels have been so effective that they have caused riots, others have been stabbed or shot by crazed fans. Many have had to run for their lives outside of the shows and many receive death threats. It was a role often pushed upon older or less classically attractive participants. There are many notable exceptions to these norms. This term is often used outside of the wrestling subculture to describe an irredeemably obnoxious or contemptible individual, particularly when this individual is openly antagonizing others. This term is also the main title of a television drama about a fictional professional wrestling organization on the Stars network called, “Heels.”

Hot Shot - verb

The term “hot shot” is used to describe rushing to the payoff of a long angle (Shoemaker, 2014). This short-term creative shift is used to solve a variety of creative issues caused by injuries, talent releases, issues with angles getting over, or a number of other circumstances.

Indy/Indie - noun/adjective

An independent wrestling promotion is a minor league promotion with limited budget and market share (Shoemaker, 2014). These promotions are not typically affiliated with other major promotions. The quality of their wrestling, production, draw and presentation varies wildly. They typically have no television presence, except for local affiliates of networks. While some independent promotions host large, well-attended shows featuring famous wrestlers, these operations are seldom profitable in the long term. The adjective *indy/indie* can be applied to any wrestler who primarily works at these smaller promotions. Most professional wrestlers today are Indy wrestlers, with over 10,000 in the United States in 2022.

Job - verb

Derivatives - jobber, jabroni

In professional wrestling the term “job” is used primarily as a verb to mean losing a match (Shoemaker, 2014). The extended version of the idiom is “to do the job” or “do the honors.” This references the fact that part of a career in professional wrestling requires a performer to be “defeated” in the worked matches. This process is often a blow to the ego, however doing so comes part-in-parcel with the industry. It can be used as a synonym with “to put over” in the in-ring context.

The term “jobber” is a pejorative term for a wrestler who is paid to always lose their matches (Shoemaker, 2014). Other terms used to describe this position are “a job guy” or “enhancement talent.” A jobber will seldom land any significant offense in an encounter. Many wrestlers who are career jobbers are actually quite skilled in the ring and well-practiced at highlighting the talents of the wrestlers they are putting over. Wrestlers who are being heavily pushed will often be set to defeat a number of jobbers in succession to demonstrate that wrestler’s prowess to the audience and build character momentum until they are part of a storyline. A jobber is almost never significantly pushed. The Uber-pejorative term “jabroni” is a takeoff of “jobber” first known to be used by Hossein Vaziri an Iranian Olympic Greco-Roman wrestler who exploded to professional wrestling fame as “The Iron Sheik.” The term was popularized by Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, who acknowledged learning their term from Vaziri, in the late-1990’s. The term jabroni has crossed into mainstream American culture, meaning “a foolish or contemptible person.” (Urban Dictionary)

Kayfabe - noun, verb, adjective

This term most closely translates to the noun or descriptor “secret” or the phrasal verb “to keep a secret.” It can be used as a verb to demand that someone keeps a secret. In a broader sense, it refers to the international and intergenerational conspiracy to present choreographed and worked matches as though they were legitimate contests. In an artistic sense, it describes the world of the play wherein all of the characters and their actions exist separate from the actor-athletes’ reality (Shoemaker, 2014).

Kick out - noun/verb

Derivatives - Near Fall, False Finish, 2-count & 3-count.

When a wrestler’s shoulders are pinned to the mat, they must raise one shoulder before the referee’s hand strikes the mat the third time (LeBell & Jacobs, 2003). When a wrestler lifts one shoulder before the pin fall can be counted, it is called a *kick out*. The etymology of the term references the preference for wrestlers to kick both legs in a dramatic display of effort to use explosive momentum to raise their shoulders from the mat. The term is used universally in wrestling to describe any time a wrestler lifts a shoulder during a pin fall attempt, even if no kicking or explosive momentum is used.

Most kick outs happen at the count of two. A kick out at the count of one usually displays the freshness or imperviousness of the wrestler being pinned. The later in the count that a wrestler lifts their shoulder, the more dramatic the kick out tends to be. This creates a *near fall*, where the match almost ends. Particularly dramatic near falls are termed as “false finishes” because they could conceivably end the match. The tension of the three count rises in the motion of the referee’s hand. In the space between the second and third strike of the mat, tension builds with each millimeter of the referee’s falling hand. A kick out at “2 and a half” typically gets more excitement from the crowd. And the higher the stakes of the match are, audiences will audibly gasp or explode with cheers the closer the referee’s hand gets to the mat. In this situation, wrestlers time their kick outs to the nanosecond before the referee’s hand hits for the count of three to maximize the drama.

Light - adjective

Derivatives - lighten up

This term refers to the amount of actual force used in a professional wrestler’s maneuvers. Because professional wrestling is cooperative, wrestlers are expected to not actually harm one another during a match. Wrestlers are expected to use their acting skills to project that they are viciously attacking their opponent and being placed in agonizing pain, while in reality, no harm or pain comes to anyone involved. A wrestler or an action that is particularly gentle is referred to as “light.” A light wrestler takes the safety of their performance partner very seriously, along with the trust that their colleague has placed in them. A major part of the artistic technique of professional wrestling is attempting to be as light as possible, while simultaneously selling as realistically/interestingly as possible. If a wrestler is being too forceful with their attacks, their opponent will ask them to soften their blows by saying “lighten up.”

Locker Room Etiquette - noun

There is a complex system of politeness and cordiality in professional wrestling (LeBell & Jacobs, 2003). These many rules are unknown to most of the public, and only taught to trainees when they enter the business. The most general notion would be to be respectful of everyone, particularly with making an effort to greet and shake hands with every single member of the locker room. There is also a secret handshake that signals a wrestler’s willingness and ability to protect their colleagues. Other common displays of this etiquette

include buying drinks for others, taking the advice of veterans, helping others carry their bags, etc. There are dozens of other subtle codes of conduct that vary somewhat between various organizations.

Lock-up - noun/verb

Both wrestlers grab a collar-and-elbow tie up (LeBell & Jacobs, 2003). This is traditionally the opening maneuver of a professional wrestling match.

Look - noun

This term refers to the physical appearance of a wrestler (Albano et al., 2000). There are a number of successful looks in wrestling that fit various body types, however, there is a strong leaning towards athletic builds in men and feminine and/or athletic builds in women. There is an historic precedent that the larger and more muscular a wrestler is, the better. This is the source of the famous “airport test,” where if an individual stands out in the airport, they have a potential to draw money. This is most apparent with 140kg (300lb) super-heavyweights and 200cm (6ft 7in) giants. It is also worth observing that professional wrestlers are playing world class athletes, so it stands to reason that if that character was believable, then they would be presented as athletic. It is important that wrestlers have gotten over with most body types, though human giants, female models, and both male and female athletes would tend to be the historically highest grossing looks.

However, a wrestler’s look is not based on stature and muscle mass alone. Wrestlers differentiate themselves from the hyperbolic airport crowds with other flashy accouterments. This enters into the realm of costuming and make-up. We often see brightly colored or bleached hair in large or striking non-traditional hairstyles. Many wrestlers paint their faces, or entire upper bodies. A wrestler’s gear is also used to catch the audiences’ attention, and either highlight or orbit their physiques.

Luchador – noun

Related – Lucha Libre

A luchador is a professional wrestler in the traditional Mexican style of Lucha Libre (Oz, 2012). These wrestlers are visually prominent for their vibrant wrestling masks which

tradition dictates they must never take off in public. This tradition is taken so seriously that many luchadors shower in their masks, or never leave their homes without them. They are also known for their super-athletic acrobatics during matches. The most famous examples of this style are El Santo, Mil Mascaras, La Parka, and crossover-WWE legend Rey Mysterious Jr.

Manager - noun

A manager is the kayfabe cornerman, chief second, and business advocate of a wrestler (LeBell & Jacobs 2003). They often serve as the flamboyant mouthpiece for wrestlers who lack verbal skills. Managers are also used to demonstrate the ethical alignment of wrestlers, though in the Modern Era they are most often associated with heels. Managers also serve as an extra foil, sometimes interfering in matches on their wrestler's behalf. They can distract the opponents, or even assault them during the bout. Indeed, managers also often carry the foreign objects that they or their clients use as de facto weapons during or after matches. Like wrestlers, managers are expected to take occasional bumps during matches to sell the storyline and pop the crowd. Many managers are former wrestlers who have aged out of active competition. It is also common for managers to become in-ring wrestlers during a long-term storyline. Managers can also serve as caring mentors for wrestlers, or abusive bosses.

Midcard - noun/verb/adjective

Derivatives - midcarder, underneath

Performers who are in supporting positions outside of the top attractions are said to be on the "midcard" (Albano, et al., 2000) Midcarders are more highly featured and better paid than developmental or enhancement talent, but not so well as top talent.

The Office - noun

This term refers to the collective management of a wrestling company (Shoemaker, 2014). Most wrestling companies have a division of labor between their two active parts: Locker Room and The Office. The office might include the promoter, the booker, agents, production workers, etc.

The office is also often used by wrestlers to refer to a specific hand signal used during a match. If someone is “given the office,” it means they have been signaled about the next move they should do or sell they should make.

#### Over - Adjective

Derivatives - get over, to go over, to put over, be over with (someone)

The adjective over is of utmost significance to professional wrestling. In the general sense, it means to be engaging or in a certain sense popular (Oz, 2012). When a performer, match, gimmick or angle is “over,” it means that it is engaging audience participation and interest. The more interest an aspect of the performance generates, the more it can be monetized for a profit. Popular is not an exact synonym for over, because heels who are hated by fans are unpopular, but by riling those fans interest and driving them to spend more to attend, view, or participate in the performances is an example of being over. The verbal phrase “get over” is used in reference to the process of becoming attractive to fan interest and therefore more engaging.

This term can also be used as the verb phrase “be over with.” This phrase is used to describe liking something. For example, a wrestler might say, “John Cena is over with me.” This term is often used outside of the wrestling context, for example, “Spider-Man is super over with my kids.” In professional wrestling, it is vital for wrestlers, matches and angles to be over with the fans.

Another common use of the term is another phrasal verb “to put over.” This term has two general meanings. The first meaning is to allow another wrestler to defeat oneself in a match. Those who are willing to engage in putting others over are generally thought of favorably by other wrestlers, while those who do not are considered divas. Wrestlers unwilling to put one another over is historically the cause of considerable backstage conflict within the industry. A secondary meaning of the term means to speak positively of someone or something.

The other common derivative use of the term in the professional wrestling vernacular is as a phrasal verb regarding wins and losses within the storyline. “To go over” or “go over on” someone means to defeat them in a match. The opposite term “to go under” means to lose.

Pay Off - noun/verb

The term payoff has two distinct but comparably vital meanings in the lingo of professional wrestling (Albano et al., 2000). The first literal meaning is to receive the allotted payment for a performance. Some promotions have a set minimum for each performer to be paid, which is negotiated between the bookers, promoters and talents. In many promotions, wrestlers are paid based on the house that was drawn live. In larger promotions, wrestlers receive pay offs from the house, then later payoffs from merchandising, and in some cases from pay-per-view revenue. In smaller promotions, wrestlers sell their own merchandise to get a secondary pay off from their “gimmick table.” These tables often include 8x10 photos, selfies or autographs.

The secondary meaning is in the context of kayfabe. This usage describes the end of an angle where the creative goal is accomplished. Hot angles with satisfying payoffs keep the audience happy and spending their money on the show, while the inverse is true of bland or mediocre payoffs that increase audience dissatisfaction.

Pop - noun/verb

The term *pop* has several overlapping meanings in professional wrestling. The first and most obvious one is to create a massive positive reaction from a live crowd (Oz, 2012). If executed properly, the defending cheers of a professional wrestling audience are seldom matched in live entertainment. The chants, gasps, and cheers of a crowd serve as real time market research data as to what and who is popular with the audience. Pops are typically short-term and audiences become exhausted and pops can atrophy if a show goes too long.

Pop can also be used to describe creating a sharp positive rise in a metric. For example, a popular angle or wrestler can “pop a house” meaning to draw a large live gate at an event. Another common example is when a special attraction is created for a television wrestling program to “pop a rating,” which means to draw a sharp increase in viewership. Much like a live pop from a crowd, these ratings and live gates are often short-lived.

Another common usage is to “pop the boys” meaning to do something for the entertainment of other wrestlers. This often includes doing something outrageous or comical during a live

segment. This usage can also be applied to any targeted group. For example, a comedic segment might be meant to “pop the kids” or an attractive babyface might be brought on to “pop the ladies.”

Industry insiders often use the term in non-wrestling contexts. This can be used as a verb for anything that makes you cheer or laugh as a general rule or a reaction. For example, one could say, “I pop for Dave Chapelle,” or “I popped huge when Arya killed the Night King.”

Popcorn Match - noun

A popcorn match is expected to be of low quality (Shoemaker, 2014). These matches are often strategically placed on a card to give fans a natural opportunity to visit concessions or use the restroom while the show is going on. These segments are also often used to give the crowd a break after particularly exciting matches, interviews, or attractions.

Potato - noun/verb

In professional wrestling, the term potato refers to an accidentally real strike (Shoemaker, 2014). It can be used as a noun or a verb. If a wrestler “potatoes” their opponent, they are expected to recognize it and immediately apologize, often by exclaiming “potato” or “tater.” If a wrestler is potatoed, they will often collect a receipt later in the match or down the line.

Promo - noun

Derivatives - cut a promo

The term *promo* refers to the monologue or dialogue a wrestler uses to promote their current storyline or character arc (LeBell & Jacobs, 2003; Albano et al., 2000). Promos are considered one of the key skills for a performer to be effective. Indeed, promo skills are often considered to be the most important to success in professional wrestling, outpacing even in-ring talent. This is because the narrative in professional wrestling is character driven, and character is most efficiently developed through these speeches. Promos can be delivered in soliloquy, in an interview, in an argument, in vignettes, in backstage segments where performers lack fourth wall awareness, or most iconically in the ring to the crowd with a microphone in hand. Delivering effective promos includes acting skills, practiced public speaking, character awareness, adequate passion, and finite points being communicated.



Because this collection of skills may take years or a lifetime to develop, many wrestlers are paired with a “mouthpiece” who can perform their promo duties for them. This type of pairing is common in both manager-wrestler tandems, as well as tag-teams. These pairings are also useful for young talents who are paired with veterans who can help guide them and hone their promo skills. Never developing promo skills is believed by many to put an upper glass ceiling on a performer’s income and market viability.

For some performers, their skills on the microphone completely overshadow any wrestling they engage in. These wrestlers are said to be able to “talk the fans into the building.” Despite several notable exceptions, no skill is considered to be more vital in drawing money in major professional wrestling organizations than effective promo work.

Promoter - noun

Promotion - noun

Derivatives - Outlaw

Any organization that has put on performances of professional wrestling is called a “promotion.” The owner or owners of that promotion are known as promoters (Albano et al., 2000). As investors in and fiduciary leaders of professional wrestling companies, promoters tend to have a natural inclination towards return on their investments and ultimately profit. This is more common among the larger and more highly regarded promotions in the world. Many smaller promotions exist as wrestling hobbyists invest their own money out-of-pocket to enjoy a minor role in the professional wrestling business. These minor league promotions seldom, if ever, make money on an individual show, and virtually never break even across the entire term of their enterprise.

Most promoters are the final deciders of their organization, per their position as the boss. While some promoters divert authority to their creative teams and promotional partner, the primary investor and owner has ultimate say in a professional wrestling organization. The promoter also assumes some liability for the promotion as they are required in most states to be bonded and insured to get a license to promote. As a license holder, promoters can legally produce wrestling shows without legal ramifications. Promoters who do not have licenses, insurance or bonds are producing shows illegally and may face criminal liability for doing so.

This is called an “outlaw” promotion and is typically frowned upon by reputable performers and contributors to the professional wrestling industry.

Some wrestling promotions become subsidiaries of larger corporations. Examples of this include when Turner Broadcasting purchased Jim Crockett Promotions and created WCW, or when Panda Energy purchased Total Nonstop Action Wrestling which it eventually rebranded as Impact Wrestling. In these situations, an executive of the parent company is designated to oversee the wrestling promotion as a subsidiary. The official titles for these roles vary, but they all include responsibilities for both the success and content of the wrestling brand. In these situations, the designated promoter is further responsible to the executives and departments above them in the corporate chain, though they are not personally liable for any financial losses that the promotion may incur.

Push - noun, verb

In the wrestling vernacular, push means the amount of creative attention and focus a wrestler or angle is getting (Oz, 2012). It can be used as a noun to mean the amount of effort that creative management is putting into getting a particular individual or act over. A “big push” means that management is putting great effort into getting it over, while antithetical “no push” means that zero effort is being put into the process. In the verb form it means to make the effort to get something over with the audience. Many performers spend a great deal of time and energy lobbying to get, build or maintain their push.

It is significant that in very real terms the size of a wrestler’s push determines their earnings and earning potential. The more a wrestler is pushed, the more money they will make. This is particularly true in large organizations where merchandising can drive a performer’s income into the seven or even eight figures. Meanwhile in those same promotions, bottom tier talent might earn less than \$1,000 per week. Simply put, the bigger the push, the more money there is to be made.

There is also an ego factor in the push, as performers wish to be highlighted. Unlike traditional theatre, professional wrestling allows minor characters to eventually be elevated to principal roles over time. Ambitious or creative talents often feel creatively stifled if their push lags or stagnates. Top performers tend to be extremely protective of their positions, to

the point of emotional manipulation, professional undercutting, or physical violence. With both ego and income at stake, the allotment of pushes becomes the source of much internal controversy and political jockeying among wrestlers.

#### Receipt - noun

A receipt is used as a term for a modicum of revenge for stiffness or a potato (Shoemaker, 2014). Typically, it involves the aggrieved wrestler landing a potato or stiff shot of their own. In incidents where wrestlers have wronged one another outside of the ring, they often declare their pursuit or execution of revenge as having “a receipt” for the aggrieved government party.

#### Repackage - verb

This term refers to a performer or their character undergoing significant aesthetic and/or ethical change (Prichard, 2018). This is often the case when a character undergoes a shift in their ethical alignment with a new presentation to match their face or heel turn. This will often include a change in costuming, hair style, grooming, entrance music, attitude, nickname, or name. Sometimes this term refers to a performer who has had a failed character reemerging as a new (and hopefully more interesting) character. This process is also important to keep storylines fresh and interesting. If a character becomes stale, the repackage is used to drum up new interest in the performer or give new life to the transformed character. This is an especially perilous situation when dealing with ongoing, unending episodic storytelling. Some performers undergo several repackages before they find a successful character.

#### Respect - noun/verb

Derivatives - respect the business, respect for the business

The principle of wrestling that is most correlated to backstage conflict is the notion of *respect*. This refers to a broad range of wrestler etiquette which newcomers and outsiders are expected to show (LeBell & Jacobs, 2003). Failure to show due deference to these norms and expectations can result in open hostility, even including acts of violence (LeBell & Jacobs, 2003). Below is a broad, but incomplete lists of the ideas involved in wrestlers showing respect for the business:

Show respect for the business.

Show respect for the traditions of the business.

Show respect for the veterans of the business.

Show respect for the locker room.

Show respect for those who pay you.

Show respect for the ring.

Show respect for your opponent who is trusting you with their body, their livelihood, and their life.

Ring – noun

This is the primary staging area for matches. It is reminiscent of a boxing ring but has many unique aspects. The frame of a standard square ring is usually an interlocking steel frame, with four posts connected by four steel walls which act as trusses. Rows of steel tubing are then used as crossbars to bridge the area that will become the ring floor. The ring floor is constructed of either boards or plywood, which is then covered with soft foam matting, which is then covered in stretched canvas. The canvas is then secured tightly around the frame. It most that rings have three ring ropes. These ropes are usually made of actual rope or airline cables covered in rubber tubing. The ropes are connected to a trio of turnbuckles at each post, which are tight to make the ropes appropriately taut for the style of wrestling being produced. The turnbuckles are then covered in pads. The most common sizes of rings are 4.88m by 4.88m (16ft x 16ft), 5.49m by 5.49m (18ft x 18ft). and 6m by 6m (20ft x 20ft). Ring heights vary, though commonly the posts are 244cm in height, with 94cm (37in) is probably the most common height from the floor to the ring floor, with 137cm from the ring floor to the top rope. The thickness of steel used in frames varies based on manufacturers. Other variations in design include shorter and taller rings, the use of springs or cross-cables, the inclusion of ring steps, the number of sides, the number of ropes, the thickness of the framing, and other factors.

Ring Apron - Noun

The ring apron is the portion of the ring platform which is outside of the ropes (LeBell & Jacobs, 2003). The edge of the ring is used for various purposes, during matches. It is sometimes used as a place for the stage combatants to continue their fight. It is considered

more dangerous than the center area of the ring because it has less padding, more likelihood of an exposed steel ring frame, and less give than the center. If a wrestler reaches this area, the rules say that the action must stop and be restarted inside of the ring. Also, if a wrestler reaches the ring apron while in a hold, the opponent must release the hold within five seconds or risk being disqualified.

#### Ring Crew - noun

The *Ring Crew* is a cadre of technicians, often trainees, who assemble and tear down the wrestling ring (Wrestling Dictionary Terms, 2022). Working on the ring crew is considered a rite of passage for aspiring performers.

#### Ring Post - noun

The ring posts are the four pillars which hold up the four corners of the ring (Wrestling Dictionary Terms, 2022). They are most often made of steel and vary in thickness based on manufacturer. The four-sided ring is almost universally used in every style of professional wrestling around the world. However, six-sided rings are sometimes used, most famously in the US by Total Nonstop Action Wrestling (now Impact Wrestling) throughout much of the 2000's.

#### Ring Ropes - noun

Derivatives - turnbuckle, rope break, running the ropes

Professional wrestling rings, like rings used for boxing, kickboxing, and mixed martial arts, are surrounded by a series of ropes (LeBell & Jacobs, 2003). Unlike combat sports which seek to keep competitors in the ring at all costs during a contest, performers in professional wrestling need to be able to enter and exit the ring swiftly, easily, and sometimes spectacularly. While combat sport rings use four ropes, professional wrestling rings use three. There are usually two kinds of ring ropes: a trio of thick bull ropes that is usually covered in tape; or three steel airline cables housed within a loose rubber tubing. The types of ropes have different advantages and disadvantages. Whichever type of rope is strung through four steel turnbuckles affixed to the corners. These turnbuckles are then covered with a large pad. If a wrestler is in a submission hold during a match and they reach the ropes, the opponent must release the hold within five seconds or risk being disqualified. This is known as a “rope break.”

### Ringside - Adjective/noun

The ringside area is the space between the ring apron and the security barrier during a wrestling match (Albano, et al., 2000)). This area is often used for a secondary place to stage the match when it spills out of the ring. It is also where valets, heaters, seconds, and managers linger to support their wrestler and pump up the crowd. Commentators and members of the production team are commonly stationed in this area. The term can be used as a noun for the area, or an adjective to describe the happenings therein.

### Ring Skirt - noun

The ring skirt is a curtain strung around the outside of the ring (Wrestling Dictionary Terms, 2022). This hides the ring's frame. It is also often used as a branding opportunity for a wrestling company's logo. It can also be used to advertise for sponsors. This curtain also serves to hide whatever is under the ring, which often includes either improvised weapons for wrestlers to use to attack one another, or for hiding a performer who lays in wait to ambush an enemy.

### Rule of Threes - noun

In professional wrestling most sections of the match are broken down into three parts (Phillips, 2022). Actions typically come in trio (Phillips, 2022)s. This can be for attempts of a signature maneuver, bumps in the shine or comeback, the number of consecutive blows landed, or any number of other variables in the match itself. This is considered an essential part of crisp narratives in traditional matches.

### Schmoz - noun

A schmoz is a chaotic brawl with an indecisive conclusion (Shoemaker, 2014). These often occur to build anticipation in a storyline. These situations show that tensions have exploded en route to the payoff.

### Sell - verb, noun

Derivatives - selling, no sell, undersell, oversell

The term sell in professional wrestling is most often used as a verb to describe the way a wrestler acts to convince the audience that they are really in pain, injured, or displaying genuine emotion (Lebell & Jacobs, 2003). It is often also used as a gerund. To sell in a literal sense reference to selling tickets or merchandise because selling properly drives public interest. Selling with the face is particularly significant for televised wrestling as the close-up is an important aspect of production. This is referenced in common advice for television wrestling that is often attributed to Vince McMahon, “The face is where the money is.” Selling with the body is important to the live crowd, as most fans are too far away to see the subtle expression of the face. A common piece of advice given to young wrestlers at live events is to “sell to the back row.” This process involves using broad, exaggerated physical gestures that can be seen by fans in the very furthest seats in arenas.

Selling is generally considered to be one of the most important aspects of getting over. If a wrestler sells well, they will engage the interest of the audience, thus getting both themselves and their performance partner over. If a wrestler fails or refuses to adequately sell for their opponent, the phrasal verb “no sell” is applicable. No selling an opponent can often be viewed as a slight by the other wrestler in the match, though it is often used as a narrative device to build an imposing character or for dramatic effect. No selling is particularly common in the Japanese puroseau style. It can also be used with the derivatives “undersell” meaning to not adequately sell a maneuver, or “oversell” which means to sell a maneuver too much.

Shoot - noun, verb, adjective

Derivatives - Shooter

This term can be most closely described as an adjective synonymous with “real” or “legitimate (Albano et al., 2000).” It is most often used as an adjective this way. As a noun it can refer to any real conflict or confrontation. The derivative term “shooter” refers to individuals who are trained in legitimate martial arts combat sports. It is most often used in reference to wrestlers, submission grapplers and mixed martial arts fighters, though it can also be extended to boxers, kick boxers, and other martial artists. In their verb form, “to shoot on” means for a legitimate fight or conflict to break out. This is often used to describe when a worked fight becomes real or when someone airs legitimate grievances or criticisms in a public forum. In recent years, it has been used to describe out-of-character interviews with

professional wrestlers, which tend toward the highlighting of salacious stories or the venting of personal grudges.

Snug/Tight - adjective

Derivatives - tighten up

The terms *tight* and *snug* are adjectives used interchangeably to describe a level of force used when performing professionally that is widely considered to be a happy medium between lightness and stiffness (Shoemaker, 2014). These terms are used to denote a medium level of limited force which looks authentic but doesn't create any unnecessary danger of injury. This level of physicality is embraced by most top and widely respected stars. If a wrestler's attacks are too light to be convincing, their opponent will tell them to increase their level of force by saying, "tighten up."

Spot - noun

The term spot is used synonymously with "position of employment (Lebell & Jacobs 2003)." It is a shortened version of "spot on the card." It is helpful to not conflate this directly with their term "job" to avoid confusion with that piece of significant wrestling lingo explained above. It can also be used in the verb phrase, "to lose (one's) spot" to describe a performer being terminated or losing their push.

When a wrestler *gets on at* or gets a *spot at/in* a major promotion, it can also be referred to a *getting/being signed* (Lebell & Jacobs, 2003). This refers to signing a (relatively) big money contract for consistent performance tours and dates at that promotion. The pursuit of getting and remaining signed to a major promotion dominates much of the career of the average wrestler, with relatively low success rates. In the US there are only 2 current promotions where the bulk of the roster make more than the US national individual median income which is \$56,287 before taxes. Those promotions are World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) and All Elite Wrestling (AEW).

A spot can also refer to a specific move or a sequence of moves in a match (Shoemaker, 2014). A wrestler uses their "spots" in the context of a match to mean all of their standard



and expected maneuvers. Crowds often respond to this by cheering particularly loudly for the familiar maneuvers of a particular wrestler, not unlike a band playing a hit song in concert.

Stable - noun

Derivatives - Stablemate

A stable is a collection of three or more wrestling characters who are allied together (Shoemaker, 2014). A stable typically has a kitschy collective name, along with shared goals and attitudes. Often their costumes are coordinated. Stablemates often travel together as well, thus extending their kayfabe support system into their real lives. Stables can be as small as three characters together, but there is no upper limit for stable members. The most common iteration of a stable is four wrestlers along with a manager or valet. The breakdown of roles tends to include a top singles wrestler, a rising upstart singles wrestler, and a tag team tandem of a wily veteran and an enforcer. Stables often come into conflict with one another allowing for multiple match combinations with built-in rivalry stakes. These storylines can often last months or even years.

Stiff - noun/verb/adjective

This term refers to a maneuver, strike or wrestler who has a tendency to hurt their opponents (Shoemaker, 2014). This can be from errant strikes that are not appropriately pulled or from the application of holds that are tight enough to actually cause pain. The term stiff is antithetical to the term “light.” Much of the time, stiffness is frowned upon in American professional wrestling because it has a vastly higher chance of causing actual physical damage. It is also discouraged because being forcefully struck or twisted violently is a generally unpleasant experience for the workplace. While some professional wrestling styles encourage stiffness, most notably the Japanese puroseau style, it can be seen as dangerous and the person untrustworthy by colleagues. It can also be used as a verb meaning for an attack to be too real or painful.

Another common use in the wrestling industry is when someone is not paid their agreed upon amount. This is often the source of great conflict between promoters and wrestlers. Stiffing wrestlers on pay can sometimes lead to violent reprisals by wrestlers. Despite the fear of reprisals, being stiffed on pay by a shady promoter is something of a common rite of passage among wrestlers.

Swerve - noun/verb

The term *swerve* has two common uses in professional wrestling (Phillips, 2022). The more common usage is when a storyline is designed with plot twists to defy the audience's expectations. This became a popular tactic during the *Monday Night Wars* wrestling boom of the late-1990's.

Another usage describes when a wrestler is legitimately double crossed regarding the outcome of their match (Phillips, 2022). This sometimes happens when a problematic champion refuses to lose their belt in the ring. Famous instances of this have happened in the WWF, most notably when then-world champion Bret Hart had the WWF title swerved away from him in Montreal by Vince McMahon, Earl Hebner and Shawn Michaels live on pay-per-view in 1997, in an incident infamously known as *The Montreal Screw Job*.

Tag-Team - noun

Derivatives - Tag, Hot Tag, Six-Man Tag/Trio

This a term typically used for a professional wrestling tandem where one of the partners wrestles, while the other partner/partners wasn't on the ring apron in their designated corners (Albano et al., 2000). The designated wrestler in the ring is called the "legal man/woman." Only the person in the ring is legally allowed to participate in the match, though that rule is usually broken a few times every single match thanks to distractions, and various loopholes in the rules. The outside man holds a short length of rope which is attached to the top turnbuckle in his team's corner. He/she must be holding the tag rope to legally tag into the match. A tag occurs when one wrestler on a team tags their partner with their open hand, optimally hand-to-hand.

A hot tag occurs when one wrestler, usually a babyface, has been isolated in the ring by the opposing tandem for much of the match. When this wrestler is finally able to make the tag, their partner attacks the ring with great fervor. This is typically the transition into the climax of the match.

The terms six-man tag-team and trios are often used interchangeably, though their specific meanings diverge somewhat. A six-man tag-team match includes two teams of three wrestlers in a tag-team. The same rules of a normal tag match apply, but with two more participants. The nomenclature is adjustable based on the genders of the participants. In recent years, the term “trios” has been popularized in reference to these matches. These trios also created what is known as the Freebird Rule, wherein any two members of a trio can participate in a 2-on-2 standard tag team match. This makes it possible for three people to hold the two tag-team belts simultaneously.

A mixed tag-team match is a popular attraction for many promotions. This is a match where a tag team or one man and one woman team together. In these matches, there is no inter gender wrestling allowed, though it often occurs. The rules state that when one woman is legally tagged in, that the other is automatically the legal person, and vice versa. This should not be confused with an intergender tag-team match where men and women are allowed to wrestle against one another.

Take Liberties - verb

When a wrestler intentionally inflicts pain on, injures or hurts their opponent, this is called “taking liberties” (Shoemaker, 2014). There are a number of reasons that this occasionally takes place. Sometimes it is the bullying of younger or smaller talent. Other times, it is the settling of a personal vendetta. Whatever the reason, it is universally considered to be the epitome of unprofessionalism in professional wrestling. When this happens, it is much more likely that the aggrieved wrestler will seek payback and that the aggrieving wrestler will face reprisal from their opponent, their peers, and the management of the promotion.

Territory - noun/adjective

Throughout much of the kayfabe era in American professional wrestling, the United States was divided up into several promotional fiefdoms by the National Wrestling Alliance (O, 2017). These territories existed independently of one another, often trading or sharing talent. All of the territories recognized a collection of world champions decided by committee at the annual NWA board meeting. These promotions would be barred from broadcasting their television product into any areas outside of their territorial jurisdiction. For the better part of the 20th century, this system was a very viable business model as separate promotions

operated with live shows seven days a week around the country for decades. Any independent promotion which ran outside of a territory was considered an “outlaw” promotion. These types of full-time regional promotions began dying out and became rare with the advent of national cable television and the conglomeration of wrestling in the late-1980’s.

Title - noun

Derivatives - Belt, Strap, Championship

The role of championship titles is discussed at some length in later sections of this study. Ostensibly the actual physical object is a massive, ornate, title belt in the fashion of most combat sport trophies that signifies their position as a lineal or grand prix champion (Albano et al., 2000). The oldest wrestling title belts date back to mid-19th Century England and the local catch wrestling titles (R. Pashayev, personal communication, 21 December 2021). In the kayfabe narrative, they serve as a narrative device which all characters pursue to drive the story. The cultural symbolism of the championship belt and what it represents is discussed later in the study (cite a section). There is typically a belt for each person who holds the lineal title in each promotional division. Some belts are given as trophies for grand prize titles. The belts are typically dominated by a large ornamental center plate and several smaller side plates on either side. They are usually snapped together around the wearer’s back.

Top Talent - noun

A top talent is used to refer to the performers who draw and are paid the most money (LeBell & Jacobs, 2003). This upper strata of performers tend to be the driving force of a wrestling company, bearing some responsibility for its financial success or failures. They are also featured prominently as a principal of or the centerpiece of the show. They are considered a star.

Trainee - noun

Derivatives - Paying Dues, Untrained

A trainee is a new wrestler or performer who is in the process of officially learning the craft of professional wrestling (LeBell & Jacobs, 2003). This process is often years-long and extremely physically and psychologically grueling. Aspirant performers often pay thousands

of dollars for reputable trainers to teach them the techniques of physical narrative, along with character portrayal in the art form. This grueling process of *paying dues* often includes performing unpleasant tasks like run construction, filtering, providing security at shows where the talent is not booked, selling merchandise, assisting in production, etc. The process is meant to familiarize the trainee with every aspect of the business, while simultaneously providing promoters with a ready source of necessary cheap labor. Trainees are rarely well-paid, if they are compensated with anything beyond experience. Paying dues is considered a vital part of respecting the business, and being perceived to have not done so is a mark of extreme derision among the Locker Room.

Worse yet, an *untrained* wrestler is typically a fan who has not had any formal wrestling training. This type of individual often performs at outlaw “backyard wrestling” events, hence the keenly insulting pejorative “backyarder/yarder.” These individuals are known for having no understanding of the craft, being wildly unsafe, and being overall detrimental to the professional wrestling industry. These enthusiastic would-be performers are ostensibly engaged in a cosplay role playing game set in the world of kayfabe. These individuals often misrepresent themselves and attempt to join professional organizations, which can cause accidental injury to performers or violent reprisals.

Turn - noun

Derivatives - Heel Turn, Face Turn, Double Turn

This term is used to describe a shift in the ethical alignment of a particular character (Shoemaker, 2014). If a character has gotten stale in their current form, or if a character has begun to become more loved or reviled by the crowd that their current alignment dictates, the creative directors of the organization will create a context in which that character can realign within the confines of the story. If a heel becomes popular, they will have a face turn and if a babyface becomes unpopular, they will take a heel turn. There is often a transition period of being a tweener during the period of the turn. The rarely used double turn describes when both characters shift their ethical alignments simultaneously when paired together. This is a rare creative move because it is extremely difficult to execute.

Tweener - noun

This term is used to refer to a character that does not fit neatly into either category of professional wrestling's traditional ethical binary. Tweeners is used to describe a fluid ethical spectrum which displays qualities of both babyfaces and heels (Shoemaker, 2014). This mode of character became commonplace in the late-1990's during the professional wrestling boom called the "Attitude Era." During this time public perception of certain traditionally moral wrestling behavior began to veer more negatively as counter-culture and as the child-fans of 1980's cartoonish wrestling superheroes began to come of age. These fans embraced the middle of the ethical spectrum and the unpredictability that those characters brought to the art form. This also included a "cool factor" associated with rebellion against social and societal norms. There are also subcategories of tweeners which describe different segments of modern professional wrestling's ethical spectrum. Examples of this would include the "antihero babyface" personified in that era by Stone Cold Steve Austin, or the "cool heel" personified by the nWo stable. Tweeners are also often used as utility players who are wrestlers that can fill in an adversary for anyone on the roster at a given time. These utility tweeners tend to be very experienced workers who have the skill to manipulate the crowd reactions toward them actively in the match. They are also known for being characteristically safe with their opponents and therefore trustworthy.

Valet - noun

A valet is an individual who escorts a wrestler to the ring in a non-business capacity (Albano et al., 2000). Most often, this is a beautiful woman and kayfabe romantic partner of the wrestler they are accompanying. The timeless example of this is "The Macho Man" Randy Savage, and his then-wife Miss Elizabeth. Valets, like managers, often interfere in matches, as distractions or assailants of wrestlers. Much like managers, valets are virtually always at least occasional wrestlers.

Vignette - noun

A vignette is a sketch, commercial or segment that features wrestlers in their kayfabe characters outside of the arena (Albano et al., 2000). These mini-movies are used to build interest in characters and storylines. These vignettes often happen behind the fourth wall.

Work - noun, verb, adjective

Derivatives - Worked, worker

This term refers to any lie, trick, con, or other deception. It can also describe something that was predetermined (Shoemaker, 2014). As a verb, it can be used to mean that something has been rigged in one's favor, much like a carnival game that can't be legitimately won. The past-tense verb "worked" can also be used as an adjective descriptor. work can also be used as an adjective in the place of "fake." This is also where the moniker of "worker" is derived. A worker is any member of the wrestling business who performs in character. Workers include, but are not limited to wrestlers, referees, managers, valets, ring announcers, commentators, timekeepers, and more. Specifically, it refers to any person who plays a role in the public deception/performance. It is most commonly used to describe wrestlers. Notably, many professional wrestlers express the opinion that all or most things outside of the professional wrestling subculture are also works.

Work Rate - noun

The quality of a wrestler's performance in the ring is commonly called their "work rate" (Wrestling Dictionary Terms, 2022). While no numerical scale exists for work-rate, it is generally considered indicative of athleticism, storytelling, safety, smoothness, selling, and ability to get over.

Wrasslin' - noun

Derivatives - Rasslin', Rasslers, Wrasslers

The common mispronunciation of "wrestling" has a surprisingly long history. The term originated in the United Kingdom and was used as far back as Geoffrey Chaucer and appears intentionally in the writings of William Shakespeare (Bazley, 2021). Originally, the term was used to describe the style of wrestling native to Cornwall, England (Roberts, 2000). Cornish wrestling also spawned the term "stickler" as this was the title given to the three referees who would make sure rules were being followed in matches (Roberts, 2000). Colloquially, this style of wrestling became known as "wrasslin." The term became common in the United States in reference to professional wrestling during the Cornish diaspora in the latter-half of the 19th century (Bazley, 2021). The Cornish, known for being adept miners, were welcomed in copper, gold and silver mines across the United States during this period of transcontinental economic expansion (Bazley, 2021). Throughout the Midwest and the South, the terms "wrasslin'" and "wrassler" became synonymous with American professional wrestling, particularly after Frank Gotch unified the American heavyweight title with the

Cornish world wrasslin championship by defeating long-time champion Jack Carkeek in 1905 (Wheeler, 2014).

The pronunciation of “Wrasslin” is also used as a pejorative in several contexts. One is the mispronunciation is used by proponents of legitimate wrestling to deride the athletic performance art (Shoemaker, 2014) . Another use of *wrasslin* as a pejorative is by members of the professional wrestling industry who find the sub-style of American professional wrestling common in the South to be detestable (Shoemaker, 2014).

#### Wrestling Pejoratives -

Professional wrestling subculture also has its own negative lingo (Oz, 2012; Shoemaker, 2014; Wrestling Dictionary Terms, 2022). This is an unfortunate symptom of the historically cutthroat nature of much of the professional wrestling business. These terms are commonly used to insult or deride others within the industry. Terms like jobber, backyarder, or crowbar have already been discussed. Below is a brief list of negative terms commonly used in professional wrestling.

- Mark - noun - an insulting term for fans popularized in the Carnival Era
- True Believer - noun - a modern wrestling fan who apparently remains completely ignorant to the reality that professional wrestling is performance art
- Money Mark - noun - a pejorative for a hapless wrestling investor, usually a fan keen on joining the industry, who unscrupulous industry insiders will inevitably attempt to scam
- Mark for (oneself) - noun - a performer with an ego so large that it leads them to alienate themselves from their peers
- Smart Mark/Smark - noun - fans who consider themselves insiders, usually consumers of dirt sheets, apter mags, shoot interviews, and assorted wrestling-related podcasts
- Mark Out - verb - to behave like an over-enthusiastic fan of anything
- ring rat/rizzat - noun - a pejorative for a wrestling groupie who engages in no exclusive sexual relationships with wrestlers, often providing them with accommodations; alternately called a “sponsor” when spoken of positively
- goof - noun - a hapless, dumb and/or unskilled person



- the shits/an abortion - noun - an awful match
- locker room cancer - noun - an individual who sews conflict and disharmony in the locker room, often creating a tense or divided environment

stooge - noun/verb - a person who cannot be trusted or a person who will not keep a secret; the verb “to stooge off” means to share a secret<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> For example, the writer of this study is a huge mark who stooged off the entire wrestling business.

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- Martin Lundy was an acclaimed professional wrestler throughout the 1980's and 1990's by his ring name of "Arn Anderson." He is the founder of the "Four



Horsemen” stable, alongside longtime stablemate Ric Flair, with whom he would align himself as an on-screen character in Jim Crockett Promotions, WCW and the WWE. He would become a professional wrestling producer in WCW, WWE and AEW from the 1990’s-2020’s.

Thompson, C., & Angle, K. (2021). The Kurt Angle Show. *AdFreeShows.com*. other, Patreon.

Kurt Angle is an acclaimed retired amateur and professional wrestler. He won the gold medal in men’s freestyle wrestling in the 100kg division at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Summer Games. Angle would go on to be a celebrated professional wrestler with WWE, TNA, and internationally.

Thompson, C., & Bischoff, E. (2018). 83 Weeks with Eric Bischoff. Other.

Eric Bischoff is the former President of WCW. Under his leadership, WCW became the #1 professional wrestling company in the world. Bischoff would later be a high-ranking executive at WWE and TNA/Impact Wrestling. Bischoff is also a longtime television executive and producer.

Thompson, C., & Crockett, J. (2021). Conversations with Conrad: Jim Crockett Jr. *AdFreeShows.com*. other, AdFreeShows.com.

Jim Crockett Jr. was the former President of the National Wrestling Alliance promoter of Jim Crockett Promotions.

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Mick Foley is a retired professional wrestler who was a top performer in WWE, WCW, TNA/Impact Wrestling, and internationally. Foley is also a multiple-time best-selling author.

Thompson, C., & Herd, J. (2020, November 9). Conversations with Conrad: Jim Herd. *AdFreeShows.com*. other, Ad Free Shows. Retrieved December 1, 2022,.

Jim Herd is a former executive at Turner Broadcasting. He was the Executive Vice President of WCW from 1989-1992.

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Jeff Jarrett is an acclaimed fourth-generation professional wrestling industry professional whose career spanned from the late-1980's to the early-2020's. He has been an acclaimed wrestler in the WWE, AEW, WCW, TNA/Impact, Jim Crockett Promotions, USWA, internationally and in several territories. He was the co-founder and is the former promoter of TNA/Impact Wrestling. He has served as an executive in AEW, WWE, TNA/Impact Wrestling, USWA, and several Tennessee-based promotions.

Thompson, C., & Prichard, B. (2016, August). Something to Wrestle With Bruce Prichard. *AdFreeShows.com*. other, AdFreeShows.com. Retrieved November 29, 2022,.

Bruce Prichard is a long-time producer and executive in the WWE. His combined tenures with the company as a high-ranking executive includes five decades: the 1980's, 1990's, 2000's, 2010's and 2020's. He is also a former executive for Impact/TNA Wrestling. He is a retired manager and occasional wrestler as "Brother Love."

Thompson, C., & Ross, J. (2019, April). Grilling JR . *AdFreeShows.com*. other, AdFreeShows.com. Retrieved November 29, 2022,.

Jim Ross is a fan-favorite professional wrestling commentator. He is also a long-time executive in WCW, Mid-South Wrestling and the WWE. In the WWE he was the Senior Vice President of Talent Relations.

Thompson, C., & Schiavone, T. (2017, January). What Happened When with Tony Schiavone. *AdFreeShows.com*. other, AdFreeShows.com. Retrieved November 29, 2022,.

Tony Schiavone is a long-time professional wrestling play-by-play commentator. He was also an executive for Jim Crockett Promotions and WCW. He is currently a commentator and executive for AEW.

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# Summary of Getting Over: A Study of the History, Industry, Performance Art, & Cultural Impact of American Professional Wrestling

Introduction - This section introduces the study of the history, industry, performance art and cultural impact of American professional wrestling. It breaks down the research questions, research methodologies, sourcing, findings, and limitations of the study. It also clearly states the conclusions that the subsequent information presented allowed the writer to inevitably reach. Among these findings are that professional wrestling is a style of performance art, that this art has had a massive cultural impact, and that the methods, standards, traditions, and conventions of this art are well-established. This section serves as an abbreviated summary of the rest of the study.

## VOLUME I: The Industry, Craft & Cultural Impact of American Professional Wrestling

1.0 Professional Wrestling as Theatre - This subsection introduces the first chapter of the study. This chapter will address the question as to whether professional wrestling is or is not theater.

1.1 The Squared Circle State: Comparative Analysis of Professional Wrestling and Historical Theatre Styles - This subsection introduces a comparative analysis of American professional wrestling alongside well-established theatrical styles. The styles selected in this section has significant overlap in some aspect or aspects of their storytelling conventions as professional wrestling. It also examines whether or not professional wrestling can be classified as a sport. The finding in section 1.1 have been previously published in a peer-reviewed academic journal.

1.1.a Commedia Dell'arte - This subsection performs a detailed comparative analysis of the narrative conventions, methodology, traditions and standards of professional wrestling and Italian Commedia Dell'arte.

1.1.b Greek Drama - This subsection performs a detailed comparative analysis of the narrative conventions, methodology, traditions and standards of professional wrestling and traditional Hellenic Greek Drama.

1.1.c Kabuki - This subsection performs a detailed comparative analysis of the narrative conventions, methodology, traditions and standards of professional wrestling and Japanese Kabuki theater.

1.1.d Modern Exhibition Sport - This subsection performs a detailed comparative analysis of the athletic elements of professional wrestling and several exhibition sports. Chief among the exhibition sports examined in this comparative analysis is demonstration martial arts. This section concludes that because of the lack of several aspects related to competitive transparency, professional wrestling in its current form is not an exhibition sport, though those aspects are possible to develop.

1.2 The Myth of Low Culture - This subsection examines the question of the existence of ascending strata of artistic media in culture. It established that this study draws from the work of cultural theorist John Storey and sociologist Omar Lizardo. The study rejects classical notions of high and low culture and dissociates from the notion that mass or pop culture is reflective of exploitative socio-cultural power dynamics. Rather, this study argues that the cultural significance of art is determined by the public interest in that work, whether contemporary or retrospective.

1.3 Life's a Work: Professional Wrestling and Performance Theory - This subsection introduces the analysis of professional wrestling as performance art. It uses five methods of examining performativity to create a 59-point matrix to determine whether an activity is performance. Ultimately, these individual methods and the full matrix determined that professional wrestling is indeed performance.

1.3.a Method I: The Schechner Criteria - This subsection examines the methods of determining performance based on the works of innovative performance theorist Richard Schechner.

1.3.b Method II: The Sebesta & O'Hara Criteria - This subsection examines the methods of determining performance based on the works of respected performance theorists Judith Sebesta and Michael O'Hara.

1.3.c Method III: The Bentley Criteria - This subsection examines the methods of determining performance based on the works of acclaimed performance theorist Eric Bentley.

1.3.d Method IV: The Aristotle Criteria - This subsection examines the methods of determining performance based on the works of classical performance theorist Aristotle.

1.3.e Method V: The Carlson Criteria- This subsection examines the methods of determining performance based on the works of renowned performance theorist Marvin Carlson.

1.3.f Conclusions on Professional Wrestling and Performance Theory - This subsection examines the overall findings of the individual methods of performativity analysis. It also measures those methods in their aggregate matrix. The matrix and the individual methods used in it all determine across all criteria that professional wrestling is performance.

1.4 Modern Academic Scholarship on Professional Wrestling Studies - This subsection analyzes various sources of scholarship on professional wrestling. The study of professional wrestling history is an industry unto itself, as global professional wrestling fandom consistently consumes media related to bygone eras of professional wrestling nostalgia. Likewise, this subsection discusses professional wrestling journalism. Finally, it discusses the growing body of academic study of the art, industry, and cultural influence of professional wrestling.

1.5 The Performativity of Americanness: Cultural Symbolism in Professional Wrestling Performance - This subsection examines American professional wrestling through the lens of American cultural iconography and the expression of Americanness by demonstrating adherence to the cultural conventions symbolized by those icons. It draws heavily from the works of German-born Americanist scholar Sussane Hamscha and her book *The Fiction of America: Performance and the Cultural Imaginary in Literature and Film*.

2.0 The Craft of the Work - This subsection introduces the second chapter of the study. This chapter discusses methods, standards, formats, and conventions of how narrative storytelling is performed in traditional American professional wrestling. It can serve as a manual for narrative performance, staging, symbolism, and technical theatrics in American professional wrestling. It establishes the fundamental American professional wrestling matches. It also gives case studies of matches, short-term angles, and long-term storylines. It discusses the variations of these methods based on the budget, scale, style, and scope of the performances.

2.1 The Foundational American Professional Wrestling Match - This subsection established the foundational traditional American professional wrestling match. It also discusses how this match extolls traditional American values as expressed by French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville. It was written in consultation by acclaimed American professional wrestler Jason “The Gift” Kincaid.

2.2 Match Time - This subsection discusses the importance and calculation methods of match time.

2.3 Staging of Professional Wrestling - This subsection discusses the standards and conventions of staging performance in professional wrestling. This subsection includes discussions of the stage, performance space, audience seating arrangement, lighting, costuming, videography, and other aspects of technical theater in professional wrestling.

2.4 The Psychology of a 7-Phase Singles Match - This subsection discusses the methods of performance in a professional wrestling match in the most basic general format in traditional American professional wrestling. It establishes the methods that performers use to elicit emotional responses from the audience. A theoretical match is discussed to demonstrate to the reader the purposes and applications of in-match narrative techniques. The traditional ethical alignment binary of American professional wrestling is established, as well as the evolving ethical spectrum of contemporary professional wrestling.

2.4.a Phase One - Entrance and Establishment of Character - This subsection establishes that live professional wrestling performance begins when a character steps through the curtain and into the performance space. It discusses the critical initial interactions between that character and audiences. Performers seek to manipulate the audience using a variety of methods during this time to sway audience members’ feelings towards them.

2.4.b Phase Two - The Shine Exposition and Happy Normalcy - This subsection discusses the second phase of a traditional American professional wrestling match. In this phase, the protagonist establishes an early advantage over the antagonist.

2.4.b.i Chain Wrestling - This subsection discusses the use of sport wrestling and submission holds in a professional wrestling match to establish the athletic acumen, or lack thereof, by the performers.

2.4.b.ii The International - This subsection discusses the most common multi-maneuver spot used in professional wrestling performance.

2.4.b.iii Heroic High Impact Action - This subsection discusses the rapid series of flashy and/or high-impact moves used to build audience excitement to conclude this phase of the match.

2.4.d Phase Three - The Cut-Off and the Turning Point - This subsection discusses the third phase of a traditional American professional wrestling match. In this phase, the antagonist claims the advantage in the match, usually through unscrupulous, dishonest, or bullying means.

2.4.e. Phase Four - The Heat and Rising Action - This subsection discusses the fourth phase of a traditional American professional wrestling match. In this phase, the protagonist repeatedly tries and fails to regain a sustained advantage in the match. The antagonist continues to gloatingly torment the protagonist and the audience, often at their own peril. Despite brief glimpses of the protagonist regaining control, the antagonist repeatedly and decisively blocks their attempts.

2.4.f Phase Five - The Climactic Comeback- This subsection discusses the fifth phase of a traditional American professional wrestling match. In this phase, the protagonist finally regains the advantage in the match, culminating in another series of flashy and/or high-impact maneuvers to top even their earlier display.

2.4.g Phase Six - The Finish- This subsection discusses the sixth phase of a traditional American professional wrestling match. In this phase, the winner of the match is determined. Though these outcomes are predetermined, they are unknown to the audience. For the theoretical match, three common endings are discussed, and the narrative implications of those endings are established.

2.4.h Phase Seven: The Post-Match Denouement - This subsection discusses the seventh phase of a traditional American professional wrestling match. In this phase, the ending of the performance is discussed, wherein character narratives continue until the performers have again crossed the threshold into the backstage area. The events during this phase establish whether the story told in the match is over, or part of a longer narrative arc with more content to come.

2.4.i Analysis of a Foundational American Wrestling Ring Performance and Narrative Psychology - This subsection analyzes the methods, strategies, techniques, traditions,

staging, standards, and cultural symbolism in the fundamental 7-phase foundational American professional wrestling match.

2.5 Case Study of a Traditional American Professional Wrestling Match - This subsection performs a case study of the widely used 9-Act variant of the traditional American professional wrestling match. It establishes the differences between the 9-Act variant and the 7-Phase foundational match. The match the case study analyzes “The Enforcer” Arn Anderson wrestling against “Diamond” Dallas Page on the 13 March 1994 edition of *WCW Saturday Night*, with Anderson cast as the protagonist and Page as the antagonist.

Act 1 - The Introductions - This subsection discusses the entrances and character introductions of Anderson vs Page.

Act 2 - Chain Wrestling and Shine - This subsection discusses the early phases of the match between Anderson vs Page, wherein Anderson gains an initial advantage.

Act 3 - The Minor Cut Off - This subsection discusses Page’s methods of claiming a short-lived advantage over Anderson.

Act 4 - The Minor Comeback - This subsection discusses Anderson’s early rally to reclaim the advantage over Page.

Act 5 - The Major Cut-Off - This subsection discusses Page’s methods of claiming a more decisive and sustained advantage over Anderson.

Act 6 - The Heat and Hope Spots - This subsection discusses Page’s methods of maintaining an advantage over Anderson, despite repeated fiery rallies by Anderson. Page taunts the crowd, uses unsavory tactics, and repeatedly shuts down Anderson’s rallies in this phase.

Act 7 - The Comeback - This subsection discusses Anderson’s finally mounting a sustained and decisive rally to regain control of the match. Anderson lands a series of deceive and exciting moves on Page to the crowd’s delight.

Act 8 - The Finish - This subsection discusses a final back and forth between the wrestlers, with Page regaining a temporary advantage, only to succumb to Anderson’s use of an inside-cradle for the victory.

Act 9 - The Denouement - This subsection discusses Anderson and Page’s behaviors after the match to reinforce their characters and the ethical alignments of those characters.

2.5.a Analysis of the Effects of the 9-Act Match: DDP vs Arn Case Study - This subsection examines the narrative themes of the Anderson vs Page match. The effects that match had on the characters involved and the audiences' perceptions of those characters is examined. The techniques used by the performers to optimize this process are also discussed.

2.6 Gimmick Matches - This subsection reviews several common variations on the rules of professional wrestling. Colloquially known as "gimmick matches" these variations bring with them their own performative, narrative, and staging challenges.

2.6.a The Steel Cage Match - This subsection discusses the conventions, staging, and performance of a cage match.

2.6.b Ladder Match - This subsection discusses the conventions, staging, and performance of a ladder match.

2.6.c The Scramble Match - This subsection discusses the conventions, staging, and performance of a scramble match.

2.6.d Battle Royal - This subsection discusses the conventions, staging, and performance of a battle royal.

2.6.e The "I Quit" Match - This subsection discusses the conventions, staging, and performance of a submission match.

2.6.f The No-Holds-Barred Match - This subsection discusses the conventions, staging, and performance of a no disqualification match, wherein the use of weapons is inevitable.

2.6.f.i Deathmatch - Red Equals Green - This subsection discusses the conventions, staging, and performance of the garishly violent "deathmatch" subgenre of no holds barred matches.

2.6.g Container Match - This subsection discusses the conventions, staging, and performance of a container match.

2.6.h Attachment Match - This subsection discusses the conventions, staging, and performance of an attachment match.

2.6.i Knockout Match - This subsection discusses the conventions, staging, and performance of a match that can only be won by knocking an opponent unconscious for a pre-set period of time.

2.6.j Specific Bodily Harm Match - This subsection discusses the conventions, staging, and performance of a match that is won by the infliction of specific bodily harm.

2.6.k Specific Weapons Match - This subsection discusses the conventions, staging, and performance of a match wherein only the use of a specific weapon is allowed.

2.6.l The Lumberjack Match - This subsection discusses the conventions, staging, and performance of a lumberjack match.

2.6.m The Cinematic Match - This subsection discusses the conventions, staging, and performance of a cinematic match which is partly or entirely pre-taped.

2.6.n The Ironman/Ironwoman Match - This subsection discusses the conventions, staging, and performance of a match wherein the competitor who scores the most falls in a pre-set period of time is declared the winner.

2.6.o The Wager Match- This subsection discusses the conventions, staging, and performance of a match where the competitors wager something for the match.

2.7 Global Approaches Reflective of Culture in the Craft and Methods of Professional Wrestling - This subsection examines prominent styles of professional wrestling from around the world. The cultural influences that cause variations in the performance are discussed. These variations as an expression of the cultural values of a particular society are examined.

2.7.a The Foundational 7-Phase American Match & 9-Act Variant - This subsection reviews the American cultural values expressed in the basic American professional wrestling matches discussed in the previous section.

2.7.b Japanese Professional Wrestling Styles - This subsection introduces an overview of narrative performance conventions in Japanese professional wrestling.

2.7.b.i Puroseu - Japanese Strong Style - This subsection discusses the history, performance, application, and influence of Puroseu, a substyle of Japanese professional wrestling.

2.7.b.ii Modern Super Junior/Cruiserweight Style - This subsection discusses the history, performance, application, and influence of the Super Junior Heavyweight substyle of Japanese professional wrestling. It is also commonly known as the Cruiserweight substyle.



2.7.b.iii Japanese Match Narrative - This subsection discusses the narrative conventions of Japanese professional wrestling. It also performs a comparative analysis of that style and traditional American professional wrestling.

2.7.c Lucha Libre - This subsection discusses the history, application, influence, performance, and narrative conventions of Mexican professional wrestling.

2.7.c.i Lucha Libre Storytelling as Compared to its American Counterpart This subsection performs a comparative analysis of that style and traditional American professional wrestling.

2.7.d European Technical - This subsection discusses the history, application, influence, performance, and narrative conventions of European professional wrestling. It specifically examines the style of professional wrestling facilitated under Lord-Admiral Mountevan's rules, which became the standards of performance in the United Kingdom and Germany throughout much of the 20th century.

2.7.d.i European Professional Wrestling Storytelling and its American Counterpart This subsection performs a comparative analysis of that style and traditional American professional wrestling.

2.7.e Conclusions and Analysis of International Professional Wrestling Styles - This subsection examines the results of the aggregated comparative analyses of traditional American professional wrestling and the international styles of professional wrestling discussed in the subsections immediately previous. The hybridization of international and American styles of professional wrestling performance is discussed.

2.8 Booking 101: Introduction to Episodic Storytelling in American Professional Wrestling - This subsection examines the conventions and methodology of episodic narrative in professional wrestling. This method extends the story arcs of characters and the narratives within matches across segments, performances, and shows to become episodes in longer narratives of varying lengths. Strategies to optimize these processes are also discussed. The role of "bookers" as the primary architects directing professional wrestling performance is examined. This subsection draws on the expertise of histories provided by luminaries of the industry, as well as personal interviews with Kincaid and former WWE writer Matt Weir.

2.8.a Getting Booked and Doing the Job: Opportunity and Ego in Fictional Matchmaking - This subsection examines the strategies and struggles of professional

wrestling performers attempting to get hired to promotions. This subsection also examines the effect of performer ego on fictional matchmaking and internal promotional politics.

2.8.a The Intoxicating Power of the Pencil - This subsection examines the amount of power bookers wield in professional wrestling. Strategies used by bookers to manage performers and staff is also discussed.

2.8.b Building The Match for Public Consumption - This subsection examines strategies used to format specific matches used in ongoing story arcs. The personnel involved in this process in promotions of various sizes is discussed.

2.8.c The Segment: The Elemental Unit of Performance in Professional Wrestling - This subsection examines the formatting strategies of professional wrestling segments. It establishes the various manner of segments including matches, vignettes, promos, interviews, and other kinds of segments. The style, prominence, and contents of different segments is discussed. The ordering, timing and execution of segments of a live performance and/or a televised performance is also discussed.

2.8.d Undisputed Era: A Case Study of an Episodic Story in Professional Wrestling - This subsection provides a case-study of a successful short-term storyline on WWE television. The debut of the performers in and creation of the acclaimed “Undisputed Era” stable is examined.

2.8.e Raw #1090: A Case Study of an Authenticated Script for a Live Large-Scale American Professional Wrestling Episode - This subsection provides a case-study of a typical performance of an internationally televised professional wrestling episode. A leaked script for *WWE Raw*, authenticated by Weir, is provided. The coordination by the broadcast team, technical crew, performers, and segment supervisors is examined.

2.8.f The Three Faces of Foley: A Case Study of Long-Term Episodic Character Evolution in Professional Wrestling - This subsection provides a case-study of a successful long-term character arc in professional wrestling. The “Three Faces of Foley” story arc is acclaimed by both critics, performers, industry professionals, and fans. This subsection studies the techniques and methods used during the 22-month episodic arc.

2.9 The Revenue Structure and Business Administration of Professional Wrestling - This subsection examines the revenue streams for professional wrestling. It also discusses how

these revenue structures have evolved over time and how they vary based on the size of the promotion.

3.0 The Unavoidable Presence of Professional Wrestling in American Pop Culture - This chapter discusses the prominence of professional wrestling as a part of American popular culture.

3.1 Professional Wrestling On the Big and Small Screens - This subsection introduces the presence, prominence, and importance of professional wrestling and professional wrestlers in both cinema and television. The presence, prominence and importance of cinema, television, and other entertainers in professional wrestling is also introduced.

3.1.a Professional Wrestling and Cinema - The presence, prominence and importance of cinema performers and personalities in professional wrestling is discussed. The presence, prominence and importance of professional wrestlers in cinema is discussed.

3.1.b Professional Wrestling on Television - The importance of professional wrestling as a commodity with television as its primary distribution is examined. The presence, prominence and importance of television performers and personalities in professional wrestling is discussed. The presence, prominence and importance of professional wrestlers on television is discussed.

3.1.c Celebrity Crossovers into Professional Wrestling - The presence, prominence and importance of celebrities in professional wrestling is discussed. The presence, prominence and importance of professional wrestlers as celebrities is also discussed.

3.2 Professional Wrestling and American Politics - The presence, prominence and importance of politicians in professional wrestling is discussed. The presence, prominence and importance of professional wrestlers in politics is discussed.

3.3 Putting the Sports in Sports Entertainment - Sports Culture Crossovers - This subsection introduces the intersection of sports and professional wrestling. The presence of competitive athletes and sports stars in professional wrestling is introduced. The presence of professional wrestlers as competitive athletes and former/future sports stars is introduced. The intersections of professional wrestling and boxing, mixed martial arts and American football are discussed in detail. An overview of the intersections of professional wrestling and other sports is provided.

3.3.a Boxing and Professional Wrestling - This subsection examines the prominence of boxers in professional wrestling and the prominence of professional wrestling/wrestlers to and in boxing. It also discusses the overlapping histories of the sports.

3.3.b Professional Wrestling and Mixed Martial Arts - This subsection examines the prominence of mixed martial arts fighters in professional wrestling and the prominence of professional wrestling/wrestlers to and in mixed martial arts. It also discusses the overlapping histories of the sports.

3.3.b.i Catch Judo and the Birth of Modern Grappling - This subsection discusses the shared roots of professional wrestling and mixed martial arts. Professional wrestling's emergence from catch-as-catch-can submission wrestling is discussed. The emergence of modern mixed martial arts primarily competitions between and cross-training among judoka and catch wrestlers is identified. The emergence of modern freestyle wrestling, SAMBO, and Brazilian Jiu Jitsu from those intersections is introduced.

3.3.b.ii Inoki, Ali and the Man in the Pink Gi: America's First Glimpses at MMA - This subsection examine the importance of the 1976 mixed rules bout between Japanese professional wrestling champion Antonio Inoki and reigning boxing champion Muhammad Ali is discussed. The importance of the bout to progenerate public interest in mixed martial arts bouts is discussed. The importance of the bout's referee, "Judo" Gene Lebell, to the evolution of both sports is discussed.

3.3.b.iii From Strong to Shoot: Japanese Professional Wrestling and MMA - The emergence of early modern mixed martial arts promotions featuring professional wrestling stars in Japan beginning in the 1980's is discussed. The emergence of the UFC and the professional wrestlers featured in many of its early events is established.

3.3.b.iv The Oddly Harmonious Crossover of American Workers and Shooters - This subsection examines the prominence of mixed martial arts fighters in professional wrestling and the prominence of professional wrestling/wrestlers to and in mixed martial arts. It also discusses the overlapping histories of the sports.

3.3.b.v Endeavor & Lesnar: Analysis of the Intertwined History of Professional Wrestling, Sport Grappling, and Mixed Martial Arts - The intertwined histories of

the WWE and UFC are discussed. The shared prominent figures in that overlapping history are analyzed. The merger of the two and the Hollywood talent agency the Endeavor Group as “TKO Group Holdings” in 2023 is discussed. The importance of the TKO conglomerate in the modern broadcast sports industry is established.

3.3.c Gridiron Footballers and the Squared Circle - This subsection examines the prominence of gridiron football players in professional wrestling and the prominence of professional wrestling/wrestlers to and in gridiron football.

3.3.d The Wide World of Sport in the Wild World of Wrestling - This subsection examines the prominence of sports stars in professional wrestling and the prominence of professional wrestling/wrestlers to and in sports.

4.0 Analysis of Professional Wrestling Craft and Culture - This subsection also provides analyses of the various artistic, economic, and cultural topics discussed in the study, alongside ongoing questions emerging from this research. Finally, it establishes the limitations of the study.

4.1 Criticisms of Professional Wrestling - This subsection examines criticisms of the art, industry and workplace culture within professional wrestling.

4.1.a Criticism of the Portrayal of Women in Professional Wrestling – This subsection discusses criticism of the portrayals of women in professional wrestling.

4.1.b Criticism of Prejudice in Professional Wrestling – This subsection discusses criticism of the portrayals of minorities and marginalized groups in professional wrestling.

4.1.c Criticism of Connections to Political Conservatism with Professional Wrestling – This section discusses the criticism of the presence of politically conservative figures in professional wrestling, and the association of professional wrestling figures with political conservatism.

4.1.d Criticism of Professional Wrestling as Low-Class Entertainment – This subsection discusses the criticism that professional wrestling is targeted at the working class.

4.1.e Criticism of Professional Wrestling as Violent - This subsection discusses the criticism that professional wrestling glorifies violence.

4.2 Analysis & Conclusions on Professional Wrestling Craft & Culture - This subsection also draws conclusions based on Part I of the study. The research questions are answered. Additional insights into the history, performance art, industry, and cultural impact of American professional wrestling are provided.

## VOLUME II: American Professional Wrestling History

5.0 A Subcultural History of Professional Wrestling - This chapter provides an abridged history of American professional wrestling. The evolution of legitimate sport into performance art is examined. The establishment of foundational performance standards and common industry practices is discussed. The decades-long kayfabe conspiracy that sought to keep the performative nature of professional wrestling secret from the public is examined. The different eras of this roughly 150-year history are discussed, as well as how media and cultural evolutions during those eras affected the performance styles and methods of professional wrestling.

5.1 From Olympic to Outlaw - This subsection discussed the roots of professional wrestling in legitimately contested catch-as-catch-can submission wrestling matches. It reviews the use of submissions in early freestyle wrestling in the modern Olympics. Finally, the outlawing of submissions in Freestyle wrestling is reviewed.

5.1.a The Snake Pit - This subsection discusses the importance of the gym in Wigan, Wales known as The Snake Pit to the histories of European, American, and Japanese professional wrestling. Luminaries of that school are also introduced.

5.2 Birth of the Babyface - This subsection examines the emergence of George Hackenschmidt, the earliest universally recognized professional wrestling world heavyweight champion. Hackenschmidt's influence on the standard archetype of a hero in professional wrestling is examined.

5.3 The Carnival Era - This subsection examines the emergence of professional wrestling as a part of traveling American carnivals. It reviews the roles of early American figures Martin "Farmer" Burns and Frank Gotch in those early days. It also examines early character gimmickry, match-fixing strategies, and crowd engagement strategies. The schism of the world title in the aftermath of Gotch's retirement and death is also discussed.

5.4 The Gold Dust Trio and the Slam Bang Western Wrestling Era - This subsection examines the first national professional wrestling cartel established by Toots Mondt, Billy Sandow, and Ed “The Strangler” Lewis. It also establishes a date after which professional wrestling is internally established to be performance. It also reviews early booking practices and the sharing of talent among regional promotions.

5.4.a Reworking the Shoot - This subsection examines the creation of common practices, the original formatting of the foundational matches, and prominent figures of the era.

5.5 The Territory Era - This subsection examines the rise of loosely associated regional professional wrestling territories across the US, North America and adjacent regions. The prominent promotions, performers, and events of this era spanning from the 1940’s to the 1980’s are discussed. The establishment, history, and influence of the national wrestling cartel known as the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA) is discussed.

5.5.a The Rise of the American Wrestling Association - This subsection examines the emergence of Verne Gagne’s AWA.

5.5.b The Rise of the Capitol Wrestling Corporation and the World Wide Wrestling Federation - This subsection examines the emergence of the Capitol Wrestling Corporation, and the New York City-based World Wide Wrestling Federation, under Vincent J. McMahon. It also introduces his son, eventual WWF/WWE tycoon Vincent Kennedy McMahon into the industry.

5.5.c The Modern Heel and the Birth of Television - This subsection examines the emergence of household television and the importance of professional wrestling as early television content. It also establishes the ways in which television changed how professional wrestling was promoted. Furthermore, it establishes the modern archetype of antagonist innovated by effeminate dandy villain “Gorgeous” George Wagner.

5.5.d The 1970’s: The Technicolor Legends of Territory Wrestling - This subsection examines how the cultural shifts and proliferation of color television changed professional wrestling presentation. The prominent promotions, performers, and events of this period are discussed.

5.5.e Birth of the Titan - This subsection discussed the founding of Titan Sports, the company that would eventually become the WWE. It also discusses the life, business career, mentorship and marriage of Vince McMahon.

5.6 A Brief Overview of Top Territories - This subsection introduces a series of abridged overviews of top promotions from the territory era which had significant historical effect on professional wrestling through their performers, promotion, cultural impact, or production. Prominent performers, personnel, and events of and within those promotions are discussed.

5.6.a The World Wrestling Council - Puerto Rico - This subsection discusses Carlos Colon's WWC in Puerto Rico. Prominent performers, personnel and events relating to that promotion are also discussed.

5.6.b The Many Legends of Mid-South Wrestling - This subsection discusses "Cowboy" Bill Watt's MSW based in New Orleans. Prominent performers, personnel and events relating to that promotion are also discussed.

5.6.c The Von Erich's present World Class Championship Wrestling - This subsection discusses Fritz Von Erich's WCCW based in Dallas. Prominent performers, personnel and events relating to that promotion are also discussed.

5.6.d Championship Wrestling from Florida - This subsection discusses the Graham family's CWF. Prominent performers, personnel and events relating to that promotion are also discussed. It also discusses the significance of Florida as a modern epicenter of professional wrestling.

5.6.e Georgia Championship Wrestling - Prominent performers, personnel and events relating to Georgia Championship Wrestling are discussed in this subsection. The establishment of professional wrestling as a national cable television commodity through the Atlanta-based promotion's presence on Ted Turner's WTBS is also examined.

5.6.f The Upstanding Don Owen and Portland Wrestling - This subsection discusses Don Owen and his Portland, Oregon-based professional wrestling companies in the Pacific northwestern United States. Prominent performers, personnel and events relating to that promotion are also discussed.

5.6.g Stampede Wrestling and the Hart Dynasty - This subsection discusses Stu Hart's Stampede Wrestling, based in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Prominent performers, personnel and events relating to that promotion are also discussed. The influence of the members of the extended Hart family on professional wrestling is discussed.



5.6.h Memphis - The Jarrett Clan, the King and the Last Territory - This subsection discusses several generations of the Jarrett family as promoters of professional wrestling in Memphis, Tennessee and surrounding areas. Prominent performers, personnel and events relating to that promotion are also discussed.

5.6.i Pacific and International Territories - This subsection discusses the constellation of territories which occupied the Pacific Rim during the era. This includes promotions in Japan, Mexico, Australia, Hawaii, the Pacific Islands and the American West Coast. Prominent performers, personnel and events relating to those promotions are also discussed. The emergence of the Anoa'i wrestling family is introduced.

5.6.j Missouri - The Home of Champions - This subsection discusses the constellation of promotions based in the state of Missouri during this era. Prominent performers, personnel and events relating to that promotion are also discussed. Missouri's importance and the central headquarters of the NWA is examined.

5.6.k Jim Crockett Promotions - The Mid-Atlantic Epicenter of Territory Wrestling - This subsection discusses Jim Crockett's Mid-Atlantic Wrestling, based in Charlotte, North Carolina. Prominent performers, personnel and events relating to that promotion are also discussed. The co-occurring emergence of Crockett as the central promoter of the NWA and Ric Flair's evolution into the central figure of territory wrestling are examined. Crockett's partnership with Ted Turner for national cable television distribution is discussed.

5.7 Legacies of the Territory Era - This subsection reviews the prominent characters, events and pitfalls of Territory Era professional wrestling. The importance and influence of promoters and performers from that era on the art and industry is also discussed.

5.8 The Many Feuds of the Real American Era - This subsection discusses the emergence of the WWF as a national professional wrestling promotion behind McMahon's innovations and Hulk Hogan's performance.

5.8.a A New Way of Doing Business - This subsection examines the innovative methods of content monetization used by McMahon in launching the WWF into national and global prominence. Merchandising and licensing in professional wrestling is discussed.

5.8.b LIVE on Pay-Per-View - This subsection examines the influence of paid on-demand television technology on professional wrestling, early and evolving pay-per-

view models, and the fight for pay-per-view dominance between McMahon and Crockett.

5.9 The Nationally Televised Demise of Territory Wrestling - This subsection discusses the collapse of the NWA and Jim Crockett Promotions. It also examines the far-reaching significance of the sale of the promotion to Ted Turner's media conglomerate, Turner Broadcasting. The importance of McMahon's sworn 1989 testimony to the New Jersey Senate that professional wrestling was non-competitive performance art is also discussed.

5.10 The Corporate Wrestling Era - This subsection introduces the changing landscape of professional wrestling since the late-1980's due to its becoming part of prominent corporations. The effects of this corporatized influence on the art, industry, and culture within professional wrestling is discussed.

5.10.a The Decline of Hulkamania and the Identity Crisis of WCW (1990-1993) - The shifts in American pop culture of the early 1990's and their effects on professional wrestling are discussed.

5.10.b The United States vs Vince McMahon - The federal trial and acquittal of Vince McMahon for distribution of anabolic steroids is discussed.

5.10.c The Cult of Extreme - the Outsize Influence of ECW - This subsection examines the legacy of the industrial and artistic influence of fledgling Philadelphia-based promotion Extreme Championship Wrestling. The rise, heyday, and fall of the promotion is discussed. The innovative characters and narrative methods of the promotion are examined. The place of the promotion as a showcase of 1990's counter-cultural idealism is also examined. Prominent performers, personnel and events relating to that promotion are also discussed.

5.10.d Controversy Creates War: Eric Bischoff and the Birth of the Monday Night War - This subsection examines the influence of WCW executive Eric Bischoff, Ted Turner's mandate to compete directly with the WWF, and the emergence of the 1990's promotional war. Bischoff helming WCW's turnaround of an eight-figure annual loss to a nine-figure revenue subsidiary of Turner Broadcasting is discussed.

5.10.e The New Generation: The Harts vs The Kliq - This subsection examines the WWF in the mid-1990's. The challenges of creating content with broad cultural resonance in the post-Hogan era are reviewed. Prominent performers, personnel and events relating to that promotion are also discussed.

5.10.f The Dirt Sheets - This subsection discussed tabloid journalism in professional wrestling and its significance to both industry professionals and fandom. Prominent publications and writers are discussed. The unreliability of said publications as academic sources is also established.

5.10.g The Monday Night Wars and the Attitude Era - This subsection introduces the late-1990's boom of public interest in professional wrestling. The cultural causes, demographic shifts, creative innovations, prominent performers, and significant events of this era are discussed.

5.10.g.i The New World Order - The emergence of the New World Order as a central stable and storyline of WCW television is discussed. The massive success of that storyline is also discussed.

5.10.g.ii The Birth of Attitude - The creative shift from family-oriented programming to content targeted toward teen and adult males is discussed. The embracing of defiant, anti-authority characters, racy storylines, and increased violence are also discussed.

5.10.g.iii Breaking the Streaks - The Coronation of Austin and the Fall of Goldberg - The emergence of "Stone Cold" Steve Austin as the top performer in the industry, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson's initial rise to fame, and the meteoric rise of the D-Generation-X stable in the WWF are discussed. Bill Goldberg's relatively short run as WCW's top star is also discussed.

5.10.g.iv The Fall of WCW - This subsection examines the corporate and creative influences that facilitated the collapse and eventual sale of WCW to the WWF.

5.10.g.v Get the F Out and the IPO In - This subsection examines the top stars of the WWF's Attitude Era and how the success generated during this era led to the initial public offering of WWF stock in 1999. It also examines the shifts that ever-increasing shareholder oversight has had on the artistic content and internal culture of the promotion.

5.10.h Public Trading and Parent Companies - The American Professional Wrestling Model in the Early 21st Century - This subsection delves into the global trend of professional wrestling promotions becoming corporate subsidiaries of larger conglomerates. The industry-wide corporate influence on artistic performance, oversight, and workplace culture is discussed. The IPO's, corporate

partnerships of, and sales of various professional wrestling companies are discussed. Prominent performers, upstart promotions, storylines, controversies, and events within the industry since the turn of the 21st century are discussed. The growth of professional wrestling into a multi-billion-dollar annual industry is also noted.

5.11 Working Glossary - This subsection provides a non-alphabetized, annotated glossary of essential professional wrestling terminology. Understanding this lingo and jargon is essential for any scholar hoping to decipher any primary or secondary resources relating to the art and industry.

References - This subsection provides citations for the entire study based on the 7th edition of the American Psychological Association manual. Some annotations are provided when necessary.

Summary - This subsection provides a detailed, English-language summary of the study.

Zusammenfassung - This subsection provides a detailed, German-language summary of the study.

# Zusammenfassung von Getting Over: A Study of the History, Industry, Performance Art, & Cultural Impact of American Professional Wrestling

Einführung – Dieser Abschnitt gibt eine Einführung in das Studium der Geschichte, der Industrie, der Performance-Kunst und des kulturellen Einflusses des amerikanischen Profiwrestlings. Darin werden die Forschungsfragen, die Forschungsmethoden, die Beschaffung, die Ergebnisse und die Limitierungen der Studie dargelegt. Darüber hinaus werden die Schlussfolgerungen, zu denen der Verfasser anhand der vorgelegten Informationen unweigerlich gelangt ist, eindeutig dargelegt. Zu den Erkenntnissen gehört, dass professionelles Wrestling eine Art Performance-Kunst ist, welche einen massiven kulturellen Einfluss ausgeübt hat, und dass die Methoden, Standards, Traditionen und Konventionen dieser Kunst fest etabliert sind. Dieser Abschnitt bietet eine verkürzte Zusammenfassung des restlichen Teils der Studie.

## VOLUME I: The Industry, Craft & Cultural Impact of American Professional Wrestling

1.0 Professionelles Wrestling als Theater – Dieser Unterabschnitt leitet das erste Kapitel der Studie ein. In diesem Kapitel wird die Frage behandelt, ob professionelles Wrestling Theater ist oder nicht.

1.1 The Squared Circle State: Comparative Analysis of Professional Wrestling and Historical Theatre Styles – Dieser Unterabschnitt führt eine vergleichende Analyse des amerikanischen professionellen Wrestling mit etablierten Theaterstilen ein. Bei den in diesem Abschnitt ausgewählten Stilen gibt es erhebliche Überschneidungen in einigen Aspekten ihrer Erzählkonventionen mit denen des professionellen Wrestling. Außerdem wird untersucht, ob professionelles Wrestling als Sport eingestuft werden kann oder nicht. Die in Abschnitt 1.1 genannten Ergebnisse wurden bereits in einer von Fachleuten begutachteten wissenschaftlichen Zeitschrift veröffentlicht.

1.1.a Commedia Dell'arte – Dieser Unterabschnitt bietet eine detaillierte vergleichende Analyse der erzählerischen Konventionen, Methoden, Traditionen und Standards des professionellen Ringens und der italienischen Commedia Dell'arte.

1.1.b Greek Drama – In diesem Unterabschnitt wird eine detaillierte vergleichende Analyse der erzählerischen Konventionen, Methoden, Traditionen und Standards des professionellen Wrestlings und des traditionellen griechischen Dramas durchgeführt.

1.1.c Kabuki – Dieser Unterabschnitt analysiert detailliert die erzählerischen Konventionen, Methoden, Traditionen und Standards des professionellen Wrestlings und des japanischen Kabuki-Theaters.

1.1.d Modern Exhibition Sport – In diesem Unterabschnitt wird eine detaillierte vergleichende Analyse der sportlichen Elemente des professionellen Ringens und verschiedener Schausportarten durchgeführt. Zu den in dieser vergleichenden Analyse untersuchten Schausportarten zählt vor allem der Schaukampfsport. Dieser Abschnitt gelangt zu dem Schluss, dass das Profi-Wrestling in seiner derzeitigen Form aufgrund des Fehlens verschiedener Aspekte im Zusammenhang mit der Wettbewerbstransparenz kein Schausport ist, wenngleich diese Aspekte entwickelt werden können.

1.2 The Myth of Low Culture – Dieser Unterabschnitt geht der Frage nach, ob es in der Kultur aufsteigende Schichten künstlerischer Medien gibt. Es zeigt sich, dass diese Studie auf den Arbeiten des Kulturtheoretikers John Storey und des Soziologen Omar Lizardo beruht. Die Studie verwirft die klassischen Vorstellungen von Hoch- und Niedrigkultur und distanziert sich von der Vorstellung, dass die Massen- oder Popkultur Ausdruck einer ausbeuterischen soziokulturellen Machtdynamik ist. Die vorliegende Studie vertritt vielmehr die Auffassung, dass die kulturelle Bedeutung von Kunst durch das öffentliche Interesse an diesem Werk bestimmt wird, unabhängig davon, ob es sich um ein zeitgenössisches oder ein retrospektives Werk handelt.

1.3 Life's a Work: Professional Wrestling and Performance Theory – Dieser Unterabschnitt führt in die Analyse des professionellen Wrestlings als Performance-Kunst ein. Anhand von fünf Methoden zur Untersuchung der Performativität wird eine 59-Punkte-Matrix erstellt, um festzustellen, ob es sich bei einer Tätigkeit um Performance handelt. Schlussendlich haben diese einzelnen Methoden und die gesamte Matrix ergeben, dass professionelles Wrestling tatsächlich Performance ist.

1.3.a Method I: The Schechner Criteria – In diesem Unterabschnitt werden die Methoden zur Bestimmung der Leistung auf der Grundlage der Arbeiten des innovativen Leistungstheoretikers Richard Schechner untersucht.

1.3.b Method II: The Sebesta & O’Hara Criteria – Dieser Unterabschnitt untersucht die Methoden zur Bestimmung der Leistung auf der Grundlage der Arbeiten der angesehenen Leistungstheoretiker Judith Sebesta und Michael O’Hara.

1.3.c Method III: The Bentley Criteria (Die Bentley-Kriterien) – In diesem Unterabschnitt werden die auf den Arbeiten des anerkannten Leistungstheoretikers Eric Bentley basierenden Methoden zur Leistungsbestimmung untersucht.

1.3.d Method IV: The Aristotle Criteria – Dieser Unterabschnitt befasst sich mit den Methoden der Leistungsbestimmung auf der Grundlage der Werke des klassischen Leistungstheoretikers Aristoteles.

1.3.e Method V: The Carlson Criteria – Dieser Unterabschnitt beschäftigt sich mit den Methoden der Leistungsbestimmung auf der Grundlage der Arbeiten des bekannten Leistungstheoretikers Marvin Carlson.

1.3.f Conclusions on Professional Wrestling and Performance Theory – In diesem Unterabschnitt werden die Gesamtergebnisse der einzelnen Methoden der Performativitätsanalyse betrachtet. Ferner werden diese Methoden in ihrer aggregierten Matrix gemessen. Die Matrix und die einzelnen darin verwendeten Methoden stellen über alle Kriterien hinweg fest, dass professionelles Wrestling Performance ist.

1.4 Modern Academic Scholarship on Professional Wrestling Studies – In diesem Unterabschnitt werden verschiedene Quellen der Wissenschaft zum professionellen Wrestling analysiert. Die Erforschung der Geschichte des professionellen Wrestlings stellt einen eigenen Wirtschaftszweig dar, da die weltweite Fangemeinde des professionellen Wrestlings fortwährend Medien konsumiert, die sich auf vergangene Epochen der professionellen Wrestling-Nostalgie beziehen. Dieser Unterabschnitt befasst sich ferner mit dem professionellen Wrestling-Journalismus. Abschließend wird die wachsende Zahl wissenschaftlicher Studien über die Kunst, die Industrie und den kulturellen Einfluss des professionellen Wrestling erörtert.

1.5 The Performativity of Americanness: Cultural Symbolism in Professional Wrestling Performance – Dieser Unterabschnitt beleuchtet amerikanisches Profi-Wrestling durch die Linse amerikanischer kultureller Ikonografie und den Ausdruck von Amerikanität, indem es die Einhaltung der durch diese Ikonen symbolisierten kulturellen Konventionen demonstriert. Es stützt sich stark auf die Arbeiten der deutschstämmigen Amerikanistin

Sussane Hamscha und ihr Buch *The Fiction of America: Performance and the Cultural Imaginary in Literature and Film*.

2.0 The Craft of the Work – Dieser Unterabschnitt leitet das zweite Kapitel der Studie ein. In diesem Kapitel wird auf Methoden, Standards, Formate und Konventionen eingegangen, mit denen die Erzählung von Geschichten im traditionellen amerikanischen Profi-Wrestling dargestellt wird. Es kann als Handbuch für erzählerische Darstellung, Inszenierung, Symbolik und technische Thematik im amerikanischen Profi-Wrestling dienen. Hier werden die grundlegenden Spiele des amerikanischen Profi-Wrestlings festgelegt. Zudem werden Fallstudien zu Wettkämpfen, kurzfristigen Ereignissen und langfristigen Handlungssträngen aufgeführt. Es werden die Variationen dieser Methoden auf der Grundlage des Budgets, der Größe, des Stils und des Umfangs der Aufführungen erörtert.

2.1 The Foundational American Professional Wrestling Match – Dieser Unterabschnitt beschreibt den Grundstein für den traditionellen amerikanischen Profi-Wrestling-Kampf. Es wird ferner erörtert, wie dieses Spiel die traditionellen amerikanischen Werte preist, wie sie vom französischen politischen Philosophen Alexis de Tocqueville zum Ausdruck gebracht wurden. Dieser Unterabschnitt wurde in Zusammenarbeit mit dem renommierten amerikanischen Profi-Wrestler Jason „The Gift“ Kincaid.

2.2 Matchzeit – Dieser Unterabschnitt befasst sich mit der Bedeutung und den Berechnungsmethoden der Wettkampfzeit.

2.3 Staging of Professional Wrestling – In diesem Unterabschnitt werden die Standards und Konventionen für die Inszenierung von Auftritten im Profi-Wrestling erörtert. Dieser Unterabschnitt umfasst Diskussionen über die Bühne, den Aufführungsraum, die Sitzordnung im Publikum, die Beleuchtung, die Kostümierung, die Videografie und andere Aspekte des technischen Theaters im Profi-Wrestling.

2.4 The Psychology of a 7-Phase Singles Match – In diesem Unterabschnitt geht es um die Methoden der Durchführung eines professionellen Wrestling-Matches im grundlegendsten allgemeinen Format des traditionellen amerikanischen Profi-Wrestlings. Es werden die Methoden aufgezeigt, mit denen Interpreten emotionale Reaktionen des Publikums hervorrufen. Anhand eines theoretischen Wettkampfs wird dem Leser der Zweck und die Anwendung von Erzähltechniken während des Wettkampfs vor Augen geführt. Die traditionelle ethische Ausrichtung des amerikanischen Profi-Wrestlings wird ebenso festgelegt wie das sich entwickelnde ethische Spektrum des zeitgenössischen Profi-Wrestlings.



2.4.a Phase One – Entrance and Establishment of Character – Dieser Unterabschnitt definiert, dass eine Live-Darbietung im Profi-Wrestling beginnt, sobald eine Person durch den Vorhang in den Veranstaltungsraum tritt. Es werden die entscheidenden ersten Interaktionen zwischen dieser Person und den Zuschauern erläutert. Die Darsteller versuchen in diesem kurzen Zeitraum die Gefühle des Publikums durch eine Vielzahl von Methoden zu manipulieren.

2.4.b Phase Two – The Shine Exposition and Happy Normalcy – In diesem Unterabschnitt wird die zweite Phase eines traditionellen amerikanischen Profi-Wrestling-Matches behandelt. In dieser Phase verschafft sich der Protagonist einen frühen Vorteil gegenüber dem Antagonisten.

2.4.b.i Chain Wrestling – Dieser Unterabschnitt befasst sich mit der Verwendung von Sport-Wrestling und Unterwerfungsgriffen in einem Profi-Wrestling-Kampf, um die sportlichen Fähigkeiten oder das Fehlen dieser Fähigkeiten bei den Darstellern festzustellen.

2.4.b.ii The International – In diesem Unterabschnitt wird der häufigste Multimanöver-Spot behandelt, der im professionellen Wrestling eingesetzt wird.

2.4.b.iii Heroische High Impact Action – In diesem Unterabschnitt geht es um die schnelle Abfolge von auffälligen und/oder aufsehenerregenden Bewegungen, die zum Abschluss dieser Phase des Kampfes eingesetzt werden, um die Zuschauer zu begeistern.

2.4.d Phase Three – The Cut-Off and the Turning Point – Dieser Unterabschnitt erörtert die dritte Phase eines traditionellen amerikanischen Profi-Wrestling-Matches. In dieser Phase beansprucht der Gegner den Vorteil im Spiel, meist durch skrupellose, unehrliche oder schikanöse Mittel.

2.4.e. Phase Four – The Heat and Rising Action – In diesem Unterabschnitt erfährt der Leser mehr über die vierte Phase eines traditionellen amerikanischen Profi-Wrestling-Matches. Diese Phase ist gekennzeichnet durch den wiederholten Versuch des Protagonisten, einen bleibenden Vorteil im Wettkampf zu erlangen. Der Antagonist fährt fort, den Protagonisten und das Publikum schadenfroh zu quälen, oft auf deren eigene Gefahr hin. Trotz flüchtiger Anzeichen dafür, dass der Protagonist die Kontrolle wiedererlangt, verhindert der Antagonist wiederholt und entschlossen seine Versuche.

2.4.f Phase Five – The Climactic Comeback – Dieser Unterabschnitt behandelt die fünfte Phase eines traditionellen amerikanischen Profi-Wrestling-Matches. In dieser Phase erlangt der Protagonist schließlich wieder einen Vorteil im Kampf, der in einer weiteren Reihe von auffälligen und/oder hochwirksamen Manövern gipfelt, die seine frühere Leistung noch übertreffen.

2.4.g Phase Six – The Finish – Dieser Unterabschnitt widmet sich der sechsten Phase eines traditionellen amerikanischen Profi-Wrestling-Matches. In dieser Phase wird ein Sieger des Wettkampfes ermittelt. Obwohl diese Ergebnisse im Voraus feststehen, sind sie dem Publikum unbekannt. Für den theoretischen Wettkampf werden drei gängige Ausgänge erörtert und die narrativen Implikationen dieser Ausgänge ermittelt.

2.4.h Phase Seven: The Post-Match Denouement – In diesem Unterabschnitt wird auf die siebte Phase eines traditionellen amerikanischen Profi-Wrestling-Matches eingegangen. In dieser Phase wird das Ende der Performance besprochen, wobei die Erzählungen der Figuren so lange fortgesetzt werden, bis die Akteure wieder die Schwelle zum Backstage-Bereich überschritten haben. Die Ereignisse in dieser Phase bestimmen, ob die im Wettkampf erzählte Geschichte zu Ende ist oder Teil eines längeren Erzählbogens mit weiteren Inhalten darstellt.

2.4.i Analysis of a Foundational American Wrestling Ring Performance and Narrative Psychology – In diesem Unterabschnitt werden die Methoden, Strategien, Techniken, Traditionen, Inszenierungen, Standards und die kulturelle Symbolik im grundlegenden 7-Phasen fundamentalen amerikanischen Profi-Wrestling-Match analysiert.

2.5 Case Study of a Traditional American Professional Wrestling Match – Dieser Unterabschnitt behandelt eine Fallstudie der weit verbreiteten 9-Act-Variante des traditionellen amerikanischen Profi-Wrestling-Matches. Er verdeutlicht die Unterschiede zwischen der 9-Act-Variante und dem 7-Phasen-Match. Das in der Fallstudie analysierte Match zwischen „The Enforcer“ Arn Anderson und „Diamond“ Dallas Page fand am 13. März 1994 in der *WCW Saturday Night* statt, wobei Anderson als Protagonist und Page als Antagonist agierte.

Akt 1 - The Introductions – Dieser Unterabschnitt erläutert die Auftritte und Charaktervorstellungen von Anderson und Page. „Hund“

Akt 2 - Chain Wrestling und Shine – Dieser Unterabschnitt erörtert die Anfangsphase des Kampfes zwischen Anderson und Page, in der Anderson einen anfänglichen Vorteil erlangt.

Akt 3 - The Minor Cut Off – In diesem Unterabschnitt geht es um die Methoden, mit denen Page sich einen kurzzeitigen Vorteil gegenüber Anderson verschafft.

Akt 4 - The Minor Comeback – Dieser Unterabschnitt schildert Andersons frühe Aufholjagd, um den Vorteil gegenüber Page zurückzugewinnen.

Akt 5 - The Major Cut-Off – Dieser Unterabschnitt beschreibt Pages Methoden, mit denen er sich einen entscheidenden und dauerhaften Vorteil gegenüber Anderson sichert.

Akt 6 - The Heat and Hope Spots – In diesem Unterabschnitt werden die Methoden von Page besprochen, mit denen er seinen Vorsprung vor Anderson trotz wiederholter feuriger Angriffe von Anderson aufrechterhalten konnte. Page verhöhnt die Menge, wendet unlautere Taktiken an und unterbricht in dieser Phase wiederholt Andersons Versuche, den Kampf für sich zu entscheiden.

Akt 7 - The Comeback – Dieser Unterabschnitt befasst sich damit, wie Anderson schließlich durch einen anhaltenden und entscheidenden Rückschlag die Kontrolle über das Match zurückerlangt. Anderson führt zur Freude des Publikums eine Reihe von täuschenden und aufregenden Moves gegen Page aus.

Akt 8 - The Finish – In diesem Unterabschnitt wird ein finales Hin und Her zwischen den Wrestlern beschrieben, bei dem Page einen vorübergehenden Vorteil erlangt, um dann Anderson mit einem Inside-Cradle den Sieg zu überlassen.

Akt 9 - The Denouement – In diesem Unterabschnitt wird das Verhalten von Anderson und Page nach dem Match erörtert, um ihre Charaktere und die ethische Ausrichtung dieser Charaktere zu verstärken.

2.5.a Analysis of the Effects of the 9-Act Match: DDP vs. Arn Case Study – In diesem Unterabschnitt werden die narrativen Themen des Matches Anderson vs. Page untersucht. Es wird untersucht, welche Auswirkungen das Spiel auf die beteiligten Personen und die Wahrnehmung dieser Personen durch das Publikum hatte. Die von den Akteuren eingesetzten Techniken zur Optimierung dieses Ablaufs werden ebenfalls angesprochen.

2.6 Gimmick Matches – Dieser Unterabschnitt befasst sich mit einigen gängigen Variationen der Regeln des Profi-Wrestlings. Umgangssprachlich als „Gimmick Matches“ bekannt, bringen diese Varianten ihre eigenen performativen, erzählerischen und inszenatorischen Herausforderungen mit sich.

2.6.a The Steel Cage Match – In diesem Unterabschnitt wird auf die Konventionen, die Inszenierung und die Durchführung eines Käfigkampfes eingegangen.

2.6.b Ladder Match – Dieser Unterabschnitt bezieht sich auf die Konventionen, die Inszenierung und die Durchführung eines Ladder Matches.

2.6.c Das Scramble-Match – In diesem Unterabschnitt geht es um die Konventionen, den Aufbau und die Durchführung eines Scramble-Matches.

2.6.d Battle Royal – Dieser Unterabschnitt befasst sich mit den Konventionen, der Inszenierung und der Durchführung eines Battle Royals.

2.6.e The „I Quit“ Match – In diesem Unterabschnitt wird auf die Konventionen, die Inszenierung und die Durchführung eines Submission Matches eingegangen.

2.6.f Der No-Holds-Barred Match – Dieser Unterabschnitt erörtert die Konventionen, die Inszenierung und die Durchführung eines No-Disqualification-Matches, bei dem der Einsatz von Waffen unvermeidlich ist.

2.6.f.i Deathmatch – Red Equals Green – In diesem Unterabschnitt werden die Konventionen, die Inszenierung und die Durchführung des extrem gewalttätigen „Deathmatch“-Subgenres der „No Holds Barred“-Matches behandelt.

2.6.g Container Match – Dieser Unterabschnitt bezieht sich auf die Konventionen, die Inszenierung und die Durchführung eines Container Matches.

2.6.h Attachment Match – In diesem Unterabschnitt werden die Konventionen, die Inszenierung und die Durchführung eines Attachment Matches erläutert.

2.6.i Knockout Match – Dieser Unterabschnitt beschäftigt sich mit den Konventionen, der Inszenierung und der Durchführung eines Matches, das nur dadurch gewonnen werden kann, dass ein Gegner für eine vorgegebene Zeitspanne bewusstlos geschlagen wird.

2.6.j Specific Bodily Harm Match – In diesem Unterabschnitt wird auf die Konventionen, die Inszenierung und die Durchführung eines Matches eingegangen, das durch die Zufügung einer spezifischen Körperverletzung gewonnen wird.

2.6.k Specific Weapons Match – In diesem Unterabschnitt geht es um die Konventionen, die Inszenierung und die Durchführung eines Matches, bei dem nur der Gebrauch einer bestimmten Waffe erlaubt ist.

2.6.l Der Lumberjack Match – Dieser Unterabschnitt widmet sich den Konventionen, der Inszenierung und der Durchführung eines Lumberjack Matches.

2.6.m The Cinematic Match – Dieser Unterabschnitt beschreibt die Konventionen, die Inszenierung und die Darbietung eines filmischen Matches, das teilweise oder vollständig voraufgezeichnet wird.

2.6.n The Ironman/Ironwoman Match – Dieser Unterabschnitt beschäftigt sich mit den Konventionen, dem Ablauf und der Durchführung eines Wettkampfes, bei dem derjenige Wettkämpfer zum Sieger erklärt wird, der in einer vorgegebenen Zeitspanne die meisten Würfe erzielt.

2.6.o The Wager Match – In diesem Unterabschnitt werden die Konventionen, die Inszenierung und die Durchführung eines Matches behandelt, bei dem die Teilnehmer etwas für das Match wetten.

2.7 Global Approaches Reflective of Culture in the Craft and Methods of Professional Wrestling – Dieser Unterabschnitt beleuchtet prominente Stile des Profi-Wrestlings aus aller Welt. Es werden die kulturellen Einflüsse erörtert, die zu Performanceunterschieden führen. Diese Unterschiede werden als Ausdruck der kulturellen Werte einer bestimmten Gesellschaft untersucht.

2.7.a The Foundational 7-Phase American Match & 9-Act Variant – In diesem Unterabschnitt kommen die amerikanischen kulturellen Werte zum Ausdruck, die in den im vorherigen Abschnitt besprochenen grundlegenden amerikanischen Profi-Wrestling-Matches behandelt werden.

2.7.b Japanese Professional Wrestling Styles – Dieser Unterabschnitt bietet einen Überblick über die narrativen Darstellungskonventionen im japanischen Profi-Wrestling.

2.7.b.i Puroseu – Japanese Strong Style – Dieser Unterabschnitt befasst sich mit der Geschichte, der Ausführung, der Anwendung und dem Einfluss von Puroseu, einem Unterstil des japanischen Profi-Wrestlings.

2.7.b.ii Modern Super Junior/Cruiserweight Style – Dieser Unterabschnitt thematisiert die Geschichte, Performance, Anwendung und den Einfluss des Super

Junior Heavyweight Substyle des japanischen Profi-Wrestlings. Es ist auch allgemein als Cruiserweight Substyle bekannt.

2.7.b.iii Japanese Match Narrative – In diesem Unterabschnitt werden die narrativen Konventionen des japanischen Profi-Wrestlings behandelt. Des Weiteren wird eine vergleichende Analyse dieses Stils und des traditionellen amerikanischen Profi-Wrestlings vorgenommen.

2.7.c Lucha Libre – In diesem Unterabschnitt geht es um die Geschichte, die Anwendung, den Einfluss, die Performance und die erzählerischen Konventionen des mexikanischen Profi-Wrestlings.

2.7.c.i Lucha Libre Storytelling as Compared to its American Counterpart – In diesem Unterabschnitt erfolgt eine vergleichende Analyse dieses Stils mit dem traditionellen amerikanischen Profi-Wrestling.

2.7.d European Technical – Dieser Unterabschnitt erörtert die Geschichte, die Anwendung, den Einfluss, die Performance und die erzählerischen Konventionen des europäischen Profi-Wrestlings. Insbesondere wird der Stil des Profi-Wrestlings untersucht, der durch die Regeln von Lord-Admiral Mountevan ermöglicht wurde und im Vereinigten Königreich und in Deutschland während eines Großteils des 20. Jahrhunderts zum Standard wurde.

2.7.d.i European Professional Wrestling Storytelling and its American Counterpart – Dieser Unterabschnitt führt eine vergleichende Analyse dieses Stils und des traditionellen amerikanischen Profi-Wrestlings durch.

2.7.e Conclusions and Analysis of International Professional Wrestling Styles – In diesem Unterabschnitt werden die Ergebnisse der aggregierten vergleichenden Analysen des traditionellen amerikanischen Profi-Wrestlings und der in den unmittelbar vorangegangenen Unterabschnitten behandelten internationalen Stile des Profi-Wrestlings untersucht. Es wird die Vermischung internationaler und amerikanischer Stile im Profi-Wrestling thematisiert.

2.8 Booking 101: Introduction to Episodic Storytelling in American Professional Wrestling – Dieser Unterabschnitt befasst sich mit den Konventionen und der Methodik des episodischen Erzählens im Profi-Wrestling. Mit dieser Methode werden die Handlungsbögen von Figuren und die Erzählungen innerhalb von Spielen über Segmente, Aufführungen und Shows hinweg zu Episoden in längeren Erzählungen unterschiedlicher

Länge erweitert. Darüber hinaus werden Strategien zur Optimierung dieser Prozesse erörtert. Die Rolle der „Booker“ als primäre Architekten der professionellen Wrestling-Performance wird untersucht. Dieser Unterabschnitt stützt sich auf das Fachwissen von Koryphäen der Branche sowie auf persönliche Interviews mit Kincaid und dem ehemaligen WWE-Autor Matt Weir.

2.8.a Getting Booked and Doing the Job: Opportunity and Ego in Fictional Matchmaking – Dieser Unterabschnitt setzt sich mit den Strategien und Kämpfen professioneller Wrestling-Darsteller auseinander, die versuchen, bei Promotions unter Vertrag genommen zu werden. Dieser Unterabschnitt untersucht ferner die Auswirkung des Egos der Darsteller auf die fiktive Partnervermittlung und die interne Werbepolitik.

2.8.a The Intoxicating Power of the Pencil – In diesem Unterabschnitt wird untersucht, wie viel Macht die Booker im Profi-Wrestling ausüben. Des Weiteren werden Strategien erörtert, die von Bookern für das Management der Performer und des Personals eingesetzt werden.

2.8.b Building The Match for Public Consumption – Dieser Unterabschnitt betrachtet Strategien, die verwendet werden, um bestimmte Wettkämpfe zu formatieren, die in laufenden Handlungssträngen verwendet werden. Es wird das an diesem Prozess beteiligte Personal bei Promotionen unterschiedlicher Größe erörtert.

2.8.c The Segment: The Elemental Unit of Performance in Professional Wrestling – In diesem Unterabschnitt werden die Formatierungsstrategien von Segmenten im Wrestling untersucht. Es werden die verschiedenen Arten von Segmenten wie Spiele, Vignetten, Promos, Interviews und andere Arten von Segmenten festgelegt. Der Stil, die Bedeutung und der Inhalt der verschiedenen Segmente werden diskutiert. Auch die Reihenfolge, das Timing und die Ausführung von Segmenten bei einer Live-Performance und/oder einer im Fernsehen übertragenen Veranstaltung werden erörtert.

2.8.d Undisputed Era: A Case Study of an Episodic Story in Professional Wrestling – In diesem Unterabschnitt wird eine Fallstudie über eine erfolgreiche Kurzzeitstory im WWE-Fernsehen vorgestellt. Das Debüt der Akteure und die Gründung des gefeierten „Undisputed Era“-Stables werden beleuchtet.

2.8.e Raw #1090: A Case Study of an Authenticated Script for a Large-Scale American Professional Wrestling Episode – Dieser Unterabschnitt enthält eine Fallstudie über eine typische Aufführung einer international im Fernsehen übertragenen Profi-

Wrestling-Episode. Ein durchgesickertes Skript für *WWE Raw*, das von Weir beglaubigt wurde, wurde bereitgestellt. Es wird die Koordinierung zwischen dem Sendeteam, der technischen Crew, den Akteuren und den Segmentverantwortlichen untersucht.

2.8.f The Three Faces of Foley: A Case Study of Long-Term Episodic Character Evolution in Professional Wrestling – Dieser Unterabschnitt beinhaltet eine Fallstudie über einen erfolgreichen langfristigen Charakterbogen im Profi-Wrestling. Der „Three Faces of Foley“-Handlungsbogen wird von Kritikern, Darstellern, Fachleuten und Fans gleichermaßen gelobt. Dieser Unterabschnitt befasst sich mit den Techniken und Methoden, die während des 22-monatigen Episodenbogens eingesetzt wurden.

2.9 The Revenue Structure and Business Administration of Professional Wrestling – In diesem Unterabschnitt werden die Einnahmeströme des professionellen Wrestlings untersucht. Es wird auch erörtert, wie sich diese Einnahmestrukturen im Laufe der Zeit entwickelt haben und wie sie sich je nach Größe der Werbeaktion unterscheiden.

3.0 The Unavoidable Presence of Professional Wrestling in American Pop Culture – In diesem Kapitel wird die Bedeutung des professionellen Wrestlings als Teil der amerikanischen Popkultur erörtert.

3.1 Professional Wrestling on the Big and Small Screens – In diesem Unterabschnitt werden die Präsenz, die Prominenz und die Bedeutung des professionellen Wrestlings und der professionellen Wrestler in Kino und Fernsehen vorgestellt. Die Präsenz, Prominenz und Bedeutung von Kino, Fernsehen und anderen Unterhaltungskünstlern im Profi-Wrestling wird ebenfalls thematisiert.

3.1.a Professional Wrestling and Cinema – Es werden die Präsenz, die Prominenz und die Bedeutung von Kinodarstellern und -persönlichkeiten im Profi-Wrestling erörtert. Betrachtet werden die Präsenz, die Prominenz und die Bedeutung professioneller Wrestler im Kino.

3.1.b Professional Wrestling on Television – Untersucht wird die Bedeutung von Professional Wrestling als Ware, die hauptsächlich über das Fernsehen vermarktet wird. Es wird auf die Präsenz, die Prominenz und die Bedeutung von Fernsehdarstellern und -persönlichkeiten im Profi-Wrestling eingegangen. Erörtert werden die Präsenz, die Prominenz und die Bedeutung von Profi-Wrestlern im Fernsehen.

3.1.c Celebrity Crossovers in Professional Wrestling – Die Präsenz, Prominenz und Bedeutung von Prominenten im Profi-Wrestling wird thematisiert. Darüber hinaus



werden die Präsenz, die Prominenz und die Bedeutung von Profi-Wrestlern als Berühmtheiten erörtert.

3.2 Professional Wrestling and American Politics – Es wird auf die Präsenz, die Prominenz und die Bedeutung von Politikern im Profi-Wrestling eingegangen. Es wird die Präsenz, Prominenz und Bedeutung professioneller Wrestler in der Politik beleuchtet.

3.3 Putting the Sports in Sports Entertainment – Sports Culture Crossovers – In diesem Unterabschnitt wird die Überschneidung von Sport und Profi-Wrestling vorgestellt. Es wird auf die Präsenz von Leistungssportlern und Sportstars im Profi-Wrestling eingegangen. Ferner wird die Präsenz professioneller Wrestler als Leistungssportler und ehemalige/künftige Sportstars dargestellt. Die Überschneidungen zwischen Profi-Wrestling und Boxen, Mixed Martial Arts und American Football werden eingehend erörtert. Es wird ein Überblick über die Überschneidungen von Profi-Wrestling und anderen Sportarten gegeben.

3.3.a Boxing and Professional Wrestling – Dieser Unterabschnitt befasst sich mit der Bedeutung von Boxern im Profi-Wrestling und der Bedeutung des Profi-Wrestlings/der Wrestler im und für den Boxsport. Außerdem wird die sich überschneidende Geschichte der beiden Sportarten beschrieben.

3.3.b Professional Wrestling und Mixed Martial Arts – In diesem Unterabschnitt wird die Bedeutung von Mixed Martial Arts-Kämpfern im Profi-Wrestling und die Bedeutung des Profi-Wrestlings/der Wrestler für und in Mixed Martial Arts untersucht. Zudem wird die sich überschneidende Geschichte der beiden Sportarten erörtert.

3.3.b.i Catch Judo and the Birth of Modern Grappling – Dieser Unterabschnitt befasst sich mit den gemeinsamen Wurzeln des Profi-Wrestlings und der Mixed Martial Arts. Es wird die Entwicklung des Profi-Wrestlings vom Catch-as-catch-can Submission Wrestling thematisiert. Die Entstehung der modernen Mixed Martial Arts ist in erster Linie auf Wettkämpfe zwischen Judoka und Catch Wrestlern und auf deren gemeinsames Training zurückzuführen. Anhand dieser Überschneidungen wird die Entstehung des modernen Freestyle Wrestling, SAMBO und Brazilian Jiu Jitsu vorgestellt.

3.3.b.ii Inoki, Ali and the Man in the Pink Gi: America's First Glimpses at MMA – In diesem Unterabschnitt geht es um die Bedeutung des Mixed-Rules-Kampfes von 1976 zwischen dem japanischen Profi-Wrestling-Champion Antonio Inoki und dem

amtierenden Boxchampion Muhammad Ali. Es wird die Bedeutung des Kampfes für die Entwicklung des öffentlichen Interesses an Mixed Martial Arts-Kämpfen erörtert. Außerdem wird die Bedeutung des Kampfrichters „Judo“ Gene Lebell für die Entwicklung der beiden Sportarten erörtert.

3.3.b.iii From Strong to Shoot: Japanese Professional Wrestling and MMA – Es wird auf die Entstehung der frühen modernen Mixed Martial Arts-Promotions mit professionellen Wrestling-Stars in Japan in den 1980er Jahren eingegangen. Es werden die Entstehung der UFC und die Profi-Wrestler, die in vielen ihrer frühen Veranstaltungen auftreten, erwähnt.

3.3.b.iv The Oddly Harmonious Crossover of American Workers and Shooters – In diesem Unterabschnitt wird die Bedeutung von Mixed-Martial-Arts-Kämpfern im professionellen Ringen und die Bedeutung des Profi-Wrestlings/der Wrestler für und in Mixed Martial Arts beleuchtet. Ebenso wird die sich überschneidende Geschichte der beiden Sportarten erörtert.

3.3.b.v Endeavor & Lesnar: Analysis of the Intertwined History of Professional Wrestling, Sport Grappling, and Mixed Martial Arts – Es wird die miteinander verflochtene Geschichte der WWE und der UFC analysiert. Es werden die gemeinsamen prominenten Persönlichkeiten in dieser sich überschneidenden Geschichte näher untersucht. Auch wird auf den Zusammenschluss der beiden und der Hollywood-Talentagentur Endeavor Group als „TKO Group Holdings“ im Jahr 2023 eingegangen. Es wird die Bedeutung des TKO-Konglomerats in der modernen Sportübertragungsbranche aufgezeigt.

3.3.c Gridiron Footballers and the Squared Circle – Dieser Unterabschnitt befasst sich mit der Bedeutung von Gridiron-Football-Spielern für das Profi-Wrestling und mit der Bedeutung des Profi-Wrestlings/der Wrestler für und im Gridiron-Football.

3.3.d The Wide World of Sport in the Wild World of Wrestling – In diesem Unterabschnitt wird die Bedeutung von Sportstars im professionellen Wrestling und die Bedeutung des Profi-Wrestlings/der Wrestler für und im Sport erkundet.

4.0 Analysis of Professional Wrestling Craft and Culture - Dieser Kapitel bietet auch Analysen zu den verschiedenen in der Studie diskutierten künstlerischen, wirtschaftlichen und kulturellen Themen sowie aktuelle Fragen, die sich aus dieser Forschung ergeben. Schließlich werden die Grenzen der Studie aufgezeigt.

4.1 Criticisms of Professional Wrestling - In diesem Unterabschnitt wird die Kritik an der Kunst-, Industrie- und Arbeitsplatzkultur im professionellen Wrestling untersucht.

4.1.a Criticism of the Portrayal of Women in Professional Wrestling – In diesem Unterabschnitt geht es um Kritik an der Darstellung von Frauen im professionellen Wrestling.

4.1.b Criticism of Prejudice in Professional Wrestling – In diesem Unterabschnitt geht es um Kritik an der Darstellung von Minderheiten und Randgruppen im professionellen Wrestling.

4.1.c Criticism of Connections to Political Conservatism with Professional Wrestling – In diesem Abschnitt wird die Kritik an der Präsenz politisch konservativer Persönlichkeiten im professionellen Wrestling und die Verbindung professioneller Wrestling-Persönlichkeiten mit politischem Konservatismus erörtert.

4.1.d Criticism of Professional Wrestling as Low-Class Entertainment – In diesem Unterabschnitt wird die Kritik erörtert, dass sich professionelles Wrestling an die Arbeiterklasse richtet.

4.1.e Criticism of Professional Wrestling as Violent - In diesem Unterabschnitt geht es um die Kritik, dass professionelles Wrestling Gewalt verherrlicht.

4.2 Analysis & Conclusions on Professional Wrestling Craft & Culture - Dieser Unterabschnitt zieht auch Schlussfolgerungen basierend auf Teil I der Studie. Die Forschungsfragen werden beantwortet. Es werden zusätzliche Einblicke in die Geschichte, Performance-Kunst, Industrie und kulturellen Auswirkungen des amerikanischen Profi-Wrestlings geboten.

## VOLUME II: American Professional Wrestling History

5.0 A Subcultural History of Professional Wrestling – Dieses Kapitel gibt einen kurzen Überblick über die Geschichte des amerikanischen Profi-Wrestlings. Es wird die Entwicklung des legitimen Sports zur Performance-Kunst untersucht. Erörtert wird die Festlegung grundlegender Leistungsstandards und gemeinsamer Branchenpraktiken. Dabei wird die jahrzehntelange „Kayfabe“-Verschwörung betrachtet, die darauf abzielte, das performative Wesen des Profi-Wrestlings vor der Öffentlichkeit geheim zu halten. Die verschiedenen Epochen dieser rund 150-jährigen Geschichte werden ebenso erörtert wie die

Auswirkungen der medialen und kulturellen Entwicklungen in diesen Epochen auf die Aufführungsstile und -methoden des Profi-Wrestlings.

5.1 From Olympic to Outlaw – In diesem Unterabschnitt werden die Wurzeln des professionellen Ringens in legitim ausgetragenen Catch-as-catch-can Submission Wrestling-Kämpfen beschrieben. Er gibt einen Überblick über die Verwendung von Unterwerfungen im frühen Freestyle Wrestling bei den modernen Olympischen Spielen. Zum Schluss wird noch das Verbot von Submissions im Freestyle Wrestling behandelt.

5.1.a The Snake Pit – Dieser Unterabschnitt setzt sich mit der Bedeutung der als „The Snake Pit“ bekannten Turnhalle in Wigan, Wales, für die Geschichte des europäischen, amerikanischen und japanischen Profi-Wrestlings auseinander. Außerdem werden bedeutende Persönlichkeiten dieser Richtung vorgestellt.

5.2 Birth of the Babyface – In diesem Unterabschnitt wird die Entstehung von George Hackenschmidt, dem ersten allgemein anerkannten Schwergewichtsweltmeister im professionellen Wrestling, untersucht. Dabei wird der Einfluss Hackenschmidts auf den Standard-Archetypus des Helden im Profi-Wrestling beleuchtet.

5.3 The Carnival Era – Dieser Unterabschnitt befasst sich mit dem Aufkommen des Profi-Wrestlings als Teil des reisenden amerikanischen Karnevals. Er gibt einen Überblick über die Rolle der frühen amerikanischen Persönlichkeiten Martin „Farmer“ Burns und Frank Gotch in diesen frühen Tagen. Darüber hinaus werden frühe Charakterspielereien, Match-Fixing-Strategien und Strategien zur Einbindung des Publikums betrachtet. Die Spaltung des Weltmeistertitels nach dem Rücktritt und dem Tod von Gotch wird ebenfalls angesprochen.

5.4 Das Gold Dust Trio and the Slam Bang Western Wrestling Era – In diesem Unterabschnitt wird das erste nationale Profi-Wrestling-Kartell beleuchtet, das von Toots Mondt, Billy Sandow und Ed „The Strangler“ Lewis gegründet wurde. Außerdem wird ein Datum bestimmt, ab dem Profi-Wrestling intern als Performance eingestuft wird. Außerdem werden die frühen Booking-Praktiken und die Aufteilung von Talenten zwischen regionalen Promotoren überprüft.

5.4.a Reworking the Shoot – Dieser Unterabschnitt beschäftigt sich mit der Entstehung gängiger Praktiken, der ursprünglichen Formatierung der grundlegenden Spiele und prominenten Persönlichkeiten der Epoche.

5.5 The Territory Era – In diesem Unterabschnitt geht es um den Aufstieg der lose miteinander verbundenen regionalen Profi-Wrestling-Territorien in den USA, Nordamerika und angrenzenden Regionen. Es werden die herausragenden Promotionen, Performer und Ereignisse dieser Ära, die von den 1940er bis zu den 1980er Jahren reicht, besprochen. Die Gründung, die Geschichte und der Einfluss des nationalen Wrestling-Kartells, der National Wrestling Alliance (NWA), werden erläutert.

5.5.a The Rise of the American Wrestling Association – Dieser Unterabschnitt beschäftigt sich mit der Entstehung von Verne Gagnes AWA.

5.5.b The Rise of the Capitol Wrestling Corporation and the World Wide Wrestling Federation – In diesem Unterabschnitt werden die Entstehung der Capitol Wrestling Corporation und der in New York City ansässigen World Wide Wrestling Federation unter Vincent J. McMahon thematisiert. Außerdem wird sein Sohn, der spätere WWF/WWE-Tycoon Vincent Kennedy McMahon, vorgestellt.

5.5.c The Modern Heel and the Birth of Television – Dieser Unterabschnitt beschreibt das Aufkommen des Haushaltsfernsehens und die Bedeutung des Profi-Wrestlings als früherer Fernsehinhalt. Außerdem wird dargelegt, wie das Fernsehen die Art und Weise verändert hat, in der Profi-Wrestling beworben wurde. Des Weiteren wird der moderne Archetyp des Antagonisten eingeführt, der durch den verweichlichten Dandy-Bösewicht „Gorgeous“ George Wagner innoviert wurde.

5.5.d The 1970's: The Technicolor Legends of Territory Wrestling – In diesem Unterabschnitt wird untersucht, wie die kulturellen Veränderungen und die Verbreitung des Farbfernsehens die Präsentation des Prof-Wrestlings veränderten. Es werden die wichtigsten Promotionen, Performer und Ereignisse dieser Zeit besprochen.

5.5.e Birth of the Titan – Dieser Unterabschnitt bezieht sich auf die Gründung von Titan Sports, dem Unternehmen, aus dem schließlich die WWE hervorgehen sollte. Außerdem werden das Leben, die geschäftliche Karriere, die Mentorenschaft und die Ehe von Vince McMahon erörtert.

5.6 A Brief Overview of Top Territories – In diesem Unterabschnitt folgt eine Reihe von Kurzübersichten über Top-Promotions aus der Territory-Ära, die durch ihre Interpreten, ihre Promotion, ihren kulturellen Einfluss oder ihre Produktion einen bedeutenden historischen Einfluss auf das Profi-Wrestling hatten. Prominente Persönlichkeiten, Personal und Ereignisse aus und im Rahmen dieser Promotionen werden erörtert.

5.6.a Der World Wrestling Council – Puerto Rico – In diesem Unterabschnitt geht es um Carlos Colons WWC in Puerto Rico. Ferner werden prominente Persönlichkeiten, Personal und Ereignisse im Zusammenhang mit dieser Promotion behandelt.

5.6.b The Many Legends of Mid-South Wrestling – Dieser Unterabschnitt widmet sich der in New Orleans ansässigen MSW von „Cowboy“ Bill Watt. Außerdem werden prominente Persönlichkeiten, Personal und Ereignisse rund um diese Promotion besprochen.

5.6.c The Von Erich’s present World Class Championship Wrestling – In diesem Unterabschnitt steht die WCCW von Fritz Von Erich in Dallas im Mittelpunkt. Zudem kommen prominente Persönlichkeiten, Personal und Ereignisse im Zusammenhang mit dieser Promotion zur Sprache.

5.6.d Championship Wrestling from Florida – Dieser Unterabschnitt behandelt die CWF der Familie Graham. Es werden zudem prominente Persönlichkeiten, Personal und Ereignisse im Rahmen dieser Promotion angesprochen. Des Weiteren wird die Bedeutung Floridas als modernes Epizentrum des Profi-Wrestlings beleuchtet.

5.6.e Georgia Championship Wrestling – Es werden in diesem Unterabschnitt prominente Performer, Mitarbeiter und Ereignisse in Verbindung mit Georgia Championship Wrestling thematisiert. Die Etablierung des Profi-Wrestlings als nationale Kabelfernsehware durch die Präsenz der in Atlanta ansässigen Promotion auf Ted Turners WTBS wird ebenfalls näher beleuchtet.

5.6.f The Upstanding Don Owen and Portland Wrestling – In diesem Unterabschnitt werden Don Owen und seine in Portland, Oregon, ansässigen professionellen Wrestling-Unternehmen im pazifischen Nordwesten der Vereinigten Staaten behandelt. Außerdem werden prominente Performer, Personen und Ereignisse im Zusammenhang mit dieser Promotion vorgestellt.

5.6.g Stampede Wrestling and the Hart Dynasty – Dieser Unterabschnitt befasst sich mit Stu Harts Stampede Wrestling, das in Calgary, Alberta, Kanada, ansässig ist. Ebenfalls behandelt werden prominente Persönlichkeiten, Personal und Ereignisse im Rahmen dieser Promotion. Es wird überdies der Einfluss der Mitglieder der Großfamilie Hart auf das Profi-Wrestling diskutiert.

5.6.h Memphis – The Jarrett Clan, the King and the Last Territory – Dieser Unterabschnitt handelt von mehreren Generationen der Familie Jarrett als Promoter des

Profi-Wrestlings in Memphis, Tennessee und Umgebung. Erörtert werden auch prominente Performer, Mitarbeiter und Ereignisse rund um diese Promotion.

5.6.i Pacific and International Territories – Dieser Unterabschnitt befasst sich mit der Konstellation der Territorien, die während der Epoche den pazifischen Raum besetzten. Hierzu zählen Promotionen in Japan, Mexiko, Australien, Hawaii, auf den Pazifischen Inseln und an der amerikanischen Westküste. Es wird auch auf prominente Performer, Personal und Ereignisse im Zusammenhang mit diesen Promotionen eingegangen. Ebenso wird die Entstehung der Wrestling-Familie Anoa'i vorgestellt.

5.6.j Missouri – The Home of Champions – Dieser Unterabschnitt widmet sich der Konstellation der Promotionen im Staat Missouri während dieser Ära. Außerdem werden prominente Persönlichkeiten, Personal und Ereignisse im Zusammenhang mit dieser Promotion vorgestellt. Auch die Bedeutung Missouris und des zentralen Sitzes der NWA wird untersucht.

5.6.k Jim Crockett Promotions – The Mid-Atlantic Epicenter of Territory Wrestling – In diesem Unterabschnitt geht es um Jim Crocketts Mid-Atlantic Wrestling mit Sitz in Charlotte, North Carolina. Außerdem werden prominente Performer, Personen und Ereignisse rund um diese Promotion behandelt. Das gleichzeitige Auftreten von Crockett als zentralem Promoter der NWA und Ric Flairs Entwicklung zur zentralen Figur des Territorial Wrestling werden beleuchtet. Schließlich wird Crocketts Partnerschaft mit Ted Turner für den landesweiten Vertrieb von Kabelfernsehen erörtert.

5.7 Legacies of the Territory Era – Dieser Unterabschnitt bietet einen Überblick über die herausragenden Charaktere, Ereignisse und Fallstricke des professionellen Wrestling der Territory-Ära. Auch die Bedeutung und der Einfluss von Veranstaltern und Performern aus dieser Zeit auf die Kunst und die Branche werden thematisiert.

5.8 The Many Feuds of the Real American Era – Dieser Unterabschnitt beschäftigt sich mit der Entwicklung des WWF zu einer nationalen professionellen Wrestling-Promotion, die auf McMahons Innovationen und Hulk Hogans Leistungen zurückzuführen ist.

5.8.a A New Way of Doing Business – In diesem Unterabschnitt werden die innovativen Methoden zur Monetarisierung von Inhalten untersucht, die McMahon eingesetzt hat, um den WWF auf nationaler und globaler Ebene bekannt zu machen. Es wird auf Merchandising und Lizenzvergabe im Profi-Wrestling eingegangen.

5.8.b LIVE on Pay-Per-View – Dieser Unterabschnitt zeigt den Einfluss der Technologie des Bezahlfernsehens auf das Profi-Wrestling, frühe und sich entwickelnde Pay-Per-View-Modelle und den Kampf um die Pay-Per-View-Dominanz zwischen McMahon und Crockett auf.

5.9 The Nationally Televised Demise of Territory Wrestling – In diesem Unterabschnitt wird der Niedergang der NWA und der Jim Crockett Promotions behandelt. Ferner wird die weitreichende Bedeutung des Verkaufs der Promotion an das Medienkonglomerat von Ted Turner, Turner Broadcasting, beleuchtet. Die Bedeutung von McMahons beedeter Aussage von 1989 vor dem Senat von New Jersey, dass professionelles Wrestling eine nicht wettbewerbsorientierte Performance-Kunst sei, wird ebenfalls diskutiert.

5.10 The Corporate Wrestling Era – Dieser Unterabschnitt stellt die sich verändernde Landschaft des Profi-Wrestlings seit den späten 1980er Jahren vor, als das Wrestling Teil bedeutender Konzerne wurde. Die Auswirkungen dieses korporatistischen Einflusses auf die Kunst, die Industrie und die Kultur des professionellen Wrestling werden erörtert.

5.10.a The Decline of Hulkamania and the Identity Crisis of WCW (1990-1993) – Es werden die Veränderungen in der amerikanischen Popkultur der frühen 1990er Jahre und ihre Auswirkungen auf das Profi-Wrestling beleuchtet.

5.10.b The United States vs. Vince McMahon – Es wird das Bundesgerichtsverfahren und der Freispruch von Vince McMahon wegen des Vertriebs von Anabolika erörtert.

5.10.c The Cult of Extreme – the Outsize Influence of ECW – In diesem Unterabschnitt wird das Vermächtnis des industriellen und künstlerischen Einflusses der jungen, in Philadelphia ansässigen Promotion Extreme Championship Wrestling analysiert. Es wird über den Aufstieg, die Blütezeit und den Niedergang der Promotion informiert. Untersucht werden die innovativen Charaktere und erzählerischen Methoden der Promotion. Auch der Stellenwert der Promotion als Schaufenster des gegenkulturellen Idealismus der 1990er Jahre wird untersucht. Außerdem werden prominente Performer, Personen und Ereignisse im Zusammenhang mit dieser Promotion behandelt.

5.10.d Controversy Creates War: Eric Bischoff and the Birth of the Monday Night War – Dieser Unterabschnitt widmet sich dem Einfluss des WCW-Managers Eric Bischoff, dem Auftrag von Ted Turner, direkt mit der WWF zu konkurrieren, und der Entstehung des Werbekriegs in den 1990er Jahren. Es wird besprochen, wie Bischoff die WCW



von einem jährlichen Verlust in achtstelliger Höhe zu einer Tochtergesellschaft von Turner Broadcasting mit neunstelligen Einnahmen geführt hat.

5.10.e The New Generation: The Harts vs. The Kliq – In diesem Unterabschnitt geht es um die WWF Mitte der 1990er Jahre. Die Herausforderungen bei der Schaffung von Inhalten mit breiter kultureller Resonanz in der Post-Hogan-Ära werden überprüft. Darüber hinaus werden prominente Performer, Mitarbeiter und Ereignisse im Rahmen dieser Promotion erörtert.

5.10.f The Dirt Sheets – Dieser Unterabschnitt befasst sich mit dem Boulevardjournalismus im Profi-Wrestling und seiner Bedeutung sowohl für die Fachwelt als auch für die Fangemeinde. Prominente Veröffentlichungen und Autoren werden besprochen. Ebenso wird die Unzuverlässigkeit der genannten Veröffentlichungen als wissenschaftliche Quellen festgehalten.

5.10.g The Monday Night Wars and the Attitude Era – Dieser Unterabschnitt stellt den Boom des öffentlichen Interesses am professionellen Wrestling Ende der 1990er Jahre vor. Es werden die kulturellen Ursachen, die demografischen Veränderungen, die kreativen Innovationen, die prominenten Interpreten und die wichtigen Ereignisse dieser Epoche erörtert.

5.10.g.i The New World Order – Es wird die Entstehung der New World Order als zentraler Stall und Handlungsstrang des WCW-Fernsehens erläutert. Ebenfalls wird der große Erfolg dieses Handlungsstrangs zur Sprache gebracht.

5.10.g.ii The Birth of Attitude – Es wird der kreative Wandel von familienorientierten Programmen hin zu Inhalten erörtert, die sich an männliche Jugendliche und Erwachsene richten. Auch das Auftreten rebellischer, autoritätsfeindlicher Charaktere, rasante Handlungsstränge und zunehmende Gewalt werden thematisiert.

5.10.g.iii Breaking the Streaks – The Coronation of Austin and the Fall of Goldberg – Behandelt werden der Aufstieg von „Stone Cold“ Steve Austin zum Top-Performer der Branche, Dwayne „The Rock“ Johnsons anfänglicher Aufstieg zum Ruhm und der kometenhafte Aufstieg des Stables D-Generation-X in der WWF. Zudem wird Bill Goldbergs relativ kurze Zeit als WCW-Topstar erwähnt.

5.10.g.iv The Fall of WCW – In diesem Unterabschnitt werden die unternehmerischen und kreativen Einflüsse beleuchtet, die den Zusammenbruch und den letztendlichen Verkauf der WCW an die WWF begünstigt haben.

5.10.g.v Get the F Out and the IPO In – In diesem Unterabschnitt werden die Topstars der Attitude Era des WWF beleuchtet und wie der in dieser Ära erzielte Erfolg zum Börsengang der WWF-Aktien im Jahr 1999 führte. Des Weiteren wird untersucht, wie sich die zunehmende Kontrolle durch die Aktionäre auf den künstlerischen Inhalt und die interne Kultur der Promotion ausgewirkt hat.

5.10.h Public Trading and Parent Companies – The American Professional Wrestling Model in the Early 21st Century – In diesem Unterabschnitt wird der weltweite Trend betrachtet, dass professionelle Wrestling-Promotions zu Tochtergesellschaften von größeren Konglomeraten werden. Der branchenweite Einfluss der Unternehmen auf die künstlerische Leistung, die Überwachung und die Arbeitsplatzkultur wird diskutiert. Es werden die Börsengänge, Unternehmenspartnerschaften und Verkäufe verschiedener professioneller Wrestling-Unternehmen erörtert. Behandelt werden prominente Künstler, aufstrebende Promotions, Storylines, Kontroversen und Ereignisse in der Branche seit der Wende des 21. Jahrhunderts. Auch das Wachstum des Profi-Wrestlings zu einer jährlichen Multi-Milliarden-Dollar-Industrie wird erwähnt.

5.11 Working Glossary – Dieser Unterabschnitt enthält ein nicht alphabetisiertes, kommentiertes Glossar der wichtigsten Begriffe des Profi-Wrestlings. Die Kenntnis dieser Sprache und dieses Jargons ist für jeden Wissenschaftler unerlässlich, der primäre oder sekundäre Quellen zur Kunst und Industrie verstehen will.

Referenzen – Dieser Unterabschnitt umfasst Zitate für die gesamte Studie auf der Grundlage der 7. Ausgabe des Handbuchs der American Psychological Association. Wenn nötig, werden Anmerkungen geliefert.

Zusammenfassung – Dieser Unterabschnitt enthält eine detaillierte, englischsprachige Zusammenfassung der Studie.

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For Andy and Dawn...