

# FIGHTING SPIRIT

ISSUE 148 • £3.99



## SKY'S THE LIMIT

The shocking truth behind Raw's plummeting UK audience

## BRAM

The TNA star opens up about his controversial career

## MAYWEATHER VS. MCGREGOR

The real story behind the biggest fight of all-time

## TETSUYA NAITO

Is the Los Ingobernables de Japón leader about to win the G1?

- JOHN CENA >
- BROCK LESNAR >
- ROMAN REIGNS >
- RANDY ORTON >
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## BAYLEY

WILL WWE EVER UNDERSTAND WHY SHE'S SO BELOVED?

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## FIGHTING SPIRIT MAGAZINE #148

Uncooked Media Ltd  
P.O Box 6337  
Bournemouth  
BH1 9EH  
Telephone +44 (0)1202 586035  
Website [www.uncookedmedia.com](http://www.uncookedmedia.com)

### THE MAGAZINE TEAM

Editor: Brian Elliott  
[fightingspiritmagazine@gmail.com](mailto:fightingspiritmagazine@gmail.com)

Design: Imran Kelly  
[imrankelly@mail.com](mailto:imrankelly@mail.com)

Contributors:  
Will Cooling, Joe Lanza, Stephen Lyon, Martin Bentley, Barry Murphy, Colin Holmes, Martin Smith and Darren Ward

Photographers:  
Scott Finkelstein, Tony Knox, David J. Wilson, Mike Lano, John Morrissey, Oli Sandler, and Dave Smith

### ADVERTISING & MARKETING

Advertising Manager Rob Cox  
+44 (0)1202 586035  
[rob@uncookedmedia.com](mailto:rob@uncookedmedia.com)

Marketing Co-ordinator Bianca Trent  
+44 (0)8453 306 540  
[bianca@uncookedmedia.com](mailto:bianca@uncookedmedia.com)

### LICENSING

To discuss magazine licensing or content syndication opportunities, please email [licensing@uncookedmedia.com](mailto:licensing@uncookedmedia.com)

### CIRCULATION

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+44 (0)1202 586 848

### CUSTOMER SERVICE

+44 (0)8453 306 540  
[customerservice@uncookedmedia.com](mailto:customerservice@uncookedmedia.com)

### THE BIG KAHUNAS

Editorial Director Darren Herridge  
[darren@uncookedmedia.com](mailto:darren@uncookedmedia.com)

Finance Director Tim Harris  
[tim@selectps.com](mailto:tim@selectps.com)

### THANKS TO

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### DISTRIBUTION

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# FSM Welcome



BRIAN ELLIOTT  
EDITOR  
[@FSM\\_Editor](mailto:@FSM_Editor)  
[@belliott5150](mailto:@belliott5150)

I watched a little bit of *Gorgeous Ladies Of Wrestling* back in the day. I never thought I'd be writing about it positively in 2017, because the truth is, when I saw it on tape in the '90s, I didn't have anything good to say about it then, either.

I admit, I only watched a handful of matches from the original promotion, tacked as they were onto the end of traders' compilation tapes, but the action was truly dire. It wasn't until years later that I saw some of the painfully unfunny vignettes that acted as storylines, and the cheesy raps that were the equivalent of promos, heating up the matches.

With the above in mind, I was in no rush to watch Netflix' new dramatised version of *GLOW*, but I was glad I did. The show captured the campy nature of the original series, but gave the wrestlers "real" back stories that invested you in their future. Alison Brie, who played Ruth Wilder, was a revelation to me, conveying the bewilderment of a non-fan discovering what wrestling is like in and out of the ring, and eventually finding herself through Zoya the Destroya – a Russian gimmick that allowed her to express herself in a manner she thought she'd only ever get from classical acting. Similarly, Betty Gilpin's Debbie Eagen struggles with being the all-American babyface at a time when her personal life is in tatters, only for a natural chemistry that exists in both her and her alter ego to show her the way. Although he barely changes his appearance to play the role, Marc Maron is brilliant as the selfish, drug-abusing, crass director Sam Sylvia, who still manages to show the audience his gentler soul as the series goes on.

There's plenty more to enjoy about *GLOW*, which has a surprisingly good sense of humour, and a tremendous '80s pop-rock soundtrack that you'll want to fire up on Spotify right away (bonus points if you already knew the Stan Bush classic, *Dare*).

Check the show out whenever you can. If you're as fortunate as me, it'll be the first wrestling your other half loves, too.

### CONTRIBUTORS



JIM  
CORNETTE  
[@TheJimCornette](mailto:@TheJimCornette)



WILL  
COOLING  
[@WillCooling](mailto:@WillCooling)



MICHAEL  
CAMPBELL  
[@MichaelCEtc](mailto:@MichaelCEtc)



ALAN  
COUNIHAN  
[@Alan4L](mailto:@Alan4L)



JOHN  
LISTER  
[@JohnLister](mailto:@JohnLister)



# CONTENTS

## FEATURES

**10** With the UK ratings for Raw dropping to truly shocking levels, **FSM** breaks down the statistics and argues that WWE is in growing danger of losing its Sky Sports deal.

**44** In developmental, Bayley was a can't-miss prospect, but WWE has badly missed the mark with her on Raw. **FSM** analyses how the promotion has made such a mess of one of its most popular talents.

**48** Tom "Bram" Latimer is one of the most controversial wrestlers you could encounter, but he's also respected by many of his peers, too. **FSM** chats to him about his past indiscretions, and how the business has changed in his eyes.

**54** Tetsuya Naito was one of the stand-out in-ring performers in New Japan, but it never seemed quite enough. As **FSM** reports, however, he has found his calling as the leader of Los Ingobernables de Japón, arguably the finest faction in all of pro wrestling.

**64** While certainly not the most famous name, Seamus Dunleavy is as revered a wrestler as anyone who ever emerged from Ireland. **FSM** talks to him about a life that has had more than its fair share of action, both in and out of the squared circle.

**68** With potentially the biggest fight of all-time just around the corner, **FSM** previews Floyd Mayweather Jr. vs. Conor McGregor and what each man stands to gain - and lose - from the Las Vegas showdown.

**78** **FSM's** Training Ground has been a library of information about wrestling psychology and how a wrestler can best present himself. In this issue, with Mad Man Manson, we tackle the question of how to deal with promoters.

# 44

**"IN NXT, SHE HAD THE CHANCE TO WORK LONGER MATCHES, AND SHE'S FANTASTIC AT SHIFTING THE TONE FROM PLAYFUL BAYLEY TO BUSINESS BAYLEY"**



“EARLY ON TUESDAY MORNING, JUNE 20, THE LIVE PREMIERE OF RAW ON SKY SPORTS WAS WATCHED BY ONLY 18,000 PEOPLE”



### ROUND-UP

A look back at all this month's TV and PPV action

- 26 Raw, Smackdown, 205 Live, NXT, Impact Wrestling, ROH On Sinclair, and Lucha Underground
- 30 WWE: Great Balls Of Fire
- 31 EVOLVE Wrestling: EVOLVE 88-89
- 32 NJPW: G1 Special In USA
- 33 GFW: Slammiversary 2017
- 34 NJPW: Kizuna Road 2017 / Bellator: NYC - Silva vs. Sonnen
- 35 EVOLVE Wrestling: EVOLVE 86-87
- 36 ROH: Best In The World 2017
- 37 Dragon Gate: King Of Gate 2017

### INSIDER OPINION

Our team of expert columnists bring you their exclusive thoughts on the world of wrestling

52 Twenty years after the Born To Be Wired match, the likes of which may never be seen again, **Rob Naylor** pens his memories of the man who took the 1990s by storm, Sabu.

58 Other territories may have had their traditions, but to Jim Cornette in Smoky Mountain Wrestling, the month of August was as special as anything. This month, he recalls the plan to make Knoxville his base town, and the struggle it took to make it.

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© SCOTT FINKELSTEIN



© ANGELO BELTRAN

**REGULARS**

- 14 NEWS
- 22 ONE TO WATCH
- 38 LETTERS
- 80 SUBSCRIPTIONS
- 82 NEXT MONTH



*Through no specific fault of the talent, Raw has reached frighteningly low ratings in the UK*



# UNITED BY INDIFFERENCE

With the UK ratings for Raw dropping to truly shocking levels, Will Cooling breaks down the statistics and argues that WWE is in growing danger of losing its Sky Sports deal.

Back in Issue 126, in November 2015, **FSM** was the first outlet to take a close look at WWE's viewing figures in the United Kingdom. Back then, concerns were raised that the live airing of *Raw* was no longer guaranteed to pass the 100,000-viewer threshold. Upon returning to topic nearly two years later, the situation has significantly deteriorated.

Early on Tuesday morning, June 20, the live premiere of *Raw* on Sky Sports was watched by only 18,000 people - and that includes those who caught up with the programme during the week after digitally recording it. It was a new nadir, but all year we have seen WWE viewing figures plunge to alarming new depths. While this was by far the lowest figure the show had done all year, it was far from an isolated incident; up to the July 10, 2017 edition, there had been 16 occasions in which the live premiere of *Raw* had been watched by fewer than 50,000 people in 2017. To place that into perspective, between 2014 and 2016, the viewership plunged beneath this threshold only four previous times.

So far this year, 57% of all *Raw*'s UK live premieres have failed to achieve half of the 100,000 mark on which we previously laboured. Such figures call into question the value of the programme to Sky Sports.

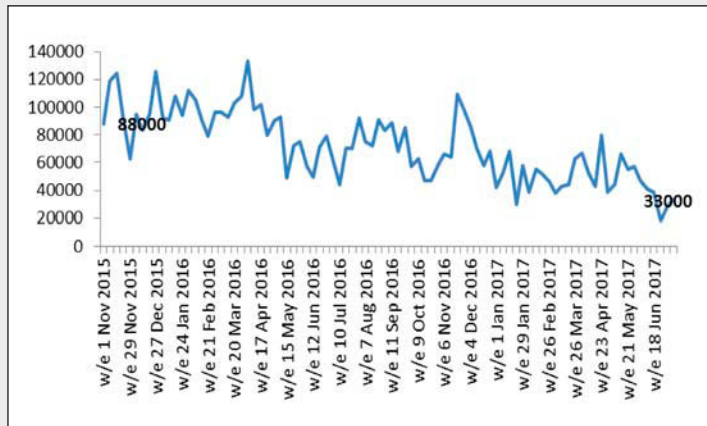
## **THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT...**

Before delving further into the data, it's worth recapping how it is examined. All viewing figures are based on data published by the British Audience Research Board, which is the UK equivalent of the Nielsen ratings that have defined success in American pro wrestling for 22 years. BARB provides a viewing figure for *Raw* that includes those who watched it live and caught up on a digital recording within a week.

One key thing to note that is that BARB reports on figures by providing a top 10 for each participating channel: when a week overlaps two months, it is classified as belonging to the month in which it ended. Therefore, a *Raw* on Monday, December 26, 2016



**Diagram A: Raw Live Premiere Viewing Figures, week ending November 1, 2015 to week ending July 10, 2017**



would be classified as being in January 2017. When discussing monthly or annual ratings, BARB's definition allows us to look at where the programme finished in that week's top 10. Several weeks' editions were excluded here, due to BARB data not being available.

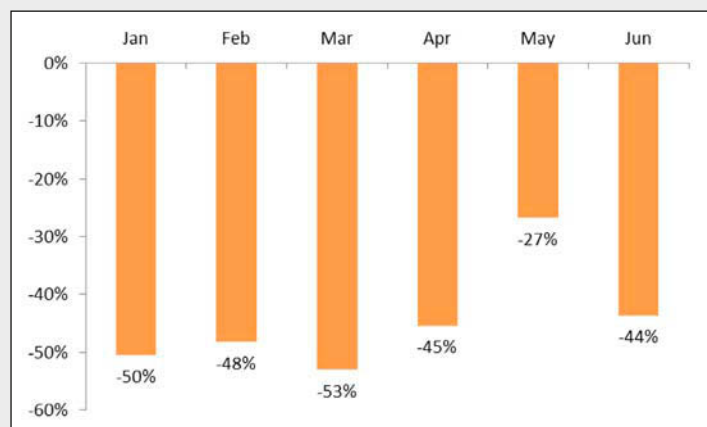
**i) Since FSM's last UK ratings analysis, the least-watched Raw had an 86% drop in viewers compared to the most-watched episode.**

If we just take the first and last episodes as the sample, then we see a 63% decline in the programme's viewership in less than two years. If we take the highest-watched show in our sample (133,000 for the edition on March 28) and compare to the recent nadir, we get an 86% decline.

However, it would be reasonable to say that this is slightly unfair on WWE. There are clear seasonal effects to Raw's viewership, magnified by the general drop-off in Sky Sports viewership when there are no English Premier League football matches. But looking at the change in the average monthly viewership of Raw from 2016 to 2017 shows that something alarming is taking place.

**ii) So far in 2017, Raw's average monthly viewership is down as much as 53% year-on-year.**

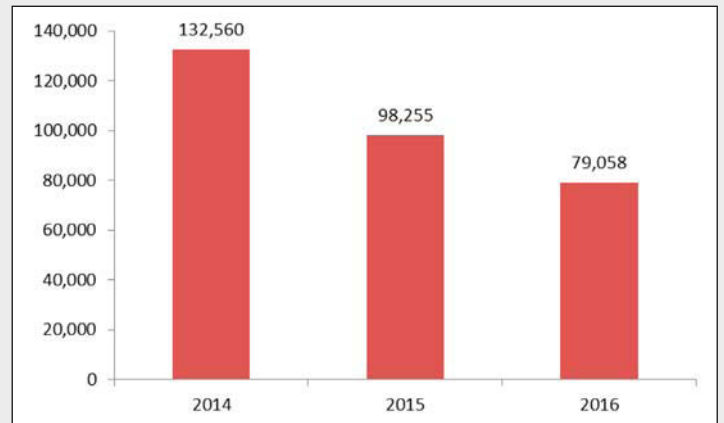
**Diagram B: Change in Raw Live Premiere Monthly Average Viewership in 2017, as compared to 2016**



Crucially, what has to be understood is that 2016 was hardly a banner year for WWE, either, as the decline in viewership that we first reported on in Issue 126 continued in 2016, with an annual decline of 18% from 2015's average viewership.

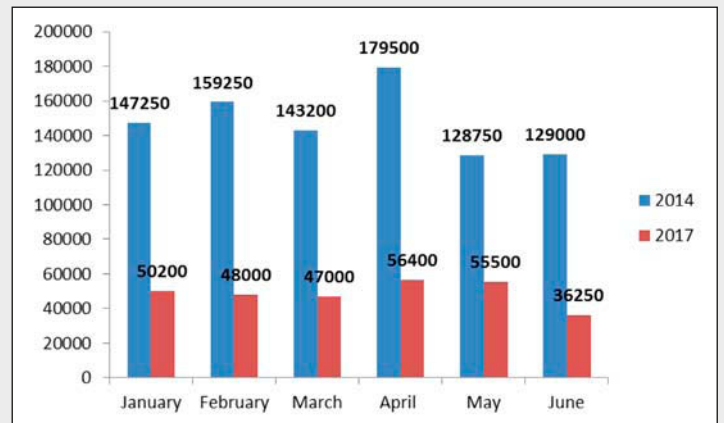
**iii) Raw's average annual viewership dropped by over 50,000 between 2014-2016.**

**Diagram C: Raw Live Premiere Annual Average Viewership From 2014-2016**



**iv) In the first six months of 2017, Raw's average monthly viewership was down as much as 71% in three years.**

**Diagram D: Comparison Between Raw Monthly Average Viewership in 2014 and 2017 so far**



Indeed, when you place the 2017 figures side by side to its 2014 equivalents, you start to see just how bad things have gotten for WWE. Only the month of May manages to escape with a decline in viewership of less than 65% across the past three years. By June, the decline has reached 71%.

And again, it's not as if 2014 was a golden age for WWE. In the last week of June 2017, the live premiere of Raw plunged to a depth previously thought impossible.

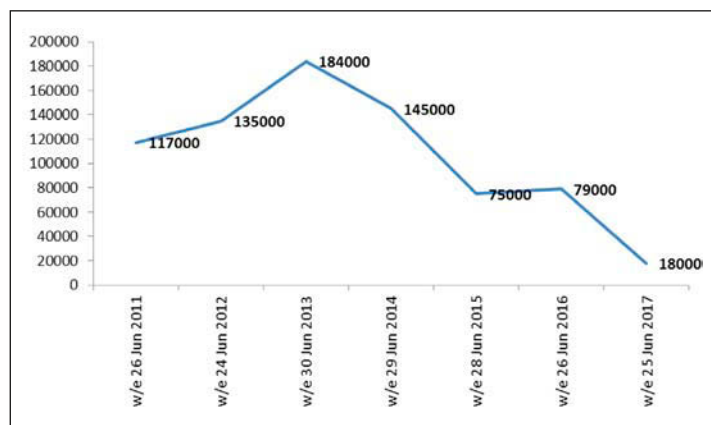
How does that compare to the same week in previous years?

**“Early on Tuesday morning, June 20, the live premiere of Raw on Sky Sports was watched by only 18,000 people”**



**v) Examining the final week in June shows that *Raw* has lost 90% of its viewership since 2013.**

**Diagram E: *Raw*'s Last Week of June Viewing Figures 2011 to 2017**



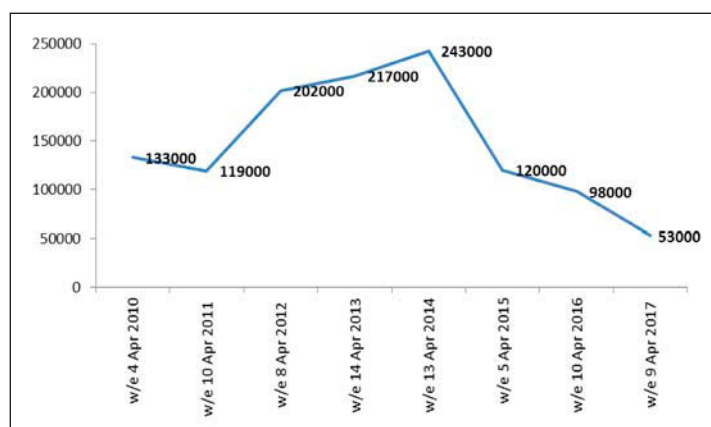
It cannot be stressed enough how severe the decline in *Raw*'s viewership has been over the past four years. Yes, it's only a snapshot of one week, but we are talking about the live premiere of *Raw* losing 90% of its viewership since 2013.

An interesting aside is that the June 21, 2013 edition of *Raw* featured a well-received match between Daniel Bryan and Randy Orton. That it saw a significant increase from the same week in previous years is yet another testament to the former ROH World champion's drawing power.

One might argue, why care about some random week in June when we all know that WWE peaks during *WrestleMania* season? Indeed, the *Raw* after *WrestleMania* has in its own right become a highlight of the wrestling calendar. But that sample only conforms to the wider story of an alarming decline.

**vi) Comparing the post-*WrestleMania* *Raw* in 2014 to that of 2017, we encounter a 78% drop in viewership.**

**Diagram F: Viewing Figures for Live Premiere of the *Raw* after *WrestleMania* (2010-2017)**



The rise of Daniel Bryan clearly led to a growth in interest during 2013 and 2014, which has since given way. After *WrestleMania XXX*, 243,000 people watched the live premiere of *Raw*, but after *WrestleMania XXXIII*, only 53,000 did so, which is a decline of 78% in three years.

More broadly, these figures conform to what we see through the data, that whereas once it was assumed that *Raw* would be watched by more than 100,000 viewers and strong shows could come close or even surpass 200,000 viewers, today an episode is doing well if it passes the 50,000 threshold.

Indeed not since the go-home show for *Survivor Series* on November 14, 2016 has *Raw*'s live premiere had a UK audience that reached seven figures.

**WHAT'S GOING ON?**

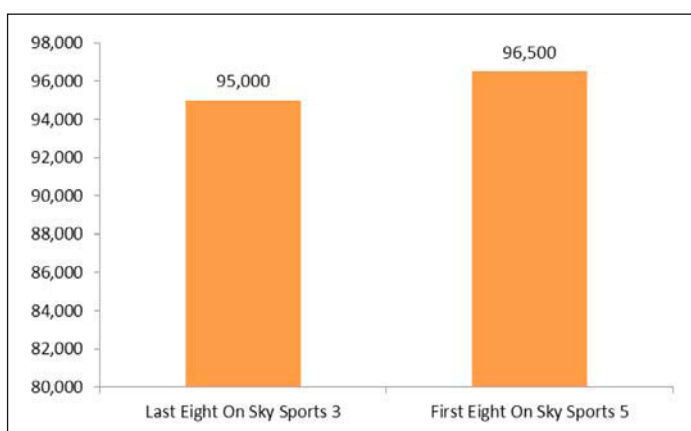
The next question to ask is simply, why is this decline happening? One possible suggestion is that *Raw* is suffering from being moved to Sky Sports 5 in 2016, but this would be incorrect for a couple of reasons. Firstly, while Sky Sports 5 is one of a trio of Sky Sports channels that the broadcaster does not wholesale to all other pay-TV providers and so typically has a smaller audience, WWE was on another of these channels (Sky Sports 3) in the past, when the viewership was much better.

Secondly, while Sky Sports 5 does tend to feature less high-profile sports, this should make minimum difference to a programme that has never benefited from a strong lead-in due to the late hour at which it starts.

Thirdly, Sky keeps all of its sports channels closely packed together on its programming guide, so it's hard to see why a WWE fan would struggle to find *Raw* after it moved from Channel 403 to Channel 405. And for those digitally recording the programme, Sky automatically continues a season link over when *Raw* changes channel.

The evidence backs this up, with the average viewership for the first eight editions on Sky Sports 5 being slightly higher than the average for the last eight on Sky Sports 3.

**Diagram G: Average viewership for the last eight airings of *Raw* on Sky Sports 3, and the viewership for the subsequent first eight airings on Sky Sports 5**



Another possible rationalisation is that there's been a shift in how people choose to access the programme. This is an argument that should be taken in two parts.

The first is that people have begun to rely more on repeat airings rather than watch or record the live premiere. While it is true that as the live premiere has plunged in viewership there have been occasions in which a repeat has had a larger audience, the argument remains unconvincing. Sky Sports is a popular platform, and there will always be people flicking through the channels looking for something to watch. There's no evidence that the prime time repeats have consistently increased from the 15,000 to 20,000 range they were doing when the live premiere was achieving significantly higher ratings. Likewise, while there have been some 5pm repeats that have done surprisingly strong viewing figures, this again was seen when the live premiere numbers have been significantly higher. Both prime time and early evening repeats are also more likely to see the occasional spike due to being preceded by an unusually strong lead-in.

A more convincing argument, at least potentially, is that people are gravitating away from recording the live premiere and catching



# “A more convincing argument, at least potentially, is that people are gravitating away from recording the live premiere and catching up on Raw in other ways”

up on *Raw* in other ways. Sky has begun allowing people to download *Raw* onto their Sky box, or watch through online services Sky Go or Now TV. However, it started expanding the WWE content provided through these channels back in 2015, so there's no reason to think that this shift can fully explain the staggering declines. And again, the prime time and daytime repeats have maintained their audience, which suggests that the hardcore audience here has genuinely declined. They may have stopped watching, or realised that they can watch the relatively small proportion of segments they're interested in through YouTube, Hulu (with a VPN) or (on a 30-day delay) WWE Network without having to pay for the expensive Sky Sports service.

And indeed, there is evidence that Sky Sports is struggling overall, with the average viewership for live broadcasts of English Premier League football matches seeing a 14% decline during the 2016-17 season. That Sky is feeling the heat adds greater credibility when you consider that the broadcaster has just relaunched Sky Sports with its long-established numeric branding giving way to specific channels for the Premier League, other football games, cricket, and golf.

But while Sky's woes may excuse some of WWE's failings, it only adds to the dangers.

## ...AND I FEEL FINE

The big story within British pay-TV is the titanic battle between Sky and BT. Sky is the erstwhile champion of pay-TV, having pioneered the tactic of using live sports and Hollywood movies to persuade British people to pay for additional channels (remember, most British households already have to pay the BBC if they want to watch network television). Sky used this success to expand its offer, using pay-TV as a hook to sell telephone lines and broadband internet. In doing so it challenged British Telecom, the formerly state-owned utility that still dominated that market. In 2013, BT decided to fight fire with fire, challenging Sky by launching its own subscription sports service. It has led to an explosion in rights fees, with the two broadcasters paying a combined £5.136billion to share the rights to broadcast English Premier League games. This was a 71% increase on the previous deal.

At one point, it was assumed that such a ferocious competition for sports rights would be good news for niche sports such as WWE and UFC, as Sky and BT sought to stop its rival from gaining an advantage. It's increasingly becoming clear that isn't the case; instead, as both broadcasters struggle to make their sums add up without increasing what they charge beyond what customers will pay, they are looking more closely at the return on investment they secure from each sport they purchase. It has led to the most popular sports getting record deals, but other sports being squeezed; for example, not only did Sky Sports give up its share of English rugby rights, but it brutally played hard ball with the rights holders to Spain's La Liga when the company organised a second round of bidding despite Sky already comfortably outbidding BT.

Indeed, WWE's position is even weaker than that because its programming is uniquely unsuited to migrate from Sky Sports to BT Sport. The latter is not only a platform with a smaller audience, but WWE benefits so much from the wider Sky platform. BT doesn't have a general entertainment channel that could push WWE to a younger audience, a mechanism for distributing pay-per-views, or an extensive online and television sports news service. And that's before you consider that Sky now owns Sky Germany

and Sky Italia, which both broadcast WWE, and is partially owned by News UK, whose Sun newspaper makes a point of favourably covering the promotion. Is it reasonable to believe that these beneficial relationships survive WWE leaving Sky? If not, then WWE really can't threaten to leave Sky for its biggest rival.

And at a time when the pressure on Sky Sports' budget is ever greater, the cost for WWE is going up. What Sky pays WWE increases every year of its current deal, with reporter Chris Harrington believing that by 2019, Sky will be paying the promotion \$33million. Crucially, he believes that the contract specifies a dollar amount, which means the cost of the deal to Sky is further increasing due to the ongoing decline in the value of the pound.

All this means that WWE would surely have to be doing significantly better than it was when the deal was signed in 2015 to justify an improved contract. And yet WWE seems oblivious to the danger that it is in; at a time when the viewing figures in its second most lucrative market are imploding, it is more focused on trying to grow its business in India based on nothing but YouTube statistics. This despite the fact that India is fundamentally unsuited to WWE's business model due to its lack of familiarity with streaming services, and the general difficulty (even with cricket) of selling merchandise or live event tickets. Instead, Indian sports make their money through successfully selling advertising, something for which WWE has never been an effective conduit.

If building the Indian market requires turning an uninteresting, life-long jobber into an instant World champion, why can't WWE push any one of the half-a-dozen talented British performers it has under contract? Would it not make sense for Neville and Becky Lynch (yes, she is Irish!) to be flourishing at the peak of the mid-card, at least? For Drew McIntyre and Nikki Cross to not be relegated to NXT? For the WWE UK division to actually be featured on British television rather than hidden behind the WWE Network paywall? Furthermore, unlike Jinder Mahal, pushing any of the British talent it has under contract would actually add to the entertainment value of the product for people of all nationalities, due to the quality of talent that Britain now produces.

The reason why none of this happens is because WWE is deeply complacent, and takes the British market for granted. What should not be forgotten is that even before this most recent decline, WWE was failing to achieve its potential; back in 2012, the live premiere of *Raw 1000* was watched by an astonishing 357,000 people.



Yes, that was a milestone edition of the programme, but it is a testament to the size of audience WWE could secure in the UK if it promoted a better product.

Should its failure to do so lead to a disastrous rights renegotiation, then Vince McMahon will have no-one to blame but himself.

*With Neville excelling without much help, WWE should be promoting him as a reason for UK fans to watch Raw*

# THE NEWS

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ALLEGATIONS MADE AGAINST "EL PATRON" RODRIGUEZ... SHANE MCMAHON HAS NEAR MISS IN HELICOPTER CRASH... MAURO RANALLO RETURNS AT NXT... WWE SUFFERS SEVERE DATA BREACH... SETH ROLLINS TO BE COVER STAR OF WWE 2K18...

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## UK NEWS

### PROGRESS TAG CHAMPS PROVE THERE'S STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Dunne, Seven, and Bate trade the straps with #CCK

BRITISH STRONG STYLE entered *Chapter 50* as the PROGRESS Tag Team champions, and left *Chapter 51* with them, too. Still, what happened in between gave the promotion a good shake in the middle of the year.

The main event of *Chapter 50: I Give It Six Months* on June 25 at the Electric Ballroom in Camden saw #CCK take the titles from Trent Seven and Tyler Bate in a high-intensity, venue-wide brawl, with Chris Brookes and Kid Lykos going over in their first match in PROGRESS following a top-rope brainbuster by Lykos on Bate, after Super Strong Style 16 winner Travis Banks had thwarted interference from PROGRESS World champion Pete Dunne.

Two weeks later at *Chapter 51: Screaming For PROGRESS* on July 9 at the O2 Academy in Birmingham, Seven goaded #CCK into putting the belts on the line in a six-man affair, with Brookes and Lykos teaming with Banks against Bate, Dunne, and Seven, with the condition that British Strong Style would never challenge for the titles again if they lost. After a chaotic war in which all six men went at it at once, it came down to Dunne smashing Lykos with a sledgehammer after Lykos had hit another top-rope brainbuster on Bate, allowing Bate and Seven to claim the titles for a second time as a team, and Seven for the third time in total.

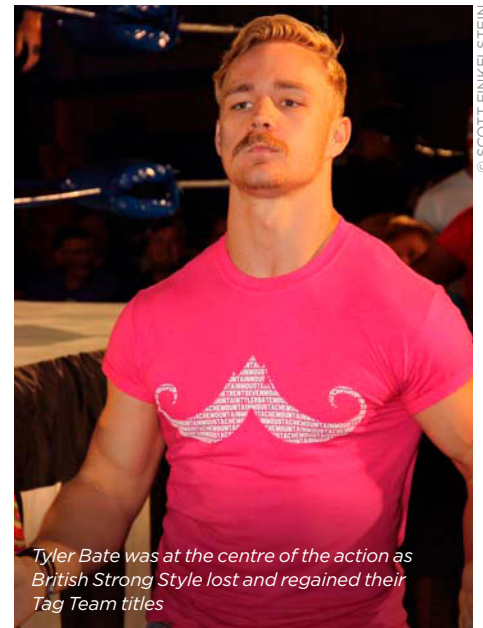
After scoring a win in a hard-hitting bout with Mike Bird at PROGRESS' German debut in Cologne on July 1, WALTER challenged Matt Riddle for the Atlas championship in Birmingham, in a re-match from their great bout at *Chapter 46* in March. This bout was better, with Riddle – who was successful in a title defence against Jurn Simmons in Cologne – and WALTER tearing the skin off their chests with their chops, and hammering each other with all sorts of suplexes. Things

came full circle for Riddle, as having won the belt the last time PROGRESS was in Birmingham in January, he lost it there, submitting to a strongly applied sleeperhold in one of the most brutal contests in PROGRESS history. On this performance, one wonders what challenger can credibly take the belt from WALTER.

A person not defending their belt is Pete Dunne, who announced at the start of *Chapter 50* that he won't be putting the PROGRESS World title on the line until his match with Travis Banks at *Chapter 55: Chase The Sun* on September 10. PROGRESS co-owner Jim Smallman booked Dunne in non-title affairs, where if someone defeated him, they'd get a title shot. Dunne survived his first two contenders, the debuting Donovan Dijak in Camden in an impressive outing, and then David Starr in Cologne in an excellent opener. Banks responded with wins over James Drake in Camden, and the debuting wXw star Marius Al-Ani in Cologne.

Toni Storm came through her first defence of the PROGRESS Women's championship, defeating Kay Lee Ray in Camden in a bout that was up a level from their great meeting at *Chapter 41*. It took a middle-rope Strong Zero piledriver for Storm to get past her fellow WWE Mae Young Classic entrant. Storm's next defence will be against Laura Di Matteo, who survived an onslaught from her arch rival Jinny to score an upset win in Cologne to gain the title opportunity.

The London Riots thought they had stemmed their run of losses in PROGRESS by scoring a win over Dave Mastiff and El Ligero in Camden, but James Davis and Rob Lynch ran into some old foes in Birmingham in the form of War Machine, with the IWGP Tag Team champions Hanson and Ray Rowe requesting a Tornado match, much like



Tyler Bate was at the centre of the action as British Strong Style lost and regained their Tag Team titles

they had at *Chapter 34*. This one was just as insane, with incredible feats of strength and stunning athleticism. War Machine claimed the win with Fallout, and booked a title match with British Strong Style for *Chapter 52: Vote Pies* in Manchester on July 23.

Chief Deputy Dunne returned to the promotion for the first time since his "brother" Pete turned against him to form British Strong Style last summer. The leader of "The Anti-Fun Police" interrupted an entertaining bout between Jack Sexsmith and "Flash" Morgan Webster to lay down the law on both men. Dunne then made a statement in Birmingham by defeating Webster, albeit following a low-blow.

Issues are continuing to develop between Jimmy Havoc and Mark Haskins. In Camden, they teamed up against Nathan Cruz and Zack Gibson, where a miscommunication with a steel chair led to Haskins being pinned by Gibson. In Birmingham, both men scored wins: Haskins over Mike Bird, and Havoc over the debuting Jigsaw. They each then made claims for a PROGRESS World title match, with Havoc taking a shot at Haskins for vacating the title when he got injured, saying he would have carried on through the pain.



## THIS MONTH'S...



### MATCH OF THE MONTH

This month's Men of the Month award goes to **The Fashion Police, Tyler Breeze and Fandango**. Through a series of wacky comedic vignettes that are consistently funny, made so because they embrace the silliness, both guys have gotten over with WWE fans and turned around what appeared to be stagnant careers. Now they are part of one of the most anticipated segments on *Smackdown* each week.



### MEN OF THE MONTH

This month's Match of the Month award goes to **Bobby Roode's** NXT title bout against **Roderick Strong** on the July 5 NXT programme. It was an excellent match, filled with drama, and Strong's family at ringside also added to the match. Roode versus Drew McIntyre is the title direction for *TakeOver: Brooklyn III*, but Strong's time as a NXT title challenger ought to come again.

## HAVE YOUR SAY

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# "THUNDER" CLAP IS LOUD FOR LIGER'S J CUP VICTORY

Former 11-time IWGP junior-heavyweight champion is victorious in UK tournament edition

REVOLUTION PRO WRESTLING celebrated its relationship with New Japan on July 8 with the first British J Cup tournament, and it was only fitting that it was won by a man largely responsible for the success of the Super J Cup tournaments of the 1990s.

Jushin "Thunder" Liger did not take long to make an impact at the Walthamstow Assembly Halls, as he defeated the RevPro British cruiserweight champion Josh Bodom in under three minutes. Bodom, coming off a successful title defence against David Starr at the Cockpit Theatre on July 2, underestimated the legendary grappler, and as a result will have to defend his title against him at *Summer Sizzler* at York Hall on August 17. Another of Liger's peers, Tiger Mask IV, entered the tournament, but was defeated by RevPro triple crown winner Marty Scurll, as he was the first to fall victim to Scurll's new Mouse Trap pinning hold.

The other two first round matches were re-matches of recent Best of the Super Juniors finals. A revisit to 2015 saw KUSHIDA once again defeat Kyle O'Reilly in a high-quality showing that stands alongside their prior NJPW and RevPro matches, with KUSHIDA earning the victory with the Back to the Future. Will Ospreay's bout with Ryusuke Taguchi was more comedic than their 2016 BOSJ concluder, but it was enjoyable all the same, with Ospreay again getting the win with the OsCutter.

The elimination final saw all the combatants keep Liger at bay, with KUSHIDA and Ospreay renewing hostilities following this year's Best of the Super Juniors showcase. Scurll eliminated KUSHIDA with the Mouse Trap, leading into the latest chapter of his rivalry with Ospreay, and after another Mouse Trap saw Ospreay depart, Scurll tried to use the same tactic on Liger. The former 11-time IWGP junior-heavyweight champion was too wily, though, and after kicking out of the hold, he hit the Liger Bomb and a brainbuster to win the tournament, to the delight of fans in the sweltering building.

After retaining the British Tag Team titles against Josh Wall and Kurtis Chapman at the Cockpit, #CCK was in non-title action against Los Ingobernables de Japón members BUSHI and Hiromu Takahashi (accompanied by his trusty pet cat, Daryl). Frustrated by Chris Brookes and Travis Banks' sick tag

moves, LIJ got themselves disqualified and attacked #CCK until the champions' third member, Kid Lykos, made his Revolution Pro debut for the save. Lykos and Banks are set to face IWGP Tag Team champions War Machine at the Cockpit on August 6, while Brookes is set to challenge Zack Sabre Jr. for the British heavyweight title at York Hall on August 17.

Matt Riddle took part in a demanding couple of matches over the week, at the Cockpit going to war with Keith Lee for the third time in just over a week, with Riddle sneaking the win in an ultra-physical contest. Riddle then went one-on-one with Tomohiro Ishii in Walthamstow, in a match so important to Riddle that EVOLVE booker Gabe Sapolsky gave him permission to miss a weekend of shows. This match had a full-speed, high-impact start, with many hard chops to the chest and a variety of heavy blows. Ishii eventually got the win with the brainbuster, but Riddle will have surely have proven the hype to the watching NJPW decision-makers.

*Jushin "Thunder" Liger added the British J Cup to his many accolades on July 8*



© TONY KNOX

**NEWS IN BRIEF**

An incident between José Rodríguez (Alberto El Patron) and Saraya-Jade Bevis at Orlando Airport on July 9 has led to public accusations of domestic violence. A witness who was in the same restaurant as Rodríguez and Bevis claimed that, after an argument in which Bevis through a drink on Rodríguez, he pursued her and used force as she tried to board a tram. Bevis is believed to have said, "Just stay out of my life. Leave me the fuck alone. I'm trying to get away from you." Allegedly, Bevis also made a remark about Rodríguez having been on a two-day cocaine binge, while he retorted that someone ought to check Bevis' bag, as "she's got all the coke in it. It's all hers." Bevis is also said to have claimed that Rodríguez was "such an abusive husband." While Bevis denied the reports on social media (in the second instance admitting she'd lied in the first post), her brothers Roy and Zak Bevis made statements on Facebook claiming that they knew Saraya-Jade was in an abusive relationship with Rodríguez, and that they had proof of physical attacks going back at least six months. "My sis won't be going [to] WWE 'cause he won't let her," wrote Roy Bevis. "[Rodríguez is] trying get her the sack by keep (sic) running on about them. So many people in the wrestling world hate him but are scared to say it. Why?" Zak Bevis wrote: "I've got too (sic) say I'm very worried about my sister, Please keep a eye on her... She's with a control freak who think he's a tough guy cause he's beats my sister and has money too cover his tracks. I love my sister; she will end up like Whitney Houston or Amy Winehouse". In the wake of the news, GFW suspended Rodríguez, but did not edit him out of future broadcasts that have already been taped... Shane McMahon counted himself lucky on July 19, after the helicopter in which he was a passenger had to make an emergency landing in the waters near Gilgo Beach in Long Island, New York. "I'd like to thank the man upstairs for looking out this morning & thanks to pilot Mario, Suffolk Co. Marine Bureau & Fire Island Coast Guard," he tweeted... In early-July, Forbes.com published details of a WWE data breach relating to 3million users. Names, addresses, email addresses, and phone numbers were stolen, but no payment details... Mauro Ranallo was unveiled as the new lead announcer for NXT at the June 23 TV tapings. Ranallo had stopped working on *Smackdown* as of March 14, apparently under duress after a falling

**continued...**

**UK NEWS**

**JESTER CLEANS HOOSE AHEAD OF SHUG'S TITLE MATCH**

**Joe Coffey defends the ICW World championship against former title-holder**

ICW RETURNED TO Edinburgh for the first time in over a year for *Tramspotting 2*, before taking the pre-*Shug's Hoose Party 4* tour home with a *Fight Club* taping in Glasgow that saw two of ICW's favourite sons handed the opportunity of a lifetime.

ICW World champion Joe Coffey was not amused with only being in the pre-interval spot in Edinburgh on June 25, despite taking on hometown favourite Joe Hendry in a terrifically engaging contest that stole the show. Coffey grabbed the win with the Boston Crab. While the title was on the line that night, former Zero-G champion Kenny Williams would have to earn a shot with a win over Coffey in Glasgow on July 9, but despite a heroic effort, he fell short, breaking a wooden panel of The Garage in the process of setting up a death-defying spot in the crowd. Coffey prevailed with the Discus Lariat before continuing to attack Williams, leading to Coffey's opponent for *Shug's Hoose Party*, Jack Jester (who had beaten Davey Blaze earlier in the night), making the save. Jester then told Coffey that he'd be defending his title in a Cage match on night two of the big July 29-30 weekender.

WWE will have its UK championship defended outside the company on night one of the weekender. Pete Dunne's opponent would be either half of arguably ICW's most storied rivalry, BT Gunn or Wolfgang, with Gunn earning the right to fight for the opportunity thanks to a win in an entertaining fatal four-way in Edinburgh, also featuring Gabriel Kidd, Kenny Williams, and Davey Blaze. The contest between Wolfgang and Gunn predictably blew the roof off The Garage, but after a double pin finish, there was just enough oxygen left for Mark Dallas to announce that both men would face Dunne, with the added caveat of Trent Seven in the mix, making it an historic four-way encounter.

A title shot wasn't the only thing Wolfgang won, as he battled Liam Thomson in Edinburgh, with Thomson's house allegedly on the line. The match was beautifully worked, and it was difficult not to feel for Thomson, as his recent run of misery has seen him lose his sink, washing machine, and now his entire abode. Adding insult to injury, said sink was used as a weapon to gain the victory. Thomson had similarly dire luck when he emerged for his Zero-G title shot in Glasgow with a Greggs sausage roll and rucksack full of his earthly possessions, only to face a Zack Gibson in no mood for a laugh. Thomson fought valiantly, but eventually lost out to the Shankly Gates top wristlock.



Joe Coffey has Kenny Williams in a bit of a spin during their bout at The Garage

© DAVID J. WILSON

Polo Promotions know they must win on night two of *Shug's Hoose Party* to be allowed to remain a team, and their tension over the situation was palpable when a loss to The Kings of Catch in Edinburgh led Mark Coffey to leave the ring long before Jackie Polo, seemingly irked at his partner for wandering off to battle Lewis Girvan in the crowd. A fired-up Coffey put on a terrific display as the team returned to form with a win over Martin Kirby and Joey Hayes, and took to the mic to deliver an emotive promo about the synergy within Polo Promotions.

Another emotional promo was cut by Coach Trip, aka Adam Shame. The former Scottish heavyweight champion was a pivotal part of the local scene, and will return when he teams with DCT to take on Davey Blaze and The Wee Man in a Kiss My Arse match at *Shug's*.

Kasey got the better of Viper in a tremendous bout in Edinburgh, earning a shot at Kay Lee Ray's Women's title. Kay Lee herself couldn't make it to the tag team death match main event that night, leaving her beau Stevie Boy to face Mikey Whiplash in a brutal affair that ended when Dickie Divers took the opportunity to exact a bit of revenge on his opponent for *Shug's*, referee Thomas Kearins. He attacked Kearins before aiding Stevie by pushing Whiplash through a barbed wire table, and counting the pin with the unconscious official's hand. That led to a tag team contest at the Glasgow show, where Stevie and Divers took on Whiplash and Chris Renfrew. This time Kearins got revenge with a Kendo stick attack on Divers that led Renfrew to seal the win.

Sha Samuels took to the mic in Edinburgh to try and bring Lionheart's beer-loving alter ego to the fore. The former Zero-G title-holder was having none of it, however, cracking a beer over the head of "The East End Butcher" before pinning him with the Rock Bottom.



**UK NEWS**

# WCPW SCORES BIG WIN WITH WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

Participants from Germany and Japan make shows a success

WHATCULTURE PRO WRESTLING'S focus shifted to the Pro Wrestling World Cup this month, with the company holding two qualifying rounds in the German section in Berlin on July 2, and in the Japanese section in Manchester on July 7.

The participants in the former were provided by the German Wrestling Federation, but the two men who qualified for the finals both held a recent connection in Westside Xtreme Wrestling. "Bad Bones" John Klinger, who has made regular appearances in WCPW throughout the year, got through his first-round match against Pascal Spalter, and then booked his ticket to the finals with a win over Cash Money Erkan (who defeated Rambo in the opening round).

The second qualifier proved to be a surprise, with most expecting Da Mack (he replaced Axel Dieter Jr, who instead signed with NXT) to go through. Da Mack got past Cem Kaplan in his opening match, booking a deciding bout with Lucky Kid, who defeated Juvenile X. In a shock to even astute observers, Lucky Kid defeated Da Mack to join Bad Bones in the August finals.

New Japan was the partner for the Japanese qualifying round, with the field primarily made up of junior-heavyweight stars. The first qualifier was Los Ingobernables de Japon's Hiromu Takahashi, who defeated Yohei Komatsu in the

opening round, and then scored a win over Ryusuke Taguchi (who got past the legendary Jushin Liger) to book his place in the finals.

Takahashi's main rival, the IWGP junior-heavyweight champion KUSHIDA, joined "The Time Bomb" in the finals. KUSHIDA defeated Sho Tanaka in his opening match, and then prevented an LIJ double in the finals by beating BUSHI, who had downed Tiger Mask IV to book his place in that contest. The finals field was to be completed later in July, with the United States qualifiers in Manchester on July 21, and the Rest of the World qualifiers in Newcastle on July 22.

Also in WCPW, The Swords of Essex' luck ran out, as they lost their Tag Team titles in Manchester to the IWGP Tag Team champions War Machine.



Martin Kirby's team got some revenge on The Prestige in Manchester on July 7

# NEWS IN BRIEF

...continued

out with John Layfield - a notion that Ranallo later denied in a joint statement with WWE... Austin Aries and WWE have parted ways. Aries was unhappy about his match with Neville not being included on the North American edition of the *WrestleMania XXXIII* DVD, and also how he was booked against Neville overall... Seth Rollins has been confirmed for the cover of *WWE 2K18* videogame... *Talking Smack* has been cancelled from its weekly Network slot. It would've been nice if someone had told host Renee Young first... The Mae Young Classic, which has its final on September 12, will feature the following competitors: Piper Niven (formerly Viper); Kay Lee Ray; Ayesha Raymond; Shayna Baszler; Marti Belle; Kairi Sane (Kairi Hojo); Mercedes Martinez; Nicole Savoy; Toni Storm; Mia Yim; Candice LeRae; Sage Beckett (Andrea); Princessa Sugehit; Bianca Belair; Tessa Blanchard; Serena Deeb; Vanessa Borne; Taynara Conti; Kavita Devi; Lacey Evans; Rachel Evers (Rachael Ellering); Jazzy Gabert; Santana Garrett; Reina Gonzalez; Dakota Kai (Evie); Abbey Laith (Kimber Lee); Xia Li; Sarah Logan ("Crazy" Mary Dobson); Renee Michelle; Rhea Ripley (Demi Bennett); Miranda Salinas; and Zeda... Shane Helms, Al Snow, and Pat Kenney were let go as agents by GFW in late-June... PWG announced the following participants for September 1-3's *Battle Of Los Angeles*: WALTER; Travis Banks; Flamita; Keith Lee; Rey Fenix; Desmond Xavier; Donovan Dijak; Jeff Cobb; Trevor Lee; "Flash" Morgan Webster; Zack Sabre Jr.; Sammy Guevara; Mark Haskins; Jonah Rock; Brian Cage; Rey Horus; Marty Scurll; Michael Elgin; TK Cooper; Matt Sydal; Sami Callihan; Matt Riddle; Ricochet; and Penta El Zero M... Kevin Kelly has left ROH in order to concentrate on New Japan commentating duties and other work... ROH's *War Of The Worlds* event in Liverpool on August 19 will be an iPPV through Fite TV. In the main event, ROH World champion Cody Rhodes defends against SANADA... On June 21, Vince Russo filed a restraining order against Jim Cornette, alleging that he had been stalking him. While Cornette has occasionally lambasted Russo in the recent past, Russo has not been shy about talking about Cornette, either. In any case, Cornette reacted to his police visit by selling signed copies of the order, the profits of which he donated to the WHAS Crusade for Children, a charity for special needs

continued...

# THE TROPHY CASE

WWE CHAMPIONS...

IMPACT CHAMPIONS...

UFC CHAMPIONS...

ACCURATE AS OF 23/07/2017

**UNIVERSAL CHAMPION**

Brock Lesnar

**WWE CHAMPION**

Jinder Mahal

**RAW WOMEN'S CHAMPION**

Alexa Bliss

**SMACKDOWN WOMEN'S CHAMPION**

Naomi

**U.S. CHAMPION**

AJ Styles

**INTERCONTINENTAL CHAMPION**

The Miz

**WWE CRUISERWEIGHT CHAMPION**

Neville

**RAW TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS**

Sheamus & Cesaro

**SMACKDOWN TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS**

The Usos

**GFW HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION**

Alberto El Patron

**GFW KNOCKOUTS CHAMPION**

Sienna

**GFW GRAND CHAMPION**

Ethan Carter III

**GFW X-DIVISION CHAMPION**

Sonjay Dutt

**GFW TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS**

Ortiz & Sanata

**UFC HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION**

Stipe Miocic

**UFC LIGHT-HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION**

Daniel Cormier

**UFC MIDDLEWEIGHT CHAMPION**

Michael Bisping

**UFC WELTERWEIGHT CHAMPION**

Tyron Woodley

**UFC LIGHTWEIGHT CHAMPION**

Conor McGregor

**UFC FEATHERWEIGHT CHAMPION**

Max Holloway

**UFC BANTAMWEIGHT CHAMPION**

Cody Garbrandt

**UFC FLYWEIGHT CHAMPION**

Demetrious Johnson

**UFC WOMEN'S BANTAMWEIGHT CHAMPION**

Amanda Nunes

**UFC WOMEN'S STRAWWEIGHT CHAMPION**

Joanna Jedrzejczyk

# NEWS IN BRIEF

children. In just 12 days, he had raised \$2,000... El Lindaman, Shingo Takagi, and Takashi Yoshida took the Open the Triangle Gate titles from Naruki Doi, Big R. Shimizu, and Ben K on July 1 in Osaka... Hikaru Sato and Atsushi Aoki won the All-Asia tag team titles from Masa Fuchi and Atsushi Onita on June 20 in Obihiro... Jun Akiyama won the All Japan TV title on June 21, beating Yutaka Yoshie in Kushiro... Tetsuya Endo won the King of DDT tournament on June 25 at Korakuen Hall, defeating Harashima. On the same show, The KO-D Trios titles were won by Masahiro Takanishi, Kudo, and Yukio Sakaguchi over Makoto Oishi, Shunma Katsumata, and Mao... Mayu Iwatani defeated Io Shirai on June 21 at Korakuen Hall, not so surprisingly taking the Stardom title from the WWE-bound competitor. Along with HZK and AZM, Shirai had dropped the Trios titles Jungle Kyona, Hiroyo Matsumoto, and Kaori Yoneyama one week earlier. On June 22, Shirai announced that she was taking a break from wrestling after WWE medicals had found her to have a neck injury... Jim Breaks, one of the greatest wrestlers of the *World Of Sport* era, was arrested in the early hours of June 30 in his home in Gran Canaria, after his on-off girlfriend of 20 years, Donna Cowley, was found with head injuries. Cowley died that morning of a heart attack. According to Spanish law, Breaks will not be charged until shortly before the case reaches court... Smith Hart, the eldest of the Hart family children, passed away on July 2 after battling prostate cancer. He was 68... Lester Wolff, who as Buddy Wolff was one of only two men to wrestle Muhammad Ali in worked matches, passed away on July 12. He was 76... Phyllis Burch, who was best known as Diane Von Hoffman in the 1980s, passed away on July 6 after complications during surgery. She was 55... Tetsuo Sekigawa, who was most famous for portraying Mr. Pogo in both FMW and W\*ING, passed away on June 23. He was 66. During back surgery, he suffered a stroke, and blood and oxygen were blocked to his brain... On the day of *UFC 213* on July 8, Women's featherweight champion Amanda Nunes pulled out of her main event with Valentina Shevchenko following a mystery illness, later claimed to be sinusitis. UFC president Dana White was not impressed, claiming that no doctor could find anything wrong with Nunes. In any case, in the new main event, Robert Whittaker beat Yoel Romero by unanimous decision, and Alistair Overeem did likewise to Fabricio Werdum.

## UK NEWS

# SMILE TURNS TO FROWNS BEFORE CONTROVERSIAL DUSTY FINISH

**NLW champion Ryan just about hangs on to his belt**

WITH ITS SECOND National Stadium show on the horizon, Dublin's OTT Wrestling presented *Born To Be Wasted* on July 1. It was a step down from their May and June cards, but a fun show nonetheless, with a solid build to the *Wrestlerama* event in the larger venue.

Ryan Smile retained the NLW title in the main event, after a Dusty finish teased the crowd with a Mark Haskins victory. *Wrestlerama's* guest authority figure, Mick Foley, appeared "via Facetime" to denounce Smile's low blow-assisted win, and "The Hardcore Legend" thereafter announced a three-way main event for August: Smile versus Haskins versus Marty Scurll. The Attitude Era-like shenanigans in the match's closing stretch won't wash with all viewers, but the live crowd was certainly invested in the drama, elevating what was a middling match to that point.

British Strong Style were once again the show-stealers, as the charismatic trio bested Keith Lee, Sami Callihan, and Donovan Dijak in an incredible six-man tag match. With his cooler than cool demeanour and a topé-con-hilo that needs to be seen to be believed, Lee was the star of the contest, making an unforgettable first impression in the Tivoli. The team of Bate, Dunne, and Seven have quickly become the most beloved act in OTT, routinely trotting out Match of the Year contenders to a white hot reception from the Irish fans.

The always-eclectic undercard boasted some additions, with several new characters living up to the company's name. Bobby George Jr, a has-been – or possibly a never-was – pro darts player was well-received in his victory over Terry Thatcher. While the match was basic, the

shtick immediately clicked. Likewise, Damian Dunne's Anti-Fun Police were welcomed with thunderous boos, as they tried to shut down the trademark "cans and craic" attitude of the OTT faithful. Fan favourites Angel Cruz, B Cool, and Kenny Williams fell to the humour-hating fuzzi on this occasion, as the bizarre team of Dunne, Bull Dempsey, and Functional (formerly Fabulous) Nicky were triumphant in their debut.

As outlandish characters go, OTT's own "Session Moth" Martina outdid herself on this evening, donning Virgin Mary garb to team with "Pastor" William Eaver against Logan Bryce and Justin Shape. Like Eaver and Shape's singles battle, this was heavy on the theatrics, with The Virgin Moth's natural charisma shining through. Shape got his win back from Eaver, but "The Pastor" has undoubtedly endeared himself to OTT fans during both his appearances. Post-match, Katey Harvey, who successfully defended her Women's title against Xia Brookside, attacked Martina, further setting the stage for their championship bout at *Wrestlerama*.

Revisiting a long-standing theme in OTT, the villainous English duo of Charlie Sterling and Zack Gibson defeated 2Unlimited, after almost inciting a riot with a *God Save The Queen* rendition before the opening bell. While the match was a level below what you would hope given the calibre of all involved, it established Sterling and Gibson as a despised pairing.

In the opener, Chris Brookes retained his top contendership "gold ring" against Damien Corvin. After copious amounts of interference from Bonesaw, beloved hometown referee Niall Fox hit some trademark #CCK spots with Brookes to put away the bruising Belfast heel.



Donovan Dijak sails through the air during his match with British Strong Style

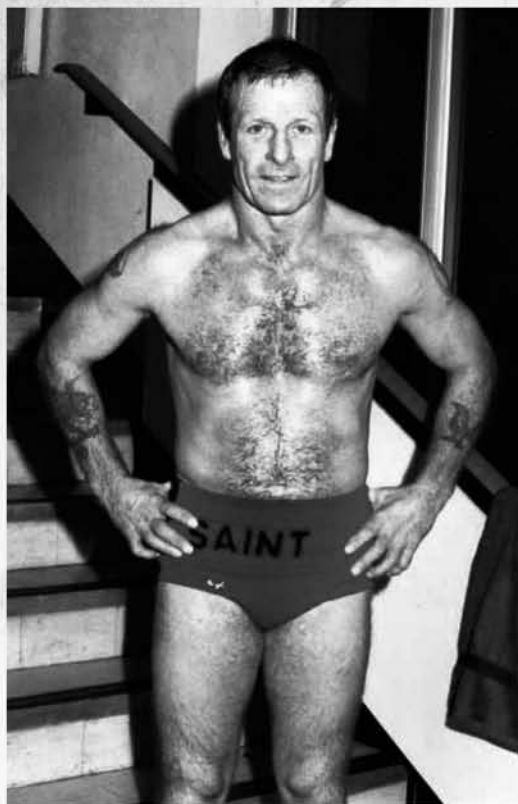
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**DOORS OPEN 3:30**

**COMMENCING 4:00PM**



# UKEVENTS

COMPILED BY MAT LINDSAY

**FSM SUGGESTS SOME OF THE FINEST PRO WRESTLING TAKING PLACE IN THE UK THIS MONTH**



- A** 05/08/17 **PCW "TOWER SLAM"**  
Tower Circus, Blackpool
- B** 06/08/17 **OTT "WRESTLERAMA"**  
Mandela Hall, Belfast
- C** 13/08/17 **ICW "FIGHT CLUB"**  
The Garage, Glasgow
- D** 17/08/17 **RPW:UK "SUMMER SIZZLER 2017"**  
York Hall, London
- E** 20/08/17 **ATTACK! PRO WRESTLING "WINTERSLAM II"**  
Walkabout, Cardiff
- F** 24/08/17 **WCPW "PRO WRESTLING WORLD CUP FINALS"**  
Bowlers Exhibition Centre, Manchester



Chris Brookes will be a part of ATTACK! Pro Wrestling's August 20 show in Cardiff

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- 03/08/17 ATTACK! Pro Wrestling "Thursday Night Throws 2": Cathays CC, Cardiff
- 03/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: Holiday Resort Unity, Breaan
- 04/08/17 HOPE "4th Anniversary Show": Forest Town Welfare, Mansfield
- 04/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: Muni Arts Centre, Pontypridd
- 05/08/17 Reckless Intent "Cruel Summer 2017": Murieston Scout Hall, Livingston
- 05/08/17 BWP "Summer Break 2017": Frith Beach Arena Park, Prestatyn
- 05/08/17 Wrestlezone: St Laurence Hall, Laurencekirk
- 05/08/17 DOA "Yarmageddon 7": Litchfield CC, Great Yarmouth
- 05/08/17 Alpha Omega Wrestling "Vendetta 2017": The Carleton, Morcambe
- 05/08/17 LCW "Knockout": West End WMC, Leicester
- 05/08/17 OTT "Wrestlerama": National Stadium, Dublin
- 05/08/17 SWE "Day of Reckoning 18/Menace II Society VII": Rushcliffe Arena, Nottingham
- 06/08/17 BEW "An Audience with Bram": Tunnel 267, Wimbledon
- 06/08/17 Dragon Pro Wrestling "Endless Summer": Rodney Parade, Newport
- 06/08/17 RPW:UK "Live At The Cockpit 19": London Cockpit, Marylebone
- 06/08/17 SWE "Retribution 8": Priory Centre, St Neots
- 06/08/17 EAW: Pemberton LC, Rushden
- 07/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: Trecco Bay Holiday Park, Porthcawl
- 08/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: Billing Aquadrome, Northampton
- 08/08/17 All Star Wrestling: Town Hall, Rhyl
- 08/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: Holiday Resort Unity, Breaan
- 09/08/17 All Star Wrestling: Pavilion Ballroom, Bournemouth
- 09/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: De Valance Pavilion, Tenby
- 09/08/17 Glan-Y-Mor Holiday Park, Aberystwyth
- 10/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: Holiday Resort Unity, Breaan
- 11/08/17 EAW: Braza Club, March
- 12/08/17 PCW: Flag Market, Preston
- 12/08/17 TCW "Do Unto Others": Church Leeds, Leeds
- 12/08/17 Pride Promotions: Pollyfield CC, Bideford
- 12/08/17 PCW "Your Sixth Is On Fire": Evoque, Preston
- 12/08/17 Source Wrestling: Burnside Scout Hall, Glasgow
- 12/08/17 HOPE "Evolution 49": Davys SC, Sheffield
- 12/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: Sovereign Centre, Eastbourne
- 13/08/17 Target Wrestling: Silloth Sports Hall, Silloth
- 14/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: Trecco Bay Holiday Park, Porthcawl
- 15/08/17 All Star Wrestling: Town Hall, Rhyl
- 15/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: Holiday Resort Unity, Breaan
- 15/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: Billing Aquadrome, Northampton
- 16/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: De Valance Pavilion, Tenby
- 16/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: Glan-Y-Mor Holiday Park, Aberystwyth
- 17/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: Holiday Resort Unity, Breaan
- 17/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: Theatr Ffwrnes, Llanelli
- 19/08/17 Ironfist Wrestling: Richmond Place Club, Hereford
- 19/08/17 Reckless Intent Wrestling: Healthy Living Centre, Twechar
- 19/08/17 House of Pain: Beeston CC, Nottingham
- 19/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: Merthyr Tydfil LC, Merthyr Tydfil
- 20/08/17 FFW "Retribution": One NK, Lincoln
- 20/08/17 IPW:UK "Swerved 2017": Whiteoak LC, Swanley
- 20/08/17 House of Pain "Smackdown to Mental Health": Richard Herrod Centre, Nottingham
- 21/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: Trecco Bay Holiday Park, Porthcawl
- 22/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: Holiday Resort Unity, Breaan
- 22/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: Billing Aquadrome, Northampton
- 23/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: De Valance Pavilion, Tenby
- 23/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: Glan-Y-Mor Holiday Park, Aberystwyth
- 24/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: Holiday Resort Unity, Breaan
- 25/08/17 BCW: Grand Hall, Kilmarnock
- 25/08/17 Fight Club: PRO: Starworks Warehouse, Wolverhampton
- 25/08/17 FutureShock "Underground #23": Longfield Suite, Prestwich
- 25/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: LC2, Swansea
- 26/08/17 Fight Club: PRO: Bush Hall, London
- 26/08/17 DOA "Sufflok Slam 2017": Gainsborough Labour Club, Ipswich
- 26/08/17 SWE "Uprising - Hellbound": Ardlor Complex, Dundee
- 26/08/17 AWW: Cornbow Hall, Halesowen
- 27/08/17 ICW "Fight Club": The Garage, Glasgow
- 27/08/17 RPW:UK: Portsmouth Guildhall, Portsmouth
- 27/08/17 RCWA: Harrow Lodge Park, Hornchurch
- 28/08/17 RCWA: Harrow Lodge Park, Hornchurch
- 28/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: Trecco Bay Holiday Park, Porthcawl
- 29/08/17 All Star Wrestling: Town Hall, Rhyl
- 29/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: Holiday Resort Unity, Breaan
- 29/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: Billing Aquadrome, Northampton
- 30/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: De Valance Pavilion, Tenby
- 30/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: Glan-Y-Mor Holiday Park, Aberystwyth
- 31/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: Holiday Resort Unity, Breaan
- 01/09/17 EBW "Wrath Upon Dearne 2017": Montgomery Hall, Wath-upon-Dearne
- 02/08/17 DOA "Adrenaline Cup 2017": GER Sports Club, March
- 02/08/17 4FW: Catholic Hall, Thatcham
- 02/08/17 Welsh Wrestling: St. Davids Hall, Cardiff
- 03/08/17 4FW: Somerset Hall, Bristol
- 03/08/17 BEW "Ambition of an Empire 2": Tooting & Mitcham FC, Tooting

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*Tom Dawkins has totally reinvented himself as the mysterious Cara Noir*



# CARA NOIR

**HEIGHT:** 6ft  
**WEIGHT:** 187lbs  
**DEBUT:** 2010  
**SIGNATURE MOVES:** Package piledriver; Capoeira kick; Guillotine brainbuster  
**HAS WORKED FOR:** Lucha Britannia; IPW:UK; Lucha Forever; RCWA; RevPro; HOPE; XWA; WAW; Pro Wrestling Chaos; LDN and many more  
**TITLES HELD:** HOPE Kings of Flight championship; XWA British heavyweight title; LDN Academy title.

A professional wrestler doesn't always find his forté immediately. It can take years of perseverance and tweaking in order to discover the aspects of one's personality that work together to make a memorable gimmick within the squared circle.

Tom Dawkins, now largely wrestling as the mysterious Cara Noir, is one such figure. He's been known as "Blackbelt" Tom Dawkins and Pure Britannico, but after seven years in the industry it's Cara Noir that is now commanding attention, as he draws upon a wide variety of different influences and characteristics, all of which he's tried out in his time.

Growing up in Hornchurch, Essex, Dawkins didn't have access to much wrestling until he was about 12, falling victim to the lack of Sky Sports at home. He quickly became hooked on the athletic young talent that was prevalent at the time, though, such as The Hardy Boyz. Crucially, it was the craft behind the shows that really appealed to the youngster.

At school, Dawkins found himself at odds with both the system and the other students. He admits that he constantly found himself in fights with other pupils, and needed some sort of release. He found solace in martial arts, utilising it as a positive outlet for his energy, and a means to learn some much needed discipline. His interest was further roused by drama classes, in a background that is aiding him enormously now. Athletically, he dabbled in soccer, but found rugby games a more positive atmosphere, but as he completed school and headed for university, professional wrestling remained stuck in his brain.

After completing his degree in Engineering and Media Production, he decided to give the grappling game a go.

## KNIGHT TIME

After a period of initial training locally, Dawkins found that he was quickly picking up some of the basics, particularly after being around veteran wrestler and trainer Jon Ritchie. By mid-2010, he had made his debut, but it would be nearly three years before he found himself being introduced to the Knight family, thanks to Karl Krammer. He soaked up the buckets of experience that comes with working for WAW, beginning the process of becoming a more rounded prospect as "Blackbelt" Tom Dawkins.

This also contrasted rather nicely with what would become his other mainstay, Lucha Britannia, which he stumbled into alongside a friend. Crashing an invitation-only session, he proved his worth and fell for the style for which Garry Vanderhorne's promotion has become renowned.

"Tom was one of these young guys who had a good solid, basic grounding in old-school British wrestling," Vanderhorne told **FSM**. "For a couple of years, he was a really good, above average UK wrestler. Tom wasn't happy with just being 'really good'; he wanted to be exceptional, and had all the right tools and people around him to help get him to that point where he so clearly is now. We saw something else in him, though, something unique and beyond the norm, just as we had done previously with Will Ospreay."

"His aerial abilities have become amazing," enthused UK veteran Greg Burrige. "I think this is due to overcoming boundaries, physically and mentally. His body, in my opinion, is aesthetically the best in British wrestling. His unique training methods, being an amazing personal trainer, have helped him achieve this. He has more self control and dedication to fitness than anyone I have ever met.

"Above all, the area in which he has improved most is his psychology, and the power of a gimmick with dimensions. When I first met him, this area felt non-existent. Since coming to the LSL, he has learnt the art of performance, and the importance of it. He is slowly becoming a master."



Cara Noir takes control of Bubblegum during their June 13 match for Lucha Forever



It didn't hurt being friends with Ospreay, who Dawkins credits as being pivotal in aiding his reputation. At IPW:UK, Daniel Edler would book him with increasing frequency, as he teamed with Ospreay before feuding with him, and Dawkins enjoyed personal milestones against the likes of Kyle O'Reilly in August 2015. Towards the end of 2016, though, he arrived at an impasse, during which he knew that a change was needed to take him to the next level.

"Tom came up with Cara Noir last year," Garry Vanderhorne recollected. "People think that wrestling is about wrestling. They're mostly wrong; wrestling is about character and storytelling which just happens to contain some wrestling. Of course, one needs to be able to physically wrestle at a high level, but the devil is in the detail: the persona and the story. Every great sports entertainer should have a fourth dimension, something unique to them."

Utilising Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* as his unique entrance music, "The Artist Formerly Known as Thomas Dawkins", Cara Noir, certainly is different. He dramatically skulks to the ring with the exaggerated commitment of a silent movie star appearing in a German expressionist horror picture. While rather different on closer inspection, his *Black Swan*-type appearance lends itself to comparisons with Finn Balor, but that's certainly a compliment, as it suggests a strong dedication in getting an outlandish, memorable figure over to audiences.

"We tried it out at Lucha Britannia, where we knew the crowd would be more accepting to its uniqueness," Greg Burrige explained. "It tore the roof off the Resistance Gallery. I was there the first night Cara Noir hit Colchester for XWA; when Tom made his entrance - which is worth the ticket in itself - I heard a reaction that I haven't heard on a wrestling show since watching Adrian Street perform on tape. People were just shocked, and there was nervous laughter. I knew that this gimmick was 'money' then, when the whole building clapped and chanted once his entrance was finished. It was an amazing adrenaline rush for me. I'm really proud of him."

## BLACK SWAN RISING

There are deep layers at work here, too. There's a hidden, vicious streak within Dawkins, and Cara's presence allows for the darker aspects of his personality to be present, emerging during critical instances. The character of Cara brings to the fore



topics such as identity and acceptance, while he's also playing with themes like control and duality. It's a fascinating, instinctive approach to developing a character for pro wrestling, and the man himself is keen to add more intricacy to the performance.

"Tom, as his 'Black Belt' character, had a lot going for him," Lion Kid mused. "Nevertheless, as someone who has wrestled Tom as both Black Belt and as Cara Noir, I think his new character is a huge step up. His entrance alone is proof of that: the music, the lighting changes, the mask and wings, his whole demeanour. It's very theatrical, creating an atmosphere that the audience is absorbed into."

Since taking on the new persona, Cara Noir has certainly made an impression. He won the HOPE Kings of Flight title from Ashley Dunn on January 29, has appeared in RevPro, and tussled with Ryan Smile and El Ligero. He was also involved in the now infamous March 12 XWA bout in which Kota Ibushi used fireworks as weapons as he paired with Gota Ihashi opposite Cara and Jimmy Havoc. Making several mainstream news outlets did no harm whatsoever to Noir's visibility. Now also junior coach at the London School of Lucha Libre, he is fast becoming one of the most knowledgeable and valuable assets to the UK scene.

"He is exactly the kind of human being that could go into any of the world's top promotions and make a huge impact," concluded Garry Vanderhorne. "That's not just limited to wrestling promotions; I mean any form of visual entertainment: performance art, comedy, action, TV, and movies.

"I think we've made another monster!"

*"It was the craft behind the shows that really appealed to the impressible youngster. The 'how' behind the action that made things special"*

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# THE TV LOUNGE

WRESTLING ROUND-UP

The Big Cass and Enzo Amore angle came to a predictable but interesting end on Raw



**MISSED WWE, TNA, ROH AND LUCHA UNDERGROUND THIS MONTH? DON'T WORRY, WE'VE GOT YOU COVERED WITH OUR ROUNDUP OF RAW, SMACKDOWN, 205 LIVE, NXT, IMPACT WRESTLING, ROH ON SINCLAIR AND LUCHA UNDERGROUND...**

It was an eventful month on *Raw*, with a returning Braun Strowman adding to an already intriguing main event mix, as the challengers lined up to face Universal champion Brock Lesnar at *SummerSlam* on August 20.

The build to *Great Balls Of Fire* on July 9 saw Joe defeat a distracted Roman Reigns on the June 19 *Raw* via Coquina Clutch, after Strowman made his return, bursting out of an ambulance backstage, with the footage being shown on the arena on the big screen. Earlier in the show, Reigns had

disrespected Joe by calling him "just Joe", to which Joe responded with a headbutt. After the Reigns versus Joe bout, the former TNA World champion left the ring and Strowman entered the arena, destroying Reigns and challenging him to an Ambulance match at *Great Balls Of Fire*. The following week, Reigns accepted the challenge, and after another brawl around the stage area, Strowman tossed Reigns into the back of an ambulance that had been parked inside the arena, symbolising what he planned to do at the pay-per-view.

The July 3 *Raw* included the final hype for their match, with Strowman beating Apollo Crews in the show's main event. Afterwards, Reigns surprised Strowman by emerging from an ambulance that had again backed into the arena, and after a brief brawl between the two, Reigns speared Strowman off the stage and through several tables at the side of the stage.

Also leading to the pay-per-view, Samoa Joe attacked Brock Lesnar from behind, almost putting him out with the Coquina Clutch on him as he was making his entrance on June 26. The following week, the two were involved in a big pull-apart brawl that needed producers and members of the roster to separate them. After the pay-per-view, during which Lesnar pinned Joe with an F5 and Strowman beat Reigns, only for Reigns to attempt to kill him (see Page 30 for a full report), it was agreed that Reigns would face Joe in a top contenders match on July 17 for the right to face Lesnar for the title at *SummerSlam*.

The mystery as to why Kurt Angle has been so anxious about receiving text messages was set to be resolved imminently. The July 10 *Raw* ended with the cliffhanger of Angle talking to a mystery person on the other end of the line, claiming that they would announce their secret the following week. Whomever it was, Angle told them he loved them.

One mystery was solved on the June 19, with the news that Big Cass had been behind the mysterious attacks on Enzo Amore, ending their partnership and turning Cass heel. Cass has frequently beat up Enzo since, despite the latter giving impassioned yet overly-scripted promos about his fighting spirit, and how Cass used to be "family".

The Miz had a busy month. Interminably, he continued to feud with Dean Ambrose, but debuted his new Miztourage of a yet again repackaged Curtis Axel and Bo Dallas. Tensions between The Miz and wife Maryse have subsided. Still, The Miz was involved in an embarrassing segment with U.S. sports personality Lavar Ball and his son, LA Lakers player LaMelo Ball on June 26. A typically American television sensation, the eccentric Lavar engaged in bizarre, out of control banter, which later included his son using the dreaded "N" word after challenging The Miz to a fight. The segment was mercifully cut short when Ambrose made his entrance and the show went to a commercial break.

On July 1, Seth Rollins become involved in the Miz versus Ambrose feud, with The Miz later costing Rollins a pay-per-view re-match against Bray Wyatt. A major part of the



James Ellsworth found himself in trouble on Smackdown after getting involved in the Money in the Bank re-match



*“A typically American television sensation, the eccentric Lavar Ball engaged in bizarre, out of control banter, which later included his son using the dreaded ‘N’ word after challenging The Miz to a fight”*

storyline seems to concern whether Rollins can convince Ambrose that he is a changed man since his days with The Authority.

Sasha Banks won a Gauntlet match over Bayley, Nia Jax, Mickie James, Dana Brooke, and Emma on June 26, while the July 10 *Raw* saw Banks team with Bayley to beat *Raw* Women’s champion Alexa Bliss and Nia Jax, when Bayley pinned Bliss for the win.

Finn Balor had a good month on television, scoring singles wins over Bo Dallas, Cesaro, and Elias Samson, and also teaming with The Hardy Boyz to triumph over Samson, Sheamus, and Cesaro. Sheamus and Cesaro remain the *Raw* Tag Team champions.

Goldust, back in a reboot of his original gimmick from 22 years ago, and looking great for it, beat R-Truth on July 10.

Over on **Smackdown**, the build towards *Battleground* on July 23 commenced, with the main event set to be Jinder Mahal versus Randy Orton for the WWE title, inside the comical Punjabi Prison cage. Both champion and challenger have scored wins of late, with Orton beating Aiden English on July 4 and Mahal defeating Tye Dillinger on July 11.

John Cena returned on the Independence Day *Smackdown*,

making his first appearance on WWE TV since *WrestleMania XXXIII*. Cena was confronted by Rusev, also returning to the programme, and a Flag match was set up for *Battleground*.

AJ Styles captured the WWE U.S. title from Kevin Owens at the July 7 Madison Square Garden house show. Styles had earned the title shot three days earlier on *Smackdown*, when he defeated Chad Gable in a “win and you’re in” match, and then also won a battle royal. His first appearance as champion saw him team with Cena to defeat Kevin Owens and Rusev on July 11.

Following the controversial finish of the Women’s Money in the Bank ladder match at the eponymous pay-per-view, a re-match took place on June 27, which once again saw Carmella beat Becky Lynch, Charlotte, Natalya, and Tamina. James Ellsworth again interfered, despite having been banned from the building. The following week, general manager Daniel Bryan suspended Ellsworth for 30 days and fined him \$10,000 for disobeying his orders.

Naomi remains *Smackdown* Women’s champion, and has repeatedly defeated Lana in quick fashion. Speaking of fashion, Tyler Breeze and Fandango, The Fashion

Johnny Gargano returned to NXT to explain how he was ready to start his singles career



Police, have been featured in some very entertaining comedy vignettes, *The Fashion Files*, in which they have dressed up in disguises to investigate who jumped them several weeks earlier.

Baron Corbin holds the men’s Money in the Bank briefcase, but aside from defeating Sami Zayn on June 27 and brawling with Shinsuke Nakamura backstage two weeks later, he has done little else of note. Zayn has moved into a feud with Mike and Maria Kanellis, with Mike smashing a glass vase over Zayn’s head on the July 11 broadcast, after being offended by Zayn interrupting his romantic moment with his wife the previous week.

The New Day and The Usos engaged in a very entertaining rap battle moderated by musician and wrestling superfan Wade Barrett on July 4. The two traded insults and insider cracks, before The Usos were disqualified for starting a brawl. Xavier Woods got a measure of revenge the following week by defeating Jey Uso.

The best match on WWE’s **205 Live** show this month was Cedric Alexander’s I Quit match win over Noam Dar on July 11. After the bout, Dar finally dumped storyline girlfriend Alicia Fox, but since this feud has had several “endings” so far, to the point where it is an in-joke on everyone involved, don’t expect to have seen the last of it. Dar’s fellow Brit, Jack Gallagher, is now locked in a feud with Brian Kendrick,

while cruiserweight champion Neville continues to face all challengers.

Over on **NXT**, several big matches featured on TV over the past month. NXT Women's champion Asuka defeated Nikki Cross in a Last Woman Standing bout on the June 28 show, in what was a compelling slice of WWE-style violence. The following week, NXT champion Bobby Roode defeated Roderick Strong in an excellent title match, with Strong's real-life fiancée, and member of MMA's Four Horsewomen, Marina Shafir, playing a major role in the storyline. Making it a trifecta of title matches for the show, The Authors of Pain retained their Tag Team titles by defeating Heavy Machinery (Otis Dozovic and Tucker Knight) on July 12. On that same broadcast came the NXT debut of Bobby Fish, who lost to Aleister Black, and the return of Johnny Gargano, who cut a promo for the Full Sail crowd about how he was moving forward without former friend Tommaso Ciampa.

**T**he fallout from *Slammiversary* saw several changes on **Impact Wrestling**, not least to the promotion's name, which is now officially Global Force Wrestling (GFW). The controversial Alberto El Patron unified the GFW and Impact titles at *Slammiversary*, and on July 6, he celebrated his win with his father, the masked legend Dos Caras, and his brother, the likewise hooded El Hijo de Dos Caras. Lashley received a rematch in the show's main event, which was interrupted by LAX, who attacked Lashley for the disqualification and declared a groggy El Patron as the newest LAX member. July 13's programme opened with El Patron confronting LAX, angry that they had declared him to be new member. El Patron said he was a leader, not a follower, and was not interested in joining the group. This prompted a furious reaction from LAX, who attacked El Patron and beat him down, leading to Lashley making an unlikely save for his conqueror. In the show's main event, El Patron teamed with Lashley to defeat the GFW Tag Team champions, LAX's Santana and Ortiz, in a non-title match, only for LAX to jump El Patron after the match. This time, Lashley did not make the save for his tag team partner.

GFW X-Division title-holder Sonjay Dutt's attentions have switched from Low Ki to Trevor Lee, after Lee stole the X-Division title belt. Dutt tried to retrieve it on July 13, engaging in a brawl with Lee following Lee's squash win over William Weeks. Dutt teamed with Matt Sydal to beat Lee and Low Ki on June 29, while Dutt scored a victory over Caleb Konley the following week.

*ACH was a part of TNA's Super X Cup tournament this month*



GFW announced an eight-man Super X Cup tournament that commenced over the past month. July 6 saw the first quarter-final match, with Desmond Xavier beating Idris Abraham. The following week, ACH (formerly of ROH) beat Andrew Everett

in another quarter-final. The other two such matches were scheduled as Drago (previously seen in Lucha Underground) versus Sammy Guevara and NOAH's Taiji Ishimori versus Davey Richards.

Ishimori wasn't the only Pro Wrestling NOAH representative featured in GFW, as Naomichi Marufuji defeated Grand champion Moose via disqualification in the third round of a title match on July 13, when Ethan Carter III interfered. Moose had a busy month, fending off attacks from both Eli Drake and Chris Adonis prior to *Slammiversary*, and enlisting the help of former Pittsburgh Steelers NFL player DeAngelo Williams to be his tag team partner at the pay-per-view.

After a series of campy training videos, the team of Jeremy Borash and Joseph Park defeated Josh Mathews and Scott Steiner at *Slammiversary*. With Borash and Mathews both returning to the announce desk after the conclusion of their feud, Park welcomed back the returning Grado on the July 6 *Impact Wrestling* by serving him immigration papers, informing him that he will be unable to stay in the country unless he gets married. A further series of campy videos aired on July 13, with Grado asking virtually every Knockout on the roster out for a date, only to be knocked back. The one Knockout who

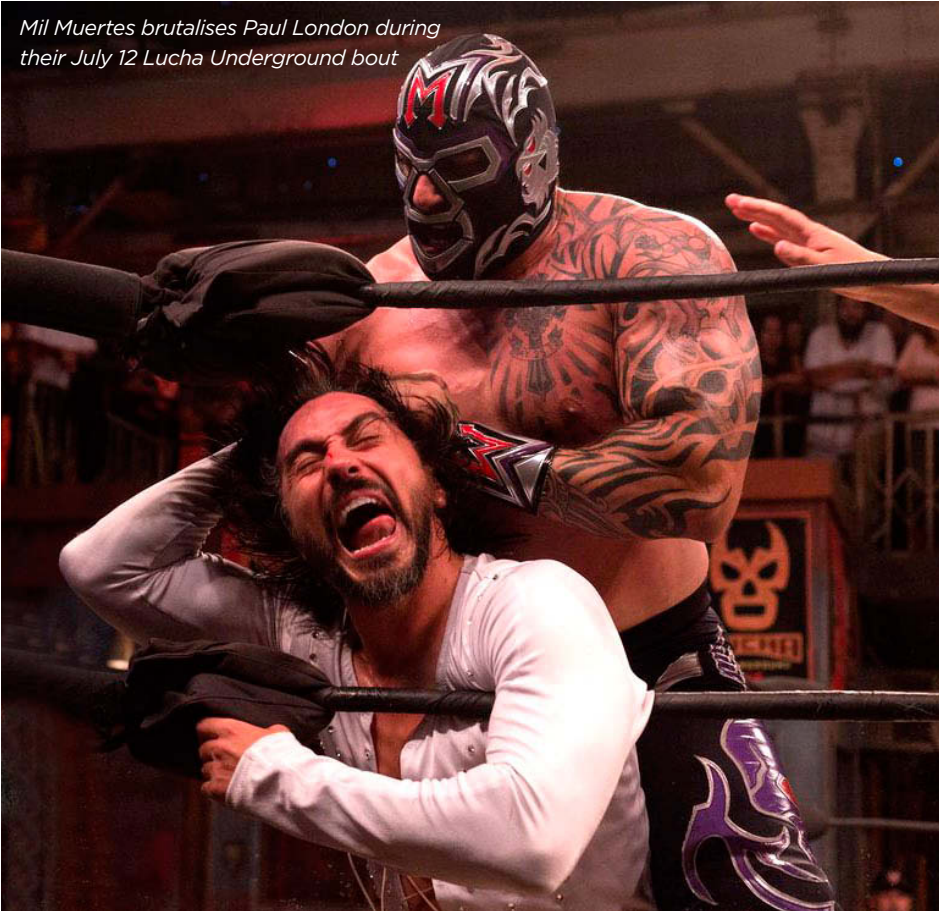
*“Joseph Park welcomed back the returning Grado on the July 6 Impact Wrestling by serving him immigration papers, informing him that he will be unable to stay in the country unless he gets married”*



*New Japan booker and CHAOS leader Gedo wrestled on ROH TV this month*



Mil Muertes brutalises Paul London during their July 12 Lucha Underground bout



© LUCHA UNDERGROUND

did accept was the crazed, jilted bride Laurel Van Ness.

Sienna defeated Rosemary at *Slammiversary* to unify the GFW Women's and Impact Knockouts titles. She successfully defended the championship against the returning Rebel on July 6.

Swoggle beat Rockstar Spud in a Mumbai Streetfight on the June 29 broadcast.

GFW brought in two Mexican minis for the July 13 show, with Octagoncito defeating Demus (Pequeño Damián 666 in CMLL) in an entertaining match.

**O**n **ROH On Sinclair**, new ROH World champion Cody Rhodes brawled with former champion Christopher Daniels on both the June 21 and July 5 shows, continuing their feud.

Kenny King earned a future ROH Television title shot by winning a four-way over The Beer City Bruiser, Mark Briscoe, and Chris Sabin on July 5. That same show saw The Young Bucks win a Triple Threat match over Sho Tanaka and Yohei Komatsu, and Leon St. Giovanni and Shaeem Ali. Jay Briscoe also beat Josh Woods.

New ROH Six-Man Tag Team champions, Dalton Castle and The Boys, beat Flip Gordon, Leon St. Giovanni, and Shaeem Ali

on July 12, on a programme that also saw Matt Taven beat CMLL star Ultimo Guerrero, while The Motor City Machine Guns beat War Machine. NXT-bound Bobby Fish's final matches with the promotion aired on the June 21 and June 28, with Silas Young and The Beer City Bruiser beating Jay Lethal and Fish, while following week, Fish put Young over on the way out.

Jay White scored a big win over Punishment Martinez on June 28, while the June 21 show saw Hiroshi Tanahashi, Christopher Daniels, and Kazarian beat CHAOS' Will Ospreay, Hirooki Goto, and Gedo in the show's main event.

**L**ucha Underground was dominated by Cueto Cup matches in a surprisingly wrestling-heavy month of television. In first round encounters on June 21, Cage defeated Vinnie Massaro; Marty The Moth beat Saltador; Pindar went over Mascarita Sagrada; and Fenix defeated Mariposa. June 28's show saw more first round matches, in which Mil Muertes beat Vereno; Paul London defeated Vibora; Taya Valkyrie advanced past Joey Ryan; and Jeremiah Crane defeated Killshot. The remaining first round matches aired on the July 5 show, with PJ Black beating Sexy Star; Son

Shows covered from June 19 to July 13. Highlights of Lucha Underground can be seen at [www.tinyurl.com/LuchaUnder](http://www.tinyurl.com/LuchaUnder).

## RATINGS REVIEW

U.S. television ratings for *Raw* have remained low albeit consistent over the past month. The June 19 programme scored a 2.04 rating (3.095m viewers); June 26 fell slightly to a 2.02 rating (2.97m viewers); July 3 dropped to a 1.91 rating (2.836m viewers); and July 10 rebounded to a 2.04 rating (3.009m viewers).

The ratings for *Smackdown* have been variable. The June 20 show was watched by 2.597m viewers, while the June 27 edition had an increase to 2.603m viewers. July 4 fell to 2.239m viewers (although that number was considered a big success considering the show aired on a major national holiday), while July 11 was watched by 2.465m viewers.

GFW's *Impact Wrestling* ratings have improved over the past month, with one week's exception. The June 22 show was viewed by 342,000 viewers; June 29 fell to 268,000 viewers; July 6 rebounded with 345,000 viewers; and July 13 was watched by 374,000 viewers, making it the most watched edition of *Impact Wrestling* in over a year, since the July 5, 2016 *Final Deletion* episode was watched by 410,000.

of Havoc triumphing over a masked doppelgänger named Son of Madness; Puma overcoming Ricky Mandel; and Dante Fox advancing past El Dragon Azteca Jr.

The July 12 edition of *Lucha Underground* saw the start of the second round. Jeremiah Crane defeated Taya Valkyrie, with Sexy Star knocking out Valkyrie with brass knuckles after the match. Mil Muertes also defeated Paul London, and Fenix beat Marty The Moth. Afterwards, Marty viciously attacked Fenix with a fork, with ring announcer Melissa Santos then showing her concern for her would-be love interest Fenix. Several weeks earlier, on the June 21 show, it had been revealed that Marty The Moth had been stalking Santos and had even set up a shrine to her.

Weekly videos also aired, hyping up a future Rey Mysterio versus Johnny Mundo encounter.

@StiflerAtem I really really enjoyed the Great Balls of Fire PPV! Watched it twice already! Best Raw PPV of the year IMO #WWEGBOF #WWE

## WRESTLING ROUND-UP



# WWE GREAT BALLS OF FIRE

Samoa Joe lost to Brock Lesnar in his first WWE Universal title challenge at *Great Balls Of Fire* on July 9, but even in defeat the bout served as Joe's unofficial elevation into the elite. One of the hottest WWE World title programs in years, carried in large part by Joe's intense promo work and credible aura, culminated in a short, realistic fight that has become the trademark of Lesnar's WWE title tilts. Joe's no-nonsense intensity and legitimate shoot-fight training was a perfect complement to the Brock big fight feel that sets his matches apart from anything else on a typical WWE card, resulting in a contest that more closely resembled a Lesnar UFC fight than a worked pro wrestling match. Joe fought Brock's fight, and fought it admirably, but couldn't quite lock in the Coquina Clutch, before Brock managed to hit the F5 to retain the title.

In the semi-main event, Roman Reigns lost a brutal Ambulance match to Braun Strowman in a fluke finish, when he missed a spear and went barreling into the back of the vehicle. He ultimately went over in the post-match, however, as he repeatedly bashed Strowman's elbow into the back door of the ambulance, before locking Braun in the back and reversing the ambulance at speed into a production truck. This prompted a standby match between Heath Slater and Curt Hawkins to occur, as emergency personnel scrambled to rescue Strowman. The television audience never saw Slater win, as cameras cut back to Strowman being freed from the wreckage. He refused medical attention and limped away, adding to a cartoonish scene that took a ton of edge off what was an otherwise brutal and vicious bout between two rivals who always bring the goods against each other.

## HOLD THAT GRUDGE

The show was loaded with solid grudge bouts up and down the card. Enzo Amore squared off with his former tag team partner Big Cass, but was no match for his seven-foot ex-best friend, not even getting a brief comeback before Cass put him away with a big boot.

Bray Wyatt defeated Seth Rollins in an encounter with good action down the stretch. Wyatt worked over Seth's surgically repaired knee, attempting to take away his athleticism, but Seth battled back, only for a quick poke to the eye to lead to the Sister Abigail finish.

Sasha Banks challenged Alexa Bliss for the *Raw* Women's title in a heated bout. Banks got her knees up on a Twisted Bliss attempt, allowing her to lock in the Banks Statement. Bliss fought for a rope break, and rolled out of the ring, but when Banks tossed her into the ringpost, and with momentum on Banks side, Bliss took an intentional count-out loss, in a finish that reflected poorly on WWE's creativity. Banks wasn't done, at least, attacking Bliss on the entrance ramp and crushing her with a Meteora off the announce table.

Cesaro and Sheamus retained the *Raw* Tag Team titles over The Hardy Boyz in a 30-minute Iron Man match, by four falls to three. The first fall came in mere seconds, as Cesaro conned Matt Hardy into thinking he was the legal man, allowing Sheamus to flatten him with a Brogue Kick. White Noise on Jeff Hardy put the champions up 2-0, with Jeff cutting the deficit in half with a Twist of Fate on Cesaro. Matt was counted out after having his head bashed into the ringpost to put the Hardy's in a 3-1 hole with just a few minutes remaining. The Hardy's scrambled back to tie it, but the champs went up 4-3 with just 30 seconds left when Cesaro blind-tagged Sheamus and stole a pin on Jeff. The latter frantically landed a desperation Twist of Fate, but time expired before the three-count. Creative falls made this one of the better Iron Man bouts in WWE history, and the finish was aided by Matt wearing a crimson mask after being cut over the right eye.

Finally, The Miz retained his Intercontinental title in the latest instalment of his never-ending saga with Dean Ambrose. The additions of Bo Dallas and Curtis Axel to Miz' entourage led to multiple interference spots, and ultimately the finish, with the constant distractions of Dallas, Axel, and Maryse leading to the Skull Crushing Finale.

**1.** Samoa Joe gets launched into one of many German suplexes at *Great Balls of Fire* **2.** Roman Reigns and Braun Strowman had an outstanding match, and did not need the terrible angle thereafter

**RESULTS** Bray Wyatt def. Seth Rollins (Pinfall / 12:10) ■ Big Cass def. Enzo Amore (Pinfall / 5:25) ■ Cesaro & Sheamus def. Hardy Boys (30:00 / Iron Man match for the Raw Tag Team titles) Sasha Banks def. Alexa Bliss (Count-out / 11:40 / Raw Women's title) ■ The Miz def. Dean Ambrose (Pinfall / 11:20 / Intercontinental title) ■ Braun Strowman def. Roman Reigns (16:35 / Ambulance match) ■ Heath Slater def. Curt Hawkins (Pinfall / 2:35) ■ Brock Lesnar def. Samoa Joe (Pinfall / 6:25 / Universal championship)



# EVOLVE WRESTLING EVOLVE 88-89

With WWN champion Matt Riddle competing in Europe, EVOLVE title-holder Zack Sabre Jr. took centre stage as the promotion made its first trip to the Southeast of the United States in quite some time.

In the main event of *EVOLVE 88* on July 8, EVOLVE's first show in the Charlotte, North Carolina area since 2012, Sabre ended his feud with Timothy Thatcher in a very physical No Holds Barred encounter. Of course, the Brit dethroned Thatcher for the EVOLVE title at *EVOLVE 79*, but their history goes much deeper, as Sabre's first match as a regular here was against Thatcher at *EVOLVE 34* in September 2014. Additionally, during his reign, one of Thatcher's earliest title defences was against Sabre at *EVOLVE 47* in August 2015.

These two have always had great chemistry, and this was no exception. There wasn't much fighting, so to speak, but there was a ton of aggression, as they brawled all over the venue. Sabre eventually retained when he caught Thatcher in an Octopus stretch in the ropes, and after the bout, Thatcher presented Sabre with the EVOLVE belt, which was a cool gesture, as the former champion neglected to do likewise when Sabre originally won it from him.

Sabre carried the momentum of that victory over to his title defence against Fred Yehi at *EVOLVE 89*, which was the company's debut in the greater Atlanta, Georgia area. This was a pretty lengthy affair that featured a lot of submission and wrestling exchanges between two highly skilled grapplers. While it didn't quite hit the heights of their original encounter back at *EVOLVE 71* last October, mainly due to a tepid crowd that really had an impact on the entire show, it was still an entertaining match, especially if you're a fan of the style. Sabre ultimately retained his title after catching Yehi in his famous European Clutch pin, which he's used to win a number of his matches in the past few months. This was actually Sabre's last appearance in EVOLVE until September due to the G1 Climax tournament.

## TAG TEAM TURMOIL

Aside from Sabre's EVOLVE title defences, the biggest news to come out of this weekend of shows surrounded the EVOLVE Tag Team titles. In what can only be described as a massive upset, The Work Horsemen (Anthony Henry and James Drake) defeated Chris Dickinson and Jaka to capture the belts. While Henry and Drake have made a couple of appearances in WWN-affiliated promotions (EVOLVE, FIP, Style Battle) in 2017, they mainly spend their time competing in the Mid-Atlantic and Southeastern regions of the U.S., in promotions like PWX (an independent group based in North Carolina). Their match got off to a slow start, but the action really intensified in



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1. This time around, Timothy Thatcher showed a little more grace after losing to Zack Sabre Jr. 2. ACH had a quite ridiculous match with Ethan Page at *EVOLVE 89*, perhaps proving a point

the second half, and the crowd in Charlotte came unglued when the underdogs ultimately scored the victory. They followed that up with a successful title defence at *EVOLVE 89*, where they went over the former champions and The Ugly Ducklings (another team from the Southeast region) in a three-way bout. The tag team division in EVOLVE certainly got a massive shake-up here.

Finally, there were two wrestlers who either began or solidified their respective turns towards the heel side of the roster. After joining forces with Priscilla Kelly at *EVOLVE 87* in June, Austin Theory had his first undefeated weekend since joining EVOLVE. He picked up a victory over PWX regular Ethan Case at *EVOLVE 88*, and scored a huge win over Trent Barreta (the man whom he attacked during his aforementioned turn) at *EVOLVE 89*, in a very entertaining match.

Meanwhile, ACH underwent a noticeable attitude change on this set of shows, mainly revolving around his spot on the cards. He skipped out on his scheduled match with Austin Theory at *EVOLVE 88* to wrestle Fred Yehi in a bout further up the card. Then, at *EVOLVE 89*, he had what could only be described as a comedic spectacle of a match with Ethan Page. Both men seemed to be displeased with their current positions in EVOLVE, and they struck back by putting on a match that might be viewed as funny by some, but a complete joke and mockery of pro wrestling by others.

## RESULTS EVOLVE 88 - July 8, 2017

Jason Kincaid def. Caleb Konley (Submission / 14:30) ■ Austin Theory with Priscilla Kelly def. Ethan Case (Pinfall / 6:40) ■ Keith Lee def. "All Ego" Ethan Page (Pinfall / 9:45) ■ Tracy Williams def. Darby Allin (Submission / 13:32) ■ Fred Yehi def. ACH (Submission / 16:45) ■ Anthony Henry & James Drake def. Chris Dickinson & Jaka (Pinfall / 19:50 / EVOLVE Tag Team titles) ■ Zack Sabre Jr. def. Timothy Thatcher (Submission / 18:00 / No Holds Barred match for the EVOLVE championship)

## EVOLVE 89 - July 9, 2017

Timothy Thatcher def. Darby Allin (Pinfall / 8:26) ■ ACH def. "All Ego" Ethan Page (Pinfall / 8:01) ■ Jason Kincaid def. Jon Davis (Pinfall / 15:31) ■ Keith Lee vs. Tracy Williams (No Contest / 8:00) ■ Anthony Henry & James Drake def. Chris Dickinson & Jaka, The Ugly Ducklings of Lance Lude & Rob Killjoy (Pinfall / 8:14 / Triple Threat match for the EVOLVE Tag Team titles) ■ Austin Theory with Priscilla Kelly def. Trent Barreta (Pinfall / 16:06) ■ Zack Sabre Jr. def. Fred Yehi (Pinfall / 23:06 / EVOLVE championship)

@broke\_ken Been a pretty good couple of weeks for the wrestling addict to enjoy, going back to #NJPW #GIUSA. Elgin vs. Omega & Ishii vs. ZSJ: great matches

## WRESTLING ROUND-UP

# NJPW G1 SPECIAL IN USA

All eyes were on Long Beach, California on July 1-2, as New Japan embarked on its first major step in true international expansion. The impact of *G1 Special In USA* would be felt across the wrestling globe; a great showing was never going to be a guarantee of long-term success, but a bad one could have killed the plan before it even got up and running. With such high stakes, the stars delivered.

The centrepiece of the weekend was an eight-man tournament to crown the first New Japan U.S. champion. The tournament drove the weekend when it came to match quality, too, with six out of seven matches being extremely good, and two of those six being high-end, Match of the Year-calibre bouts. It was a vehicle to showcase Kenny Omega as the face of the English language brand, and he grabbed the opportunity gleefully.

On night one, Omega was pushed to the limit by his fellow Canadian Michael Elgin in an absolute scorcher. These combatants have built up great chemistry, and the dynamic of their styles meshes so well. Elgin threw bombs, but Omega took his best shots and kept firing back, eventually wearing the big man down and pinning him with an extremely impressive One Winged Angel.

Following victory over Jay Lethal in a smooth as silk semi-final, Omega went on to face his year's biggest rival not named Kazuchika Okada. Yes, it was "The Stone Pitbull" who awaited him in the final, and Omega and Tomohiro Ishii delivered a classic. The highlight of the half-hour-plus bout was a spot in which Ishii clamped down on the top rope with his teeth to avoid a Dragon suplex from the apron through a table. This was drama on another level; he fought with all his power, but eventually Omega wrenched back and snapped the suplex off, in an incredible moment. It took a lot to follow that, but they also offered an incredible closing stretch that included both men hitting each other's finishes before a huge One Winged Angel kept Ishii down.

Ishii had booked his place in the final by beating Zack Sabre Jr, who really impressed all weekend and showed himself to be more than a great fit amongst New Japan's elite. This semi-final was a classic battle of brute force versus finesse, and the former won out. Ishii's selling of Zack's submission hold was about as good as it gets, as he fought desperately to break them, and he eventually triumphed with a brainbuster. Sabre's opening night against Juice Robinson saw the former NXT wrestler get his limbs rearranged in some torturous holds, and he did a great job rallying the Long Beach crowd behind him. Eventually the Englishman's onslaught was too much, and Juice was forced to tap in the knot of an Octopus.

## THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

Outside of the tournament, there were several title matches that produced a mix of good, great, and



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**1.** In Long Beach, Kenny Omega continued his case for being the best in the world **2.** Cody Rhodes put his strengths to the fore in battling IWGP champion Kazuchika Okada

downright ugly in one case. The marquee bout of night one was Okada's defence of NJPW's top prize against Cody Rhodes. This was quite possibly the best match of the latter's career; his style is a stark contrast to the majority of Okada's title match opponents, and it helped create a real sense of fear that Rhodes might win. Some of Rhodes' offence didn't look up to par down the stretch, but that wasn't his strength going in, and when it came to making the crowd bite, he delivered. Okada showed once again what a versatile champion he is, ending proceedings with the Rainmaker.

The closest contender to the tournament final for Match of the Weekend honours was a spectacular Young Bucks versus Roppongi Vice junior-heavyweight Tag Team title bout that was the best Bucks affair in several years. This was the perfect blend of insane, death-defying spots and sound tag team storytelling. The selling of Rocky Romero and Trent Barreta makes them the perfect opponents for the Bucks, and it showed again here. The timely Herb Meltzer Driver commemorating the passing of Dave Meltzer's father was a special moment that led directly to the match-ending Sharpshooter.

The only major fail of the weekend was the IWGP Intercontinental title match pitting Hiroshi Tanahashi opposite Billy Gunn. The former DX star was exposed in this setting, and it was not at all what the crowd wanted. The match fell flat, to say the least, and offered nothing worthy of any praise.

It was the antithesis of this wonderful weekend.

## RESULTS Night One - July 1, 2017

CHAOS def. Bullet Club (Pinfall / 9:21) ■ Los Ingobernables de Japón def. Jushin Thunder Liger, Volador Jr., Dragon Lee & Titan (Pinfall / 6:44) ■ Jay Lethal def. Hangman Page (Pinfall / 8:30) ■ Zack Sabre Jr. def. Juice Robinson (Submission / 10:04) ■ Hiroshi Tanahashi, KUSHIDA, Jay White & David Finlay def. Billy Gunn, Yoshitatsu, Yohei Komatsu & Sho Tanaka (Pinfall / 9:40) ■ War Machine def. G.O.D (Pinfall / 11:06 / IWGP Tag Team titles) ■ Tomohiro Ishii def. Tetsuya Naito (Pinfall / 15:51) ■ Kenny Omega def. Michael Elgin (Pinfall / 22:31) ■ Kazuchika Okada def. Cody (Pinfall / 27:12 / IWGP heavyweight title)

## Night Two - July 2, 2017

Jushin Liger, KUSHIDA & David Finlay def. Yoshitatsu, Yohei Komatsu & Sho Tanaka (Submission / 8:52) ■ Kenny Omega def. Jay Lethal (Pinfall / 12:56) ■ Tomohiro Ishii def. Zack Sabre Jr. (Pinfall / 11:42) ■ Juice Robinson, Volador Jr., Dragon Lee, Titan & Jay White def. Los Ingobernables de Japón (Pinfall / 12:28) ■ Bullet Club def. Michael Elgin & War Machine (Pinfall / 11:17) ■ The Young Bucks def. Roppongi Vice (Submission / 22:41 / IWGP junior-heavyweight Tag Team titles) ■ Bullet Club def. CHAOS (Pinfall / 10:00) ■ Hiroshi Tanahashi def. Billy Gunn (Pinfall / 14:25 / IWGP Intercontinental title) ■ Kenny Omega def. Tomohiro Ishii (Pinfall / 31:20 / IWGP U.S. title tournament final)



# GFW SLAMMIVERSARY 2017

Impact Wrestling completed yet another rebranding, with the 15<sup>th</sup> edition of *Slammiversary* being the first event run under the GFW banner following the acquisition of Jeff Jarrett's Global Force Wrestling by Impact Wrestling's parent company, Anthem. Moving forward, the company call letters will be GFW, with the weekly television show keeping the name *Impact Wrestling*. The letters "TNA" have now officially been sent into the ether, leaving behind a mixed legacy of greatness (AJ Styles, Samoa Joe, and early X-Division), the surreal (Hulk Hogan, Mick Foley, and Billy Corgan), the not-so-great (the dying days of Dixie Carter's régime, post-2012), and the downright terrible (masturbating midgets, one embarrassing behind the scenes mishap after another, and basically anything involving Vince Russo).

If *Slammiversary XV* was meant to be a fresh coat of paint rather than all new décor, the event was a success. While nothing on the show was particularly great, with a few bouts marred by overbooking, overall it was a fun show with a solid build, where everything delivered at an acceptable level at worst, with several bouts exceeding expectations. At times, the show had a genuine feel of the glory days of the promotion, with the return of long-time announcer Don West to the commentary booth not hurting in that regard.

The opener, the best match on the show, was a good example of old school TNA flavour, a four-way Tag Team title match that evoked the fun feel of X-Division spotfests of old. The new Latin American Xchange of Ortiz and Santana (seconded by original members Konnan and Homicide) outlasted three international teams: Pro Wrestling NOAH's Naomichi Marufuji and Taiji Ishimori, Laredo Kid and Garza of The Crash, and Drago and El Hijo del Fantasma of AAA. This was wild, fast-paced action from all eight men, highlighted by Fantasma's gorgeous topé suicida, corkscrew planchas by Drago, and wild dives by everyone including LAX's valet Diamante, before LAX finished off Laredo Kid with their Doomsday Blockbuster.

The main event was the second of two Impact Wrestling and GFW title unification bouts, as GFW World champion Alberto El Patron defeated Impact Wrestling World champion Lashley. It was a solid but unspectacular match, marred by constant interference by Lashley's second King Mo, ending with an El Patron double foot-stomp.

The first unification bout saw GFW Women's champion Sienna win the Impact Wrestling Knockouts title from Rosemary in a well worked bout dragged down by overbooking and a cloudy heel/face dynamic. Laurel Van Ness saved Sienna from certain defeat by pulling referee Earl Hebner out of the ring following a Rosemary Red Wedding. Allie then chased off Van Ness, but Sienna was able to put her hands up to block Rosemary's



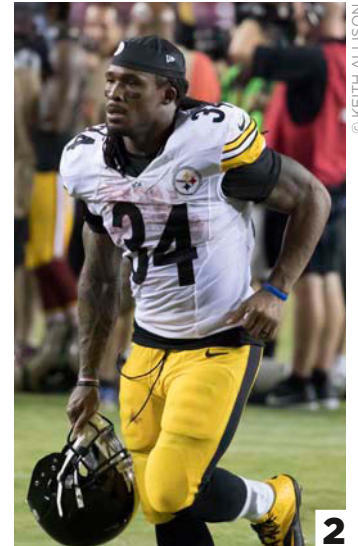
mist attack, rubbing the mist back into Rosemary's face before clamping on a guillotine to pick up the win.

## TWO OUT OF THREE AIN'T BAD

The best built match on the card was a best-of-three falls grudge match between Sonjay Dutt, defending the X-Division title that it took a decade for him to finally win, and arch rival Low Ki. They split two well-paced falls before Dutt won the third with a gorgeous moonsault into a double foot-stomp, reminiscent of Ki's own Warrior's Way.

The star of the show was arguably NFL running back DeAngelo Williams, who may have had the most impressive pro wrestling debut of all-time, in what ironically doubled as his retirement match. Williams looked incredible beyond just performing hot moves, with great natural instincts and fantastic bursts of athleticism, as Williams and Moose defeated Chris Adonis and Eli Drake.

In other action, Ethan Carter III went over James Storm in a Strap match; The American Wolves' feud came to a head as Eddie and Alisha Edwards beat Davey and Angelina Love-Richards in a good Full Metal Mayhem mixed tag, when Eddie used a brutal flip powerbomb off a ladder on Davey; and Jeremy Borash and Joseph Park won a wacky Broken Hardy-style "match" over Josh Mathews and Scott Steiner, which included fun TNA throwback cameos by Shark Boy, Robert Irvine, James Mitchell, and Joe Park's alter ego, Abyss.



1. Alberto El Patron unified the GFW and TNA World titles at Slammiversary 2. DeAngelo Williams put in a stunning performance in his first and only pro wrestling match

**RESULTS** LAX def. Marufuji & Ishimori, Drago & El Hijo del Fantasma, Garza Jr & Laredo Kid (Pinfall / 14:40 / GFW & TNA Tag Team titles) ■ DeAngelo Williams & Moose def. Chris Adonis & Eli Drake (Pinfall / 10:40) ■ Ethan Carter III def. Jame Storm (Pinfall / 10:50) ■ Jeremy Borash & Joseph Park def. Josh Mathews & Scott Steiner (Pinfall / 10:52) ■ Alisha & Eddie Edwards def. Davey & Angelina Love-Richards (Pinfall / 8:30 / Mixed tag match) ■ Sonjay Dutt def. Low Ki (18:20 / Two-out-of-three falls match for the X-Division title) ■ Sienna def. Rosemary (Submission / 10:55 / GFW & TNA Women's title unification bout) ■ Alberto El Patron def. Lashley (Pinfall / 18:05 / GFW & TNA World title unification bout)

## NEW JAPAN KIZUNA ROAD 2017

Acting as a bridge between the huge *Dominion* event and the G1 Climax tournament, New Japan's *Kizuna Road* series saw the promotion run three shows in eight days for their most hardcore fans at Korakuen Hall. Many have argued that New Japan has run the famous venue too much this year, and when you realise that it ran four shows there during the Best of the Super Juniors and will have three more next month at the start of the G1, it's a pretty reasonable point to make. However the fans in attendance were in great spirits for what ended up some very entertaining events.

Each card was built around a title match in the main event – a rare occasion for Korakuen – and a big announcement regarding G1 participants, blocks, and matches. The first show on June 20 was headlined by a NEVER Six-Man title bout as champions SANADA, BUSHI, and EVIL defended against the wildly popular Taguchi Japan (Ryusuke Taguchi, KUSHIDA, and Juice Robinson). This was all action, with a ton of fun sequences worked in, playing mainly off Taguchi's comedy and baseball references. The crowd lapped it up. The LIJ trio retained their titles when SANADA tapped out Robinson with the Skull End (Dragon Sleeper). The former *Wrestle-1* man really jumped off the page here.

Show two on June 26 featured NEVER openweight champion Minoru Suzuki defending his belt against CHAOS' YOSHI-HASHI. The challenger plays a great underdog, and that's the perfect kind of opponent for the vicious bully Suzuki. They clicked very well, and this ended up being one of the best Suzuki matches in years. There was the expected interference spot with Suzuki-gun and CHAOS hitting the ring, but it was really well done, and peaked with a huge Okada dropkick on Davey Boy Smith Jr. that left champion and challenger one-on-one alone in the ring. The dust settled, and they duked it out in dramatic fashion, with YOSHI giving his everything to hang in there with the former Triple Crown champ before falling to a definitive Gotch-style piledriver.

BUSHI and KUSHIDA made it three for three with another fantastic main event on June 27. While they didn't hit the highs of their Best of the Super Juniors cracker, they still put on a really entertaining show to round out the week. KUSHIDA made his first defence of his new title reign, defeating his rival with a Back To The Future (cradle piledriver) as BUSHI attempted a top-roped MX (codebreaker).

All three shows provided fun, easy to watch undercards with the young lions getting a lot of focus and proving a real highlight.



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**1.** KUSHIDA made the first defence of his junior-heavyweight title at *Kizuna Road*

**RESULTS** Shota Umino vs. Tetsuhiro Yagi (Time-limit draw / 10:00) ■ Yoshinobu Kanemaru & TAKA Michinoku def. Tiger Mask & Hirai Kawato (Pinfall / 8:59) ■ Hiroyoshi Tenzan, Satoshi Kojima & Jushin Liger def. Yuji Nagata, Manabu Nakanishi & Tomoyuki Oka (Pinfall / 8:14) ■ Tomohiro Ishii & Toru Yano def. Togi Makabe & Katsuya Kitamura (Pinfall / 7:32) Los Ingovernables de Japón def. Hiroshi Tanahashi, Juice Robinson, Ryusuke Taguchi & David Finlay (Submission / 13:24) ■ Suzuki-gun def. CHAOS (Pinfall / 12:35) ■ KUSHIDA def. BUSHI (Pinfall / 19:21 / IWGP junior-heavyweight title)

## BELLATOR NYC: SONNEN VS. SILVA

Bellator's debut in Madison Square Garden was headlined by a fight five years in the making. Chael Sonnen and Wanderlei Silva had clashed repeatedly in the UFC, but the fight never took place due to injuries and suspensions. After his disastrous promotional debut against Tito Ortiz, this was the perfect match to rehabilitate Sonnen; even in his prime, Silva struggled against wrestlers who had the size and strength to take him down, and it was therefore no surprise that Sonnen held him down for pretty much the entire fight on June 24. Silva would show flashes, dropping Sonnen in the first round and going for a guillotine choke in the second, but his inability to defend takedowns meant he just couldn't sustain any momentum.

Another Pride FC veteran, Fedor Emelianenko, made his Bellator debut here. Sadly, he is a shell of the man who once dominated the heavyweight division; some of the old punching power remains, but his once iron-clad chin is long gone. Against Matt Mitrione, both characteristics were displayed in only one second, as both men were knocked down after simultaneously connecting with right crosses, but Mitrione recovered quicker, finishing "The Last Emperor" on the ground.

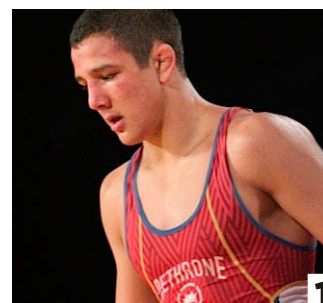
In comparison to the UFC, Bellator promoter Scott Coker has never placed the same emphasis

on titles, and this show made that quite clear. The light-heavyweight championship actually headlined the preliminary card, despite being a re-match between two recent signings from the UFC, Ryan Bader and Phil Davis. If the idea was to use it as a lead-in for the U.S. pay-per-view, it was a strange decision, considering the fight was just as boring as their first encounter. Bader won by split decision.

The welterweight title affair was also lacking in action, with Douglas Lima winning a lopsided decision over Lorenz Larkin, the key issue being that Larkin was overly cautious after being dropped by Lima in the second. To cap a trio of unsatisfying title fights, the lightweight title bout had to be quickly abandoned due to Brent Primus injuring Michael Chandler's leg with low kicks.

The most anticipated fight on the undercard was the MMA debut of the highly-credentialed amateur wrestler Aaron Pico. In a shocking upset, however, he was quickly defeated by Zach Freeman. Pico was understandably reluctant to take down a more experienced fighter with a strong base in Jiu Jitsu, so he tried to push the action on the feet, was caught with an uppercut, and then submitted.

Given the promotion's heavy investment in Pico, this now looks like very strange matchmaking.



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**1.** Top freestyle Aaron Pico did not have a good transition into his first MMA bout

**RESULTS** Hugh McKenna def. John Salgado (Submission [kimura] / R1 / 4:06) ■ Matt Rizo def. Sergio da Silva (Submission [rear-naked choke] / R3 / 3:48) ■ Anthony Giacchina def. Jerome Mickle (Submission [rear-naked choke] / R3 / 3:40) ■ Bradley Desir def. Nate Grebb (KO [punches] / R1 / 2:54) ■ Ryan Couture def. Haim Gozali (Decision [unanimous] / R3 / 5:00) ■ Heather Hardy def. Alice Yaeger (TKO [punches] / R3 / 4:47) ■ James Gallagher def. Chinzo Machida (Submission [rear-naked choke] / R1 / 2:22) ■ Ryan Bader def. Phil Davis (Decision [split] / R5 / 5:00) ■ Douglas Lima def. Lorenz Larkin (Decision [unanimous] / R5 / 5:00) ■ Zach Freeman def. Aaron Pico (Submission [guillotine choke] / R1 / 0:24) ■ Brent Primus def. Michael Chandler (TKO [doctor stoppage] / R1 / 2:22) ■ Matt Mitrione def. Fedor Emelianenko (KO [punches] / R1 / 1:14) ■ Neiman Grace def. Dave Marfione (Submission [rear-naked choke] / R3 / 2:27) ■ Chael Sonnen def. Wanderlei Silva (Decision [unanimous] / R3 / 5:00)



# EVOLVE WRESTLING EVOLVE 86-87

EVOLVE champion Zack Sabre Jr. and WWN title-holder Matt Riddle once again took centre stage as EVOLVE returned to the Northeast for a big weekend of wrestling on June 24-25. However, before they went into separate title defences at *EVOLVE 87*, they went up against one another in the main event of *EVOLVE 86*, in a “Battle of Champions” simply for pride and bragging rights, and not for either belt.

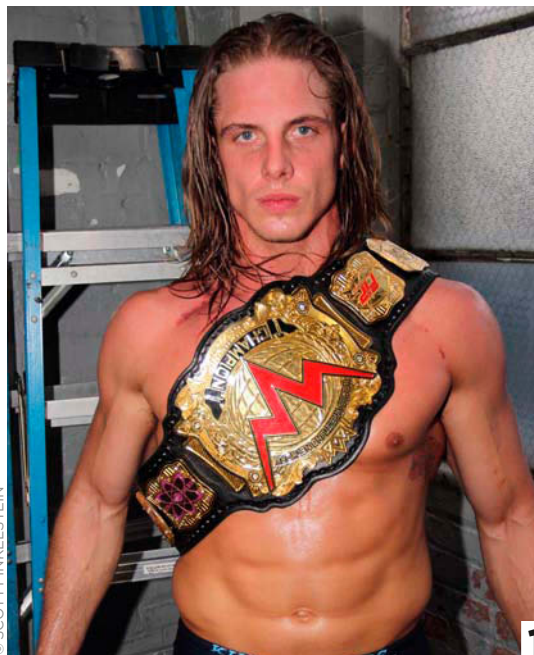
To no surprise, the match ended up being the best of the show, as it featured plenty of technical exchanges and grappling, along with some hard-hitting action in the closing stages. Sabre ultimately got the win via submission, tying Riddle up in a headscissors and heel hook before striking several elbows, to even up their series at one apiece (Riddle won their first encounter at *EVOLVE 59*). Unless there are unforeseen circumstances, there will certainly be a third match down the line.

Back in title defences, both combatants went into *EVOLVE 87* with tough challengers to overcome. The EVOLVE championship was on the line first, as Sabre defended against Jaka, one half of the Tag Team champions and a member of Catch Point (along with his long-time tag team partner Chris Dickinson). This was an incredible contest full of intense action and a ton of hard strikes, mainly slaps and chops. While Sabre scored the victory with the European Clutch bridging pin, this was truly a breakout performance for Jaka. He’s done very well in the tag team ranks, but proved here that he could hold his own against one of the best in a major singles match.

In the main event, Riddle was able to successfully defend his WWN title against the monstrous Keith Lee. They had recently developed a bit of a friendship, but it was all business here as they had arguably the best match of the entire weekend. Much like the EVOLVE title bout earlier in the night and the Battle of Champions from the night before, this one included some hard-hitting action (a big theme in the key matches on these shows) and amazing displays of power. The end of the contest was fascinating, as both men collapsed after a headbutt from Lee, but Riddle fell on top of him, and thus took the pinfall victory on somewhat of a fluke. Based on that finish, they too will surely meet again soon.

## CATCHING UP

As a whole, this weekend of events was a very mixed bag for Catch Point. While Tracy Williams managed to stretch his winning streak in singles competition to five (and in the process challenged Riddle to a match for the WWN title on August 12),



1. Matt Riddle continued to enhance his reputation, despite losing to Zack Sabre Jr. at *EVOLVE 86* 2. Timothy Thatcher staked his claim for an EVOLVE title match with two victories on this weekend

EVOLVE Tag Team champions Chris Dickinson and Jaka went a combined 0-4 in their separate singles affairs. Two of those came against Fred Yehi, who earned impressive submission victories over his former stablemates.

Timothy Thatcher made a strong return to EVOLVE by going 2-0 on the weekend, but the big news regarding Thatcher was that he is now loosely affiliated with Catch Point, the same stable with which he feuded for well over a year during his reign as EVOLVE champion. Of course, the common thread between the two sides now is Stokely Hathaway, who has promised that the EVOLVE title will soon belong to either Catch Point or The Dream Team. While Jaka came up just short at *EVOLVE 87*, Thatcher got his chance to reclaim the EVOLVE title on July 8 in Charlotte, North Carolina, when he faced Zack Sabre Jr. in a No Holds Barred encounter.

Finally, after one of Ethan Page’s Gatekeepers left the wrestling business entirely a few months ago, the other (formerly Blaster McMassive of CHIKARA fame) finally had enough, too, and broke away from “All Ego” at *EVOLVE 86*. Apparently tired of doing Page’s dirty work, he revealed his name to be Thomas Sharp. Page then sent out a third Gatekeeper (referred to as “The Dirty Gatekeeper”), but he was quickly disposed of by Sharp. The latter then had a shot at revenge against Page in a singles match at *EVOLVE 87*, but his former mentor was victorious with the Spinning Dwayne.

## RESULTS EVOLVE 86 - June 24, 2017

Timothy Thatcher def. Austin Theory (Submission / 10:25) ■ ACH def. Chris Dickinson (Pinfall / 14:23) ■ Thomas Sharp def. “The Dirty Gatekeeper” (Pinfall / 2:00) ■ Fred Yehi def. Jaka (Submission / 16:17) ■ Tracy Williams def. Jason Kincaid (Submission / 13:55) ■ Keith Lee def. “All Ego” Ethan Page (Pinfall / 10:46) ■ Zack Sabre Jr. def. Matt Riddle (Submission / 12:30)

## EVOLVE 87 - June 25, 2017

Tracy Williams def. ACH (Submission / 14:35) ■ Timothy Thatcher def. Jason Kincaid (Submission / 12:45) ■ Fred Yehi def. Chris Dickinson (Submission / 16:28) ■ Zack Sabre Jr. def. Jaka (Pinfall / 15:00 / EVOLVE championship) ■ “All Ego” Ethan Page def. Thomas Sharp (Pinfall / 5:35) ■ Trent Baretta def. Austin Theory (Pinfall / 14:50) ■ Matt Riddle def. Keith Lee (Pinfall / 14:56 / WWN championship)

# ROH BEST IN THE WORLD 2017

Going into June 23's *Best In The World*, Ring of Honor's annual summer pay-per-view event, Bullet Club looked to show its dominance, as it had members in four of the eight matches on the main card. Even though, as whole, the faction went 2-2 on the night, the biggest result occurred in the main event, as Cody Rhodes captured the ROH World title from Christopher Daniels.

While it was certainly a good match, though, it was definitely below the standard one would expect from an ROH pay-per-view main event. There was solid back and forth wrestling throughout, but too much in the way of shenanigans, from the referee getting taken out, to interference, to chairs and tables coming into play. None of those aforementioned shenanigans directly led to the eventual outcome, in which Rhodes pinned Daniels with the Cross Rhodes.

The other big result for Bullet Club saw The Young Bucks retain the ROH Tag Team titles against Best Friends (Trent Barreta and Chuck Taylor) and War Machine (Hanson and Ray Rowe). The match was originally scheduled to be a regular tag team bout, but Best Friends inserted themselves into the fray after bringing up the fact that they (along with Rocky Romero) had beaten Bullet Club in a six-man tag on ROH TV a few weeks previously. This Triple Threat bout would end up being the Match of the Night, as it featured some insane, non-stop action from start to finish, and the fans in Lowell, Massachusetts absolutely loved it. Both of the challenging teams put on incredible performances, with powerbombs, moonsaults, and chokeslams featuring in their offence, but ultimately the Bucks secured the win with the IndyTaker.

Despite those two huge victories, Marty Scurll came up short in his quest to regain the TV title from KUSHIDA. There was some great technical wrestling here, along with hard-hitting action, as Scurll was more ruthless than usual, making it look like he had KUSHIDA beaten on a few different occasions. Still, the current IWGP junior-heavyweight champion eventually put away "The Villain" after hitting him twice with his new finisher, Back To The Future (cradle DDT).

Meanwhile, "Hangman" Page was soundly defeated by Frankie Kazarian in a brutal Strap match. This was a little different than what you would normally expect from this stipulation, as instead of being connected with one long strap, both competitors had their own piece of leather, of about two or three feet, attached to their wrists. They each put it to good use, resulting in a pretty violent match. At one point, a strap with thumbtacks and nails was involved, and both men took the chance to use it. Eventually, Kazarian choked out Page with a brutal, old-school finish, hanging him in the ropes for the submission.



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1



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2

1. Christopher Daniels' 105-day reign as ROH World champion came to an end at Best In The World 2. Marty Scurll was in no mood for pleasantries as he tried to reclaim the Television title

## THE BOYS BECOME MEN

The ROH Six-Man Tag Team titles were also up for grabs, as Dalton Castle and The Boys challenged The Briscoes and Bully Ray. The match did feature some solid action, but it mainly served as a backdrop for the storyline involving Jay Briscoe, who was obsessed with getting his hands on The Boys after they inadvertently caused him to get pinned in an eight-man on ROH television. This ultimately proved to be the downfall of his team, as it led to Dalton Castle rolling him up to capture the belts for his trio.

Elsewhere on the card, Search & Destroy won a wild eight-man tag against The Rebellion, with the stipulation being that the losing faction would disband. Jonathan Gresham managed to secure the victory for his side after getting Rhett Titus to tap out to an Octopus stretch. Jay Lethal continued his feud with Silas Young, as he took on "The Last Real Man" in singles competition. Lethal got the win with a cradle, but Young got the last laugh, as he and The Beer City Bruiser destroyed him after the match. This assault ended after the Bruiser put Lethal through a table on the floor with a splash from the top rope.

In the opener, CMLL's Ultimo Guerrero and El Terrible scored a victory over The Kingdom.

**RESULTS** Ultimo Guerrero & El Terrible def. The Kingdom of Matt Taven & Vinny Marseglia with TK O'Ryan (Pinfall / 11:04 / Lucha rules match) ■ Frankie Kazarian def. "The Hangman" Adam Page (Submission / 12:03 / Strap match) ■ The Motor City Machine Guns, Jay White, & Jonathan Gresham def. The All-Night Express, Caprice Coleman, & Shane Taylor (Submission / 12:45 / Losing Unit Must Disband match) ■ Jay Lethal def. Silas Young (Pinfall / 16:23) ■ Dalton Castle & The Boys def. The Briscoes & Bully Ray (Pinfall / 13:20 / ROH Six-Man Tag Team titles) ■ KUSHIDA def. "The Villain" Marty Scurll (Pinfall / 14:55 / ROH World TV title) ■ The Young Bucks def. Best Friends of Trent Beretta & Chuck Taylor and War Machine (Pinfall / 12:27 / Triple Threat Tornado match for the ROH World Tag Team titles) ■ Cody Rhodes def. Christopher Daniels (19:23 / ROH World championship)



# DRAGON GATE KING OF GATE 2017

It was always going to be difficult for Dragon Gate's King of Gate tournament to top last year. In its first year under a new expanded format, the 2016 edition surpassed everyone's expectations, and was among the best in-ring productions in Dragon Gate history. This became especially difficult with the 2016 MVP, Akira Tozawa, missing from this year's field, leaving a big void, and as such the tournament didn't hit the consistent highs this time around.

All that said, by any normal standard, this was an excellent series of shows, and the tournament produced some tremendous bouts. There was no singular MVP like last year, as the best matches were spread out across a wide variety of participants in the 16-man field. The competitors were in four round robin-style blocks, with the winners emerging for a final four knockout competition on the last two nights in Hakata Star Lanes.

That final four emerged as Naruki Doi, Eita, T-Hawk, and Shingo Takagi. Both semi-finals were strong, with former teammates Eita and T-Hawk having a very well-worked match built around an excellent onslaught of the arm by Eita, and Shingo and Doi bringing serious drama with their veteran know-how. The latter had a ton of heat down the stretch, with the crowd really getting behind Doi, and their support paid off as he advanced to a showdown with T-Hawk the next night.

The deciding bout was simply fantastic, and one of the best matches of the whole tournament. Doi was incredible, producing the best singles match he's had since his Dream Gate run in 2009. T-Hawk stepped up with a great showing himself, and while he still doesn't have the connection one would want him to have with the crowd, his execution and timing is off the charts.

The only criticism of this match was that maybe the wrong man won: the air was sucked out of the arena when Doi didn't kick out of the match-ending Night Ride, as they really thought he was taking it. It remains to be seen if the decision was right for the long-term, but on the night it felt like the wrong call.

## OLD RIVALRIES DIE HARD

Korakuen Hall was host to some of the better matches of the tournament, with the highlight being old rivals Shingo and BxB Hulk going at it again. Hulk has been a shell of himself in recent times, but he performed like the old days here by showing amazing fire and really taking it to Takagi. As good as Hulk was, though, Shingo's unwavering heelishness was the best thing about the match; he was such a horrible, unlikeable person in this bout that you couldn't help but root for him to go down in defeat. The finish was the embodiment of this: with time running out on the 20-minute limit and the crowd urging Hulk on as he scrambled for victory, Takagi snuck in a low-blow out of



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nowhere and wrapped up Hulk with a tight cradle for the three with only seconds remaining. It was incredibly well done.

Korakuen also played host to the best moment of the tournament, on opening night. Following their match, Masaaki Mochizuki took the mic and asked his opponent, Shingo, what it felt like to lose to a "nearly 50-year-old bastard". He continued and launched one of the great promos of the year. "I, Masaaki Mochizuki, age 47 years and four months, with no unit affiliation or recent championship matches, defeated Shingo Takagi today. King of Gate starting has made me think about the current state of Dragon Gate; there are rookies making a huge impact, and there are new units forming. Takagi, Hulk, Doi, Yoshino, YAMATO, Twin Gate champions, Triangle Gate champions – there is a lot going on. However, in the middle of that, there are still myself and Don Fujii. 47 years old. No units or titles. We may not have as many chances as we once did, but King of Gate is the season where all dreams can come true.

"I won't ever stop aiming for the Dream Gate and the top spot."

1. Shingo Takagi lost out in the semi-finals of this year's King of Gate tournament 2. It was competitors like YAMATO that Masaaki Mochizuki referenced in his brilliant promo

## THE TOP FIVE MATCHES OF KING OF GATE 2017

1. Shingo Takagi vs. BxB Hulk (June 1 - Korakuen Hall)
2. Jimmy Susumu vs. Kzy (May 20 - Osaka)
3. Naruki Doi vs. T-Hawk (June 10 - Hakata)
4. YAMATO vs. Eita (May 9 - Korakuen Hall)
5. CIMA vs. Ryo Jimmy Saito (May 27 - Sapporo)

# SAY WHAT?!

One of the great things about pro wrestling is that there are so many different styles, and so many different opinions. Voice your thoughts on the sport we love via e-mail, Facebook, and Twitter.



Don West (here with Brian Hebner, Earl Hebner, and Brian Stiffler) was back on commentary at Slammiversary

## FACE TO FACEBOOK

### TNA GIVES WAY TO GFW

**Andrew Cassidy:** So GFW is back from the dustbin of failed wrestling projects?

**Michael Shimaoka:**

Apparently so. I'm not really sure why the GFW and TNA merger is happening and I'm unsure about why the rebrand is necessary.

**Simon Wight:** Well, the Impact name does have a stigma about it, so I get that. Problem is GFW also has a stigma for being nothing but a name for two years and that whole Global Force Gold pyramid scheme thing.

**Stephen Roberts:** The merger between GFW and Impact has already happened. They both merged shortly after Anthem bought out TNA Impact and renamed it just Impact Wrestling.



### PULLING THE TRIGGER TOO EARLY?

**James Potter:** Anybody else think they're pulling the trigger early on the Samoa Joe vs. Brock Lesnar dream match?

**Jon Hulse:** There was a time when Samoa Joe even being in WWE was a ridiculous thought, so I'll take this match in any way it's given. But you're right, it could make more money if they gave it more time.

**Annelise Freedman:** I think the match is intended to draw in a wider audience from those who wouldn't normally watch WWE, but know who Joe is. However, it would indeed help if they built Joe up a little first. I know they can't really show old footage of him in other companies, so they need to start from scratch.

**Chris Kelly:** Controversial opinion, but I don't think WWE-only fans give much of a damn about Samoa Joe, personally. Although I loved the stuff with Heyman this week. That is how you get a heel over.

**Jon Hulse:** I think WWE-only fans won't know that 12-13 years ago Joe was routinely having Match of the Year contenders. WWE hasn't yet given their fans a reason to care about how good he is.

**Steve Stubbington:** *SummerSlam* would've been a better idea, but then who's to say it's not a feud that will span multiple months?

## TWITTER TALK

### TNA SLAMMIVERSARY 2017

**@churrosandnaps** Dig that these tag teams are all from different companies. #Slamm15

**@solomonster** OMG, I could watch Scott Steiner running around calling people fat-asses all day long #Slamm15

**@joshua7520** That was so much fun. Steiner, the return of Shark Boy, James Mitchell, and then the return of the Monster Abyss. That was great! #SLAMM15

**@OrnKonstanstine** This confirms JB is the brain behind Final Deletion #Slamm15

**@ColonelFancy** Rosemary's entrance is major league. The fans look at her as a star, she carries herself like a star. #Slammiversary #Slamm15

**@WAManeuver** The year is 2017. DON WEST IS CALLING A PAY-PER-VIEW. #Slamm15

**@jsb0327** I have watched wrestling all my life and I don't remember a mixed tag match that hardcore and brutal. Great match ladies and gentlemen!

**@zmanbriazane** James Storm: "I've been with this company for 15 damn years!" Except for a few weeks I'd rather not discuss!" #Slammiversary

**@raveneffect\_HC** @ImpactWrestling #SLAMM15 showed WWE, NJPW, ROH & everyone else how a PPV is done. Great wrestling, fun segments

### ROH BEST IN THE WORLD 2017

**@Hogufama** Watching ROH Best In The World. It was kind of dull until Beer City Bruiser's frog splash through the table on the floor. Been great since.

**@marxismflairism** The Best In The World main event (Cody Rhodes vs. Christopher Daniels) was the first ROH match I've watched in almost a year.

**@WVEDanielBryan** Congratulations! Being @ringofhonor champ for 462 days transformed me as a wrestler and was one of the best times in my career. Enjoy it!

**@JoshuaCaudhill85** As a wrestling fan & as a human being, can't help but get chills over this. Very happy. This is what he worked for #ROHBITW @CodyRhodes

**@metsandnesfan** Leaving #WWE was the best thing @CodyRhodes did for his career. He's found himself! Congrats champ! #ROHBITW #AmericanNightmare #TooSweet

**@BillNevilleNAI** What an HONOR it was to witness @CodyRhodes win the ROH World championship tonight. Couldn't have happened to a better guy. #ROHBITW

**@bullyray5150** IMO...The working relationship between @ringofhonor and @njpw1972 is producing the most entertaining pro wrestling on the planet right now

## TOUCH BASE...

YOU CAN GET IN TOUCH WITH FSM IN ANY OF THE FOLLOWING WAYS

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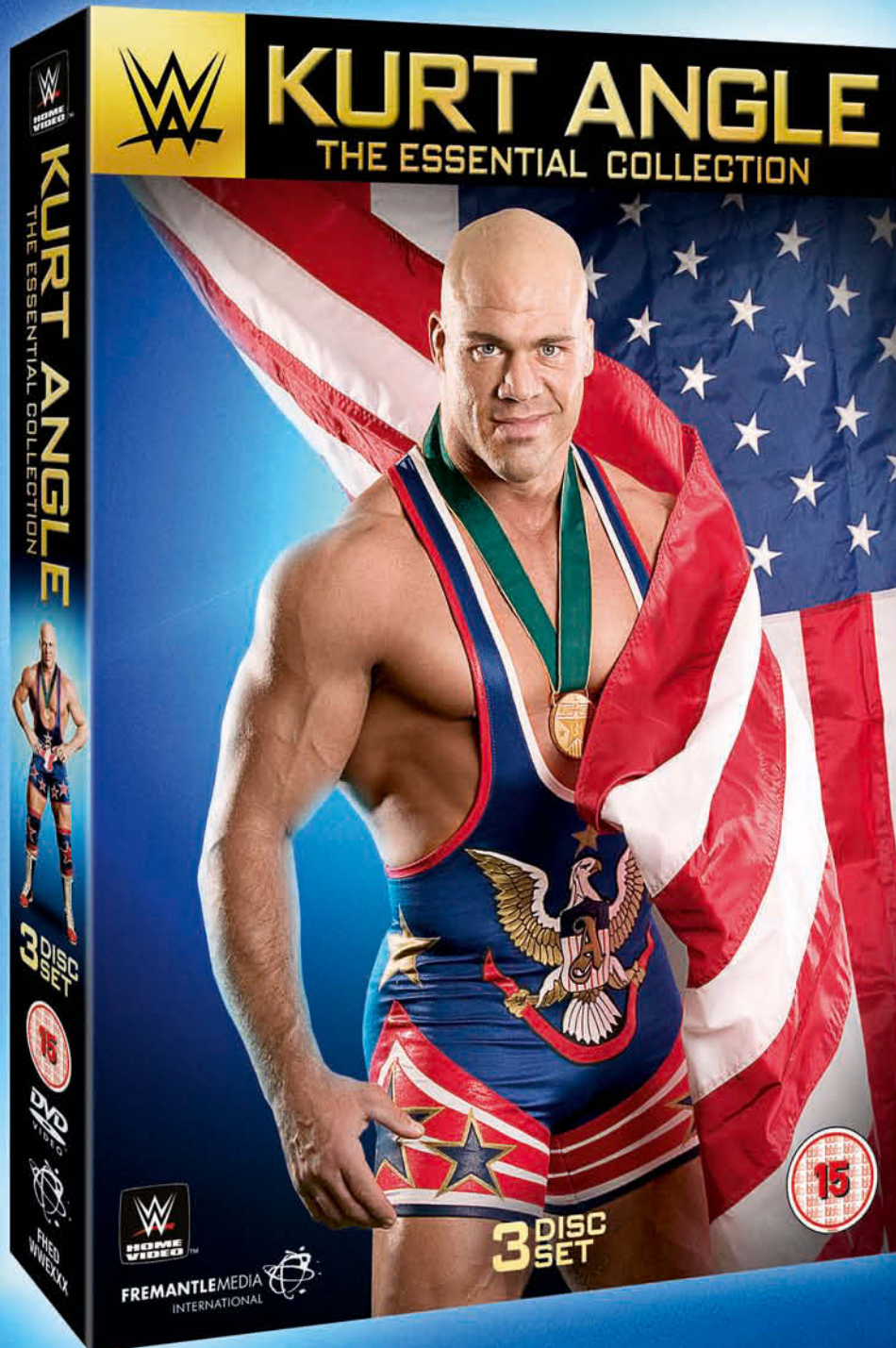
**FACEBOOK:** You can join our active Facebook discussion community by visiting [www.tinyurl.com/JoinFSM](http://www.tinyurl.com/JoinFSM)

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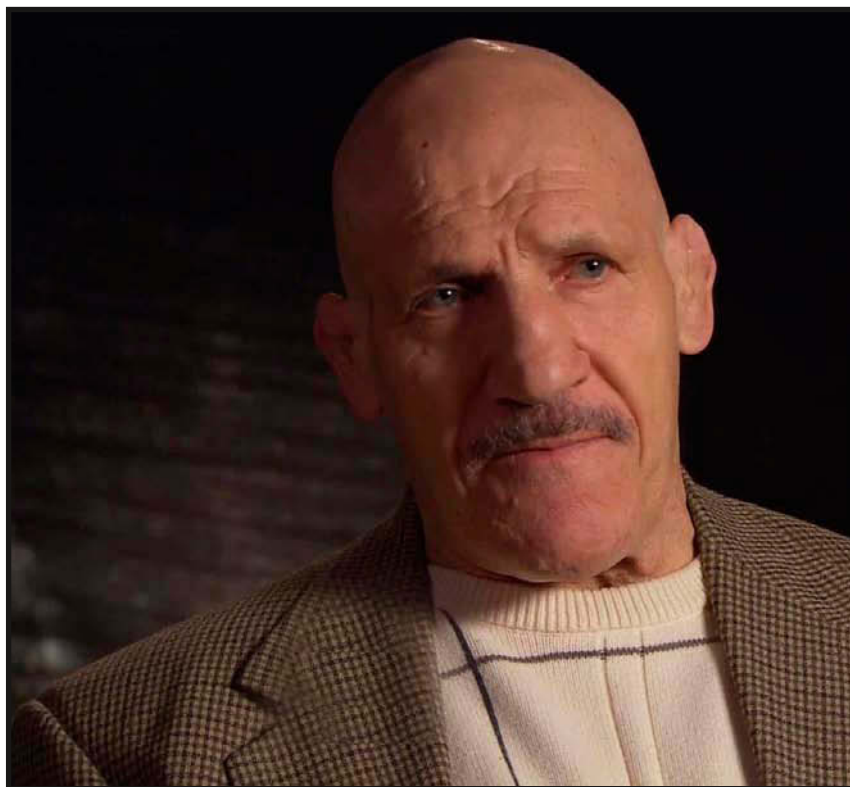


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## THE HALL OF CHAMPIONS

**T**aking less than three minutes to do so, WWE's Twitter page decided to run through every man to hold the WWE championship. That's a whopping 50 wrestlers, including everyone from Bruno Sammartino and Hulk Hogan to Steve Austin, John Cena, and Chris Jericho. Perhaps the most eye-opening thing here is seeing how WWE's tastes have shifted over the years.

<http://tinyurl.com/WWETitleHistory>

## The Most Electrifying Wedding

**B**efore watching this clip, be careful about whether you want your fiancé(e) to see it! This is a Nigerian wedding that isn't exactly traditional; walking down the aisle to The Rock's entrance theme, this pumped-up groom wanted to leave quite the impression on his bride-to-be. If you do indeed have big wedding plans, you'd do well to match the bravado shown here!

<http://tinyurl.com/GroomRock>



## Here I Go Again: Kerry Von Erich

**I**f you're a fan of classic rock and old-school wrestling, then this is the video for you! Backed by Whitesnake's timeless track *Here I Go Again*, the clips included show Kerry Von Erich at his best. It's a real shame that he could never replicate his World Class form in the WWF, but at least fans have these memories. "The Modern Day Warrior" was sheer money in his prime.

<http://tinyurl.com/VonErichWhitesnake>



## Interview With A Starr

**S**elf-confidence is a powerful thing, especially when an underdog needs to stand out. That's precisely what fuelled David Starr to tell everyone that he was the best, even when he knew he was not. Such apparent arrogance has served Starr well, and it also makes his interview with Kenny Johnson one of the most fascinating this month. This is a different kind of career retrospective.



<http://tinyurl.com/StarrInterview>

## That's Not PROGRESS!

**B**efore locking up with Kay Lee Ray for PROGRESS Wrestling, OTT Women's champion Katey Harvey fired back at the promotion's fans who had apparently made her feel unwelcome the first time she appeared there. The result was this well-produced promo, one that tells a good story and reveals that Harvey – when she's given the floor – can talk the talk.



<http://tinyurl.com/PROGRESSPromo>

<http://tinyurl.com/WrestlingFanFilm>

## EVOLUTION OF AN INDUSTRY

**T**he advent of social media has unquestionably changed the pro wrestling industry, as now fans have greater access to their grappling favourites than ever before. But at what cost? This Is Wrestling Film interviewed numerous wrestlers and personalities within the business (including the likes of Doug Williams [below] and Jeff Jarrett) to find out just how great this change has been.



© TONY KNOX



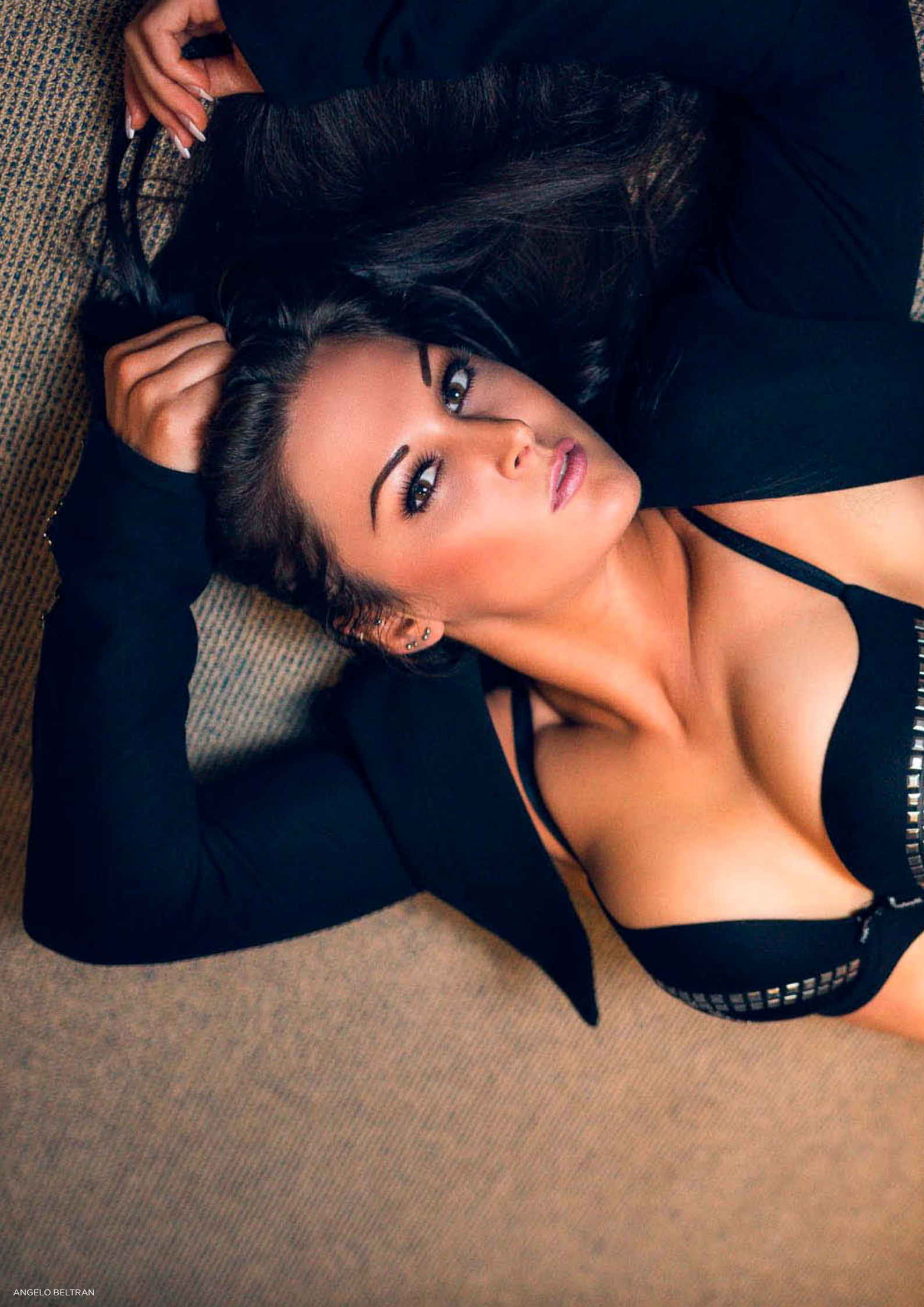
**S**ince being **FSM**'s own One To Watch back in Issue 135, "Savvy" Sid Scala has been taking no shortcuts to further stardom. The flat cap wearing grappler now looks better than ever thanks to a new training régime, and has been killing it in matches for IPW:UK, 4FW, and Fight Nation, going over the likes of Crusher Lomaxx, Earl Black Jr, and Kelly Sixx in recent times.

Make sure to catch him at the next possible opportunity – and don't forget to visit the merch table!



© TURNING FACE PHOTOGRAPHY








A woman is shown from the waist down, wearing a black bikini with a mesh-like pattern on the top piece. She is lying on a grey, textured carpet. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

# Savannah Summers

Lucha Fantastica (Australia); UCW  
(New Zealand); WWP (South Africa);

Twitter & Instagram: @Savannah5ummer5





WWE's portrayal of Bayley on the main roster has left a lot to be desired

# REVOLUTION RECLUSE

In developmental, Bayley was a can't-miss prospect, but WWE has badly missed the mark with her on Raw. Michael Campbell analyses how the promotion has made such a mess of one of its most popular talents.

It was August 22 2015, and the location, Brooklyn. It the latest *NXT: TakeOver* special. On this evening, Bayley (real name: Pamela Rose Martinez) usurped Sasha Banks for the NXT Women's championship, in one of the most emotional moments in modern wrestling history – the culmination of a journey that fans had walked every step of the way. The feelings were real, like the surge of goodwill towards two talents being positioned in a pivotal spot. The bout would end up being voted Match of the Year in the 2015 **FSM** Reader Awards, and part of what made it special was the knowledge that Banks was passing the torch; she had already made it to the main roster, and now Bayley would fly the flag for NXT. She did that with aplomb, making successful title defences against the likes of Alexa Bliss, Nia Jax, and even Eva Marie before a long overdue call-up a year later.

Fans were ecstatic to see the beloved babyface receive her well-deserved shot at making it on the main roster.

On June 4 2017, though, 11 months after her main roster debut, it was the *Raw* brand pay-per-view, *Extreme Rules*. Here Bayley, now the former *Raw* Women's champion, was embarrassed by Bliss

in a title bout that went just 5:10. Prior to, and during the match, Bayley was booed by a considerable section of the crowd in Baltimore, Maryland, who saw her as despairingly timid and weak.

It had taken WWE's creative team less than a year to undo all that was achieved in NXT, the latter of which had made the 28-year-old the most engaging character in the entire company.

Where did it all go so wrong?

## CHAMPION OF THE PEOPLE

The signing of Martinez to NXT first became public knowledge in December 2012. A life-long wrestling fan, she came in with four years' experience already under her belt, largely as Davina Rose, including notable appearances for SHIMMER.

Rechristened Bayley, Martinez became one of the major success stories of the brand. Attempting to describe her appeal to someone who hasn't experienced her infectious nature would be near futile; she was simply a breath of fresh air, an on-screen depiction of a young, hard-working fan, positive and optimistic. Bayley was a "good girl", but with fighting ability that belied her innocent



characteristics, and her use of inflatable “Bayley Buddies” as props during her entrance never failed to raise a smile, standing apart from everyone else with her colourful, retro attire. Bayley’s jaunty, jolly music resembled something Irish girl pop group B\*Witched could have surged into the UK singles charts in 1998.

There was an earnest, honest side to Bayley’s character, and her ambition always came across, even to older, perhaps jaded fans. Like Daniel Bryan, Sami Zayn, and Becky Lynch, the audience responded to her quest as if “one of them” had made it. She reflected their drive and enthusiasm for wrestling.

Obviously then, it was a huge moment for everyone when she defeated reached the NXT summit a little over two years after first appearing for the group. Perhaps even bigger than the belt, though, was that the character of Bayley had been an enormous success, given that it seemed to be aimed directly at young girls, like her famous superfan Izzy Silagyi.

At *TakeOver: Respect*, Banks and Bayley would have one final NXT match-up, this time a 30-minute Iron Man match, but more importantly, they were also given the main event spot. At the conclusion of the show, when Bayley retained her title to yet another rapturous response, the roster came out to applaud, presenting both ladies with bouquets of flowers, in the kind of classy celebration for which pro wrestling should be known. William Regal was moved to tears in the moment.

The occasion was not dissimilar when Bayley made her main roster debut at *Battleground*. Rather oddly, it was a one-off appearance as a surprise tag team partner for Sasha Banks. With much uncertainty within the company over the reception to such a resolutely old-fashioned blue-eye, this was actually a bizarre trial run for Bayley. To no surprise to anyone with eyes and ears, however, the Verizon Centre in Washington, D.C exploded for her arrival. Although the action was secondary to the presence of the guest star, it was still an excellent moment, somewhat prematurely prefacing her official main roster debut, on August 22, during which she was immediately thrust into a feud with champion Charlotte.

Bayley worked the autumn and winter months as part of the Women’s title picture, but alarm bells perhaps should have rung swiftly, as she was the one to drop the fall in a Triple Threat match at her first advertised pay-per-view, *Clash Of The Champions*, opposite Flair and Banks. Although the nature of the stipulation allowed for wiggle room, it felt like a blow right out of the gate. The remainder of the year saw Bayley trade victories with Charlotte and Dana Brooke, but her insertion into the title picture so quickly illustrated a depth problem from which the women’s division was suffering, as having split its top talent across two shows, the majority of the ladies featured on *Raw* were all involved in the title picture. Their was no clear build to anyone as a deserving challenger, and instead, each female was either a preliminary talent or a title contender.

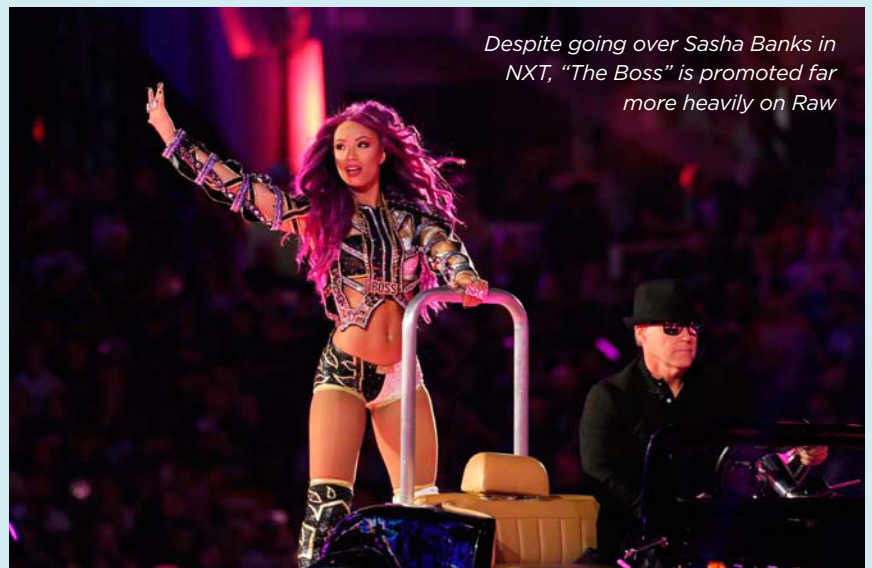
## LEFT OF THE MIDDLE

With this muddled status, and how WWE had bounced the title between Charlotte and Banks on six occasions in eight months, it was inevitable that Bayley would wind up as Women’s champion too

soon, and without a satisfying chase. Logic seemed to dictate that this would transpire at *WrestleMania*, on a suitably large stage, at least. This career moment never arrived, though, as inexplicably, she instead went over Charlotte on February 13, thanks to a Banks assist. This storyline-based climax seemed to be a step towards an eventual feud with her buddy, rather than an effective conclusion to a long, simmering plot-line. Even in championship glory, momentum was gone, and it really did feel as if Bayley and the other women were simply making things happen for themselves while they waited for any long-term direction.

At *WrestleMania*, Bayley defended successfully against Charlotte, Banks, and Nia Jax in a fairly good but rushed four-way that felt designed to get them all on the card. By this point, it was clear that the stuttering over whether or not to turn Banks heel for a Bayley feud had somehow left the champion in something of a limbo: the focus began to shift dramatically towards using Bayley to get heat

**“To no surprise to anyone with eyes and ears, however, the Verizon Centre in Washington, D.C. exploded for Bayley’s arrival”**



*Despite going over Sasha Banks in NXT, “The Boss” is promoted far more heavily on Raw*



*Bayley did at least win a four-way Elimination match over Charlotte, Banks, and Nia Jax at WrestleMania*

Instead of Bayley, WWE seems far more interested in promoting the limited Nia Jax



on heel opponents Jax, and following her draft to *Raw*, Alexa Bliss.

March 20 had seen Bayley beaten by Jax, despite still being the champion, in a moment reminiscent of Rey Mysterio's lacklustre title reign. But worse was to come: as Bliss has risen to prominence, it hasn't just been at the expense of Bayley in terms of storyline, but at the expense of the entire character. At every turn, Bayley has been sacrificed to "The Goddess"

In her hometown return to San Jose at *Payback* on April 30, WWE had Bayley drop her title to Bliss. Their theory is that a significant hometown loss adds considerable heat to a heel, but in reality, an outcome that positively absorbs the crowd and encourages fans to return to future events is much more valuable. A good heel can gain heat on another occasion, but it's very difficult for a babyface to recover from such a deflating loss. *Payback* didn't recover, either; the defeat completely sucked the heat out of the building, while the rest of the show struggled on.

In the weeks that followed, Bayley could not have looked more feckless as she was verbally and physically established as leagues behind Bliss, and lacking any sort of street smarts with which to keep up. At *Extreme Rules*, part of what made her character so pathetic was the fact that she had challenged Bliss to the contest and was, of course, fully aware of what a Kendo stick stipulation meant. Yet on the night, she hesitated and behaved as if she was incapable of inflicting pain on her opponent. There's a huge gulf between being an honourable good guy and a sadistic villain, one that still obviously allows for a person to partake in the good fight. By being the hapless girl who was "having fun" and "being positive", Bayley was cast in the same bracket as comedy figures who have no purpose in anything competitive.

Still, the nadir of this mishandling had to be the horrendous segment with roving reporter Corey Graves, who had enough time away from monitoring Kurt Angle's private messages to conduct a woeful interview with Bayley on June 13. As the segment concluded, Bayley went in for a hug, which Graves was extremely reluctant to indulge. In fact, he looked

to be repulsed, while Bayley came across like an uncool creep.

June 26 continued the trend, as a Gauntlet match to determine the top contender came down to Banks and Nia Jax. Bayley was the first eliminated, demolished in just over three minutes. She had officially become fodder.

### WHY SO SAD?

Chief culprit amongst the misery has been the very modern affliction that haunts WWE storytelling: the Daniel Bryan factor. As has been discussed repeatedly, WWE never intended Bryan to have the main event run that he enjoyed, and certainly had no plans whatsoever to put him anywhere close to the main event of *WrestleMania XXX*. It was the outpouring of fan support spawned from what they felt was an ineffective push, bordering on burial at times, that resulted in WWE's hand being forced. Fans felt that their favourite was not being given the opportunities he had earned, and a groundswell of support changed Bryan's trajectory. But the promotion later took the credit, as if it had been a long-term strategy; Bryan's positioning at times as a foolish, naive dolt, and at best, a plucky, little underdog was rewritten in its eyes as a vital factor in a success that it had manufactured itself.

WWE has since clearly taken that approach to booking other talent. The Daniel Bryan push now goes as follows: take someone whose appeal mystifies Vince McMahon and "push" them by having them constantly lose, be portrayed as nerds that none of the "cool" characters want to hang with, and generally smother them with the stench of their shortcomings. WWE did this with Sami Zayn so badly that the Canadian has transformed from one of the most sympathetic performers in the industry to one of the most searingly irritating losers on TV.

Bayley has not quite hit that low yet, but WWE must be made aware that it's in the distance.

Another unfortunate aspect is that Bayley's downfall has run concurrent with the enormously successful release of the Warner Brothers *Wonder Woman* movie. Aside from being a really good piece of blockbuster film-making, it's also proven to be a tremendous example of how to portray a heroic female action star. It doesn't pander, but simultaneously doesn't condescend. *Wonder Woman's* appeal is inclusive, not narrow.

"It's not just wrestling - I think any company presenting to the public needs to present positive female role models," OTT Wrestling's Katey Harvey told **FSM**. "Wrestling has done a great job of this recently; there's such a variety of girls on shows in terms of looks, talent, skills et cetera. We've come a long way from The Miss Rumble competition in 2000, to women main-eventing regularly in fantastic matches.

"For so many years in superhero films, we've seen women either be a love interest, a villain, or a bit-part superhero. *Wonder Woman* blew my mind because you could have made the exact same film with a male lead, and it would have been just as amazing. She was a great hero because of her beliefs, her strength, and her courage; it didn't actually matter at all that she was a woman, because she never exploited it. It was



so refreshing to see that. And it gives out the message that just be true to yourself and you'll succeed."

On paper, Bayley is an alternative to the usual concerns, but she's also an antidote to the Attitude Era bitchiness, the over-the-top nature of *GLOW*, and is also someone who stands apart from the pomp of Sasha Banks, the dynasty-driven Charlotte, or fitness models like Trish Stratus. She should fit the bill for being that diverse entry point for those who normally wouldn't watch pro wrestling, and should be that contradiction to every stereotype. But right now, even Bayley is feeling little more than a bad parody of her former self.

## SIGN OF THE TIMES

"I feel that right now, I'm in a weird spot with my career," she candidly admitted during a recent appearance on *The Steve Austin Show*. "With NXT I felt I can do anything; I knew exactly what they wanted and how they were going to react to me and my opponent, no matter who it was. I knew what they can do to get a reaction and what I can do to get sympathy or anything. But with this crowd I'm still kind of figuring them out with WWE.

"I think it has a lot to do with, I don't know, in this day and age the crowds are... (pauses) It's so different than back then, and they all want to cheer for the wrong person or they're on their Twitter. That can mess with your head too, just reading tweets and people telling you this, and you start to believe it."

The truth is, however, that crowds have embraced Bayley – but they have not embraced her booking on *Raw*. She has found herself trapped between the more popular Banks, who is a more natural heel, a "monster" WWE definitely wants to push in Nia Jax, and Alexa Bliss, who has improved so swiftly that she's on the cusp of attaining babyface reactions. It isn't too late for Bayley, by any means; she still commands an overwhelmingly positive reaction from most crowds, and is always going to find herself rotated back into the mix. Fixing the problem would actually be fairly simple, if the company truly knew what to do with a babyface like Bayley.

A similar issue of limbo has seen NXT struggle to turn Asuka heel since April. The reason behind this difficulty is disturbingly obvious: as a believable performer, she's miles better than every other woman on the brand, a fact illustrated by the inability to cultivate a replacement for her. As a character, her dominance over the entire roster has made her seem awesome, in the truest sense of the word, so much so that it's impossible for people to cheer other "inferior" competitors. Bayley has no such issues: everybody beats her, when she does win it's often by a fluke, and she cuts whiny promos about not wanting to hurt people on a show that is supposed to present people "fighting" for prizes. A little of the drive of Asuka would go a long way to tapping back into Bayley's natural likeability.

"In terms of presenting and 'creating' female role models, I think the best place to start is creating characters who have a gimmick based on being strong, being able, but most of all not coming out and showing your butt in the audience's face," said Heather Bandenburg of Pro Wrestling: EVE and Lucha Britannia. "I think a big part of that is allowing

the wrestler themselves to develop a character in keeping with parts of their personality they want to channel."

Bayley has managed to conquer prehistoric attitudes previously, becoming a bona fide role model. Now it's key that she is once again embraced for her own personality, rather than a simplified caricature of herself.

"Her gimmick is her ability and herself," said Bandenburg. "She's only wrestling for her, and for those who she wishes to inspire. There are a lot of female wrestlers that are doing it for those reasons – for female strength and ability – not so they can look pretty. Women are allowed to be complex now, to the extent that we are less inclined to watch female actresses that are just a pretty face."

## THERE'S MORE TO ME

Like other inspirational women at the forefront of the entertainment business, there is potential for Bayley to be more. She has made no bones about the fact that she always wanted to be a kid-friendly icon who would provide young girls with a hero on whom they could pin their hopes and dreams. Even if she is unable to portray that fully on the main roster, it's imperative that she isn't presented as a two-dimensional loser who young ones are supposed to like, but nobody else can take remotely seriously. To be a role model, she must be projected as successful in standing up for her moral code, and her abilities must shine through, especially in the face of less upstanding opponents. Essentially, her positive qualities have to lead her to success, not failure. During a time when female role models are under the microscope, it's vital that she is allowed to flourish.

The wrestling audience is more than ready to embrace Bayley again. They just need to be given reasons to do so.

"Personally, I think she just needs a chance to show a bit of edge," concluded Katie Harvey. "In NXT, she had the chance to work longer matches, and she's fantastic at shifting the tone from playful Bayley to business Bayley.

"Playful Bayley all the time can be seen as naive and harder to root for. You never root for the person who runs up the stairs in a horror movie."

**"In NXT, she had the chance to work longer matches, and she's fantastic at shifting the tone from playful Bayley to business Bayley"**



# BRAM I AM

Tom "Bram" Latimer is one of the most controversial wrestlers you could encounter, but he's also greatly respected by many of his peers. Brian Elliott chats to him about his past indiscretions, and how the business has changed in his eyes.

*Tom "Bram" Latimer spoke to FSM just weeks after suffering a devastating injury while wrestling in Italy*



© TONY KNOX

**FSM: It's coincidental that we'd planned to speak for this issue, because you just suffered a bad injury in Italy. What exactly happened?**

**Bram:** It was me and Jimmy [Havoc] in one of these stupid little hardcore matches. It would've been absolutely fine... (pauses) It was a dead easy match because it was like a theme park, and we were next to a river rapid ride, so we had a spot where we were gonna brawl and take the fall into the ride, but obviously we never even got to that point. But I just took a hip toss onto a folding chair. I've done that before, but it was always a metal one, and I guess they can't get a hold of anything normal there - it's not the kind of table that we want, and it wasn't the kind of chairs that we want, and their thumbtacks were the ones with the plastic on the end - so I basically took a fall on that and it exploded into my arsehole and gooch.

**So it wasn't just the flesh of your backside - you actually tore your anus?**

Yeah. I've got a stitch hanging out of my arse now.

**So basically the X-Pac injury?**

More or less. It was carved up everywhere. I was there (in hospital) for a week; I had to discharge myself and get the hell out of there because I kind of just lived there forever. It was horrible.

**Were you insured for any of that?**

I was worrying as well, as I don't even have [insurance] in the States, which I should. If I get hurt, I don't give a damn if [promoters] think I'm going to pay for it myself - no, that's not gonna happen. But I'd never even thought about it, and then I was sat in the hospital and I asked the nurse, "Is it an insurance thing here?" and they were like, "No, don't worry about it." I was thinking, "I bet they're going to try and hit me with something when I try and leave - that's maybe why they don't want me to leave." But apparently it's like the NHS. It was terrible, but at least it was free.

**To circle back a bit in your career, did you have to try out before you went to FCW?**

Oh yeah - I'd been trying out from early-2005 until 2010. I think I had a year when I just thought, "Fuck it! I quit wrestling! I hate it. I'm never going to get signed." I was there when Drew [McIntyre], Wade [Barrett], and Sheamus all got signed, and I just never could



*Ashley Fliehr – better known as Charlotte – credits her ex-husband for teaching her about the realities of wrestling*

seem to get my break, ever. So I think I did quit for a year before getting back into it and trying out again. Five years is a long time to be told no, or nothing, so you thought maybe it was never gonna happen.

### **Can you pinpoint a moment or change after which you did get signed?**

For one, I'd just turned 18 when I first tried out, and I still didn't know how to wrestle, or how to talk to people. I remember [Head of Talent Relations] Johnny Ace pulled me aside, and I was shitting myself. He said, "Come on then, kid, tell me what you've done [in wrestling] and where you've been", thinking that I'd been wrestling all around the world, and I hadn't done anything. I could barely even get my words out, I was so nervous, and eventually he looked at me in disgust and said, "Go and stand at the back of the room." I thought, "Well, I just fucked that up!"

They'd make us do matches on the fly and stuff, and all of the guys there would sort of have a pre-planned match anyway, which was all highspots and moonsaults and all that kind of bullshit – that's all we'd do, thinking it was the coolest thing, when they didn't want to see that. We were all rather young, and I started to get into better shape and everything, and I think that helped.

When I got hired, it was at the same time as Rampage [Brown] and Martin Stone, so being in the ring with those guys, they're going to make me look good, so they probably had a hand in getting me hired, because at least I looked the part and they were able to get me through something solid.

### **What was the adjustment like to living in Orlando? I imagine life was totally different from Chesterfield.**

It was brutal at first. Me and Olly (Rampage Brown) got there, and luckily Barri ("Mason Ryan" Griffiths) already had a house there – PJ Black was living there, and so was Kelly Kelly, but they buggered off once we came – he had been there for a year, and he took us to get our social security number and babied us until we could walk on our own. So if it wasn't for him, it'd would've sucked: not knowing, not driving, no-one really wanting to help you, so I think we'd have had a tough time if Barri hadn't already been there.

### **Is it easy to get into trouble in a place like Orlando, when you're isolated like that?**

I was actually pretty good for a long time. Everyone thought I was really [well-behaved] before I went to the States, because I was so focused on becoming a good wrestler and having a good body, but when you finally get there you realise, "Oh, this is not what I thought it was gonna be; these people are horrible, this place sucks, the money's the shits."

It was only once I started feeling settled, in a better position, that drink and all these sorts of things started coming in, because it was miserable. Especially with drug testing and everything else, there isn't any other escape other than to be able to have a drink after the show. I'm not the best at handling my beer, and all my arrests have generally been associated with beer – I can drink a lot of it, but it doesn't do me any favours.

At some point it would've happened; I'd have been fired for fucking up that way.



© TONY KNOX

### **So what exactly did happen in the incident that led to your firing from FCW?**

Me and Jinder [Mahal] ended up out, and I'd just got my driver's licence. I ended up thinking I'd be able to drive these girls' car, and I was driving around without the headlights on and everything, so I got pulled over. Luckily, I never got charged with it, but I was nearly fired then after only being there for a couple of weeks. Apparently they went to Vince [McMahon] and asked him, and he said, "I don't care", so they decided to keep me.

The second one, we were out, me and Ryan (Parameter, aka Konnor of The Ascension), Ashley (Fliehr, aka Charlotte Flair), and Joel (Redman, aka Oliver Grey), and somehow we all got split up. I ended up drinking a lot of Four Horsemen (a mix of four different whiskies) so I was charging around, apparently, and I apparently ended up pushing a cop and running away, and then jumping over a car and getting tazed in mid-air. Ryan found out later I had the fifth best taze in St. Pete (St. Petersburg, Florida) history. If I'd have got done for that, it was five years in jail, and it's a deportable offence, so WWE, the second that happened, wiped their hands of me, and they left me in a really funny position with it, too, because they, not giving me time to work through it –

*Bram takes a boot from WWE UK's Joseph Conners during a June match for TNT Wrestling*

**"I'm not the best at handling my beer, and all my arrests have generally been associated with beer – I can drink a lot of it, but it doesn't do me any favours"**



*Bram recently got to grips with one of indie wrestling's hottest properties, Matt Riddle*

because again I never got charged for it - just got rid of me, which then hurt me because I had to leave the country, but how can I leave the country if I'm going through an investigation?

They almost put me in the position where I might have become a fugitive if I'd left, so it was a lot more detailed than you think.

**And you didn't end up getting charged that second time, either?**

No, because I ended up getting into a PTI programme (Pretrial Intervention Programme). That happened with my last arrest, too, so technically I've been arrested for all these things, but I've not done 'em.

**I'm sure you saw your release coming, but what actually happened that day? Did Bill DeMott give you the news, or John Laurinaitis?**

It was Bill. I think when I first got out of jail I rang or spoke to Bill, and he said, "Don't worry. Hang in there; it'll be all right." They were like, "We're just going to leave you at home", and then another day would pass, and another day would pass, and I'd hear nothing,

and I'd be like, "What's going on?" and they'd tell me not to worry. I think I was just headed to the gym and I got a call phone from (Senior Director of Talent Development) Canyon [Ceman]. I was Canyon's first fire. Me and Canyon got on really well, to be honest, so he was a bit upset about it, and when I was saying, "What can I do?" he even said, "Go to TNA. Go and make a name for yourself. Do whatever you've gotta do." To be honest, as ignorant as I am, I thought, "I'll be all right. They won't fire me." But when they did, it kinda fucked me up a little bit.

**Bill is a guy who's very polarising. His coaching methods have been questioned, that "drill sergeant" style, but that must be what WWE wanted from him if they had him in that position.**  
Oh, definitely.

**It's interesting to me to know about his coaching methods, and what some people thought about them, but also get the impression from you that he'd have your back.**

I think he did. Essentially, it was all over his head, he had no say who comes and goes, and no-one's going to stick their neck out that much for you because everyone's so worried and scared about protecting their own job,

As far as his training, once you figured him out, he was great. All the people who came out and starting burying Bill, saying he would do this and do that, these guys are all bottom-dwellers who weren't gonna go anywhere anyway. They saw the writing on the wall, so they were the ones kicking off about Bill. He was definitely picked on and group-targeted, but then saying that, maybe if I wasn't a Bill guy, maybe I'd have a different outlook on it.

**Did you meet Ashley at NXT?**

I might have been there about a year-and-a-half, and by that point I was very grizzled; I'd seen a lot of people come and go. Even at that point, I'm one of the veterans there, so when anybody came in like that, you can't help it, and you think, "Oh, fuck these people." So when she came in, I thought, "Oh fuck!" She was clueless, but only because she didn't know [anything about wrestling]. Her promo was terrible. Obviously, she grew on me later on, and she's like a completely different person; from how she came in, being naïve to the politics, to what she is now, it's night and day. It's amazing. She picked up everything so quick, too.

**What happened before your recent tour with NOAH (when Bram was sent home after being photographed lying in a convenience store freezer) seemed like an overreaction - something the Japanese are particularly sensitive about. You'd have thought you'd pissed on their chips, or something.**

That's exactly how they took it. They were going to sue NOAH, and it could've been a big, big thing. I know that when I finally spoke to TNA, they were like, "Oh, don't worry about it - but you have to pay for all the ice cream [in the freezer]." So that was like \$1,500 I had to pay them, because it was far too disgusting that a gaijin was lying on [top of packs of] ice cream.



**This brings up a different point about how people say they want wrestling to be wild and dangerous and cool, but as soon as something as harmless as that happens, it's unacceptable. In that sense, do you feel like you were born a few decades late?**

Yeah, totally.

**You'd have fitted in well in the '70s.**

Yeah, or give me 1999-2002 or whatever. Everything I grew up watching, everything I grew up wanting to be, you can't be now. I'm just so stuck in the past, and I think a lot of us are. It's hard to roll with the times, and I don't want to do what everyone does now, and what everyone does is not what I think pro wrestling is. Don't get me wrong; there are guys who are way better wrestlers than me, but I don't wanna watch gymnastics - it's not my cup of tea.

**Do you get the chance to wrestle your own way in ICW, for example? Can you express yourself there?**

One hundred percent I can express myself the way I want there. There's a few places where I can; any sort of over-18s shows, because even a simple hand gesture now is frowned upon. Even chewing gum is a sin, so it's nice to be able to go to those places where I can be that way.

All these dodgy things that happened to me - back in the day it would've helped my character. Like Sabu - people think he's insane, a crazy bastard. One, Sabu is a sweetheart, and two, he doesn't want to get hurt. He's not out of his mind, but people believed it. There was one time I saw him come out in Japan, and someone grabbed his turban off his head, and he jumps in the crowd and he kicks the crap out of that guy, and people instantly go, "He's insane! Holy shit!" But no, you just can't make him look like a punk; if he'd have walked away from that, he'd have lost his credibility forever.

So I think that all these things [if they happened in a previous era] would've helped me make more money, and get more bookings, but it's just not the same anymore. It's going to hurt me rather than help me.

**Would you like to see more over-18s promotions develop here, then?**

I think we already have that here, but it would be good if there was one in the States. I was talking to Bull Dempsey about this, and he wanted to get his head together with something like ICW in the States, because there isn't anything like that, that also draws regular people like they're going to a rock concert. You're not going to find them anywhere else, because for them it's like going for a night out.

For me, it's more about the States, because it kind of sucks that I have to be here (England) so much because I can't make a decent living out in the States. There are about 10 indie guys in the States that get to do everything, and get everywhere, and unless you're one of those 10, it won't work for you.

**It is strange, because you've been on TV for TNA recently, and yet I still don't think people understand your style, and who you are.**

I agree. I don't know what that boils down to; maybe it's what people read, or that they see me doing this

one thing at a show, and at another show I'm doing a kids thing, I don't know.

**You don't strike me as the kind of person who'll do three Canadian Destroyers every match just to get over with that kind of audience.**

(laughs) Right! But that's essentially what you have to do now, to a degree. I wrestled Matt Riddle the other day, and I'd never done a Canadian Destroyer or taken one, but he said he'd like me to do it, and I thought, "Fuck it, why not?" I wrestled that style of match with him, and I did really feel like, "This is cool!" but it also felt like the reaction I'd get doing a hardcore match, hitting someone in the face or something - there was no story to it, it was just some cool shit. But that's what everyone expects, and it's killing it for all of us. If you're a mark for yourself then you're taking money away from everyone else [in the business].

**A completely off-topic question to finish, but I believe you have a big interest in conspiracy theories. You don't necessarily have to believe it, but do you have a favourite conspiracy theory?**

All the normal big ones, really. The moon landing...

**(interrupts) The moon landing seems like a safe one. What do you think happened with the moon landing?**

Oh, the moon landing's a complete work! I don't think anyone's been, or if they have, they've been told not to come back.

**So how do you think they got the footage of Neil Armstrong and, "One small step for man"? Was it done in a TV studio?**

Oh yeah, of course it is! (laughs) Everything's a conspiracy!

"Life is a work," Dr. Tom [Prichard] told me at developmental. "Life is a work."

And I completely believe it.

**"Everything I grew up watching, everything I grew up wanting to be, you can't be now"**



# NAYLOR'S NOTEPAD

TWENTY YEARS AFTER THE BORN TO BE WIRED MATCH THE LIKES OF WHICH MAY NEVER BE SEEN AGAIN, **ROB NAYLOR** PENS HIS MEMORIES OF THE MAN WHO TOOK THE 1990S  
BY STORM, SABU.

I'd seen the Great Muta. I'd seen Jushin "Thunder" Liger. But in the fall of 1993, I saw my first footage of Sabu.

From that point onward, everything had changed.

There's no doubt about it – I *love* pro wrestling. Since the first time I saw it in 1985, it became my complete obsession. I'd watched all the names throughout the wrestling world for nearly a decade before I'd even come across Sabu, but he was one of several wrestlers about whom I was completely enamored, not just in following his career, but as in paying money both for VHS tapes and to see him wrestle live.

The first time I saw Sabu was in an Apter mag. There he was with a completely wild look on his face – a bloody mess draped in barbed wire. I'd seen numerous gory photos of wrestlers over the years, so this MC Hammer pants-wearing descendent of the original Sheik didn't necessarily make a mark on me upon first sight, but when word got about that there was a guy who'd debuted in Eastern Championship Wrestling who was so wild, so crazy, so death-

defying that he scared children and had become *the* star of what was emerging as the hardcore wrestling fan's favorite promotion, I knew I had to seek out some tape.

Thus, I went to the readers pages of the Wrestling Observer newsletter, and had tape lists sent to me from other wrestling fans, and it seemed like everyone out there had *The Best Of Sabu* available. I picked up a particular compilation (the title of the tape slips my mind – likely *Breaking Tables* or something similar) and it was the greatest \$20 I'd ever spent. The tape opened with grainy, ghostly third generation footage of an outdoor stadium show in Japan where Sabu and The Sheik were wrestling Dr. Luther and Dr. Hannibal. Sabu did a somersault plancha over the ropes, which at the time was a gnarly move on its own. But then I saw him place his opposition on a table on the outside, climb to the top and hit a moonsault, and in getting such great distance he just kneed the fuck out of his opponent's face before crashing and burning to the floor. It was, by far, the craziest thing I'd ever seen in pro wrestling to that point, and *then* he placed thick, unbreakable tables in the ring and hit moonsaults and legdrops on them, bouncing off with force and writhing in pain thereafter.

My jaw was on the floor, in awe of what I'd seen, and I hit rewind at least 10 times.

Also on the same tape was a match featuring Sabu against The Lightning Kid (Sean Waltman). By the time I saw this match, the Kid was The 1-2-3 Kid in the WWF, and a big star and favorite of mine. This was a dream match to me, and it delivered huge. In this match there were about 20 things I'd never seen before, but the one that stands out the most was when Sabu hit a sunset flip into a powerbomb onto the Kid from *inside* the ring to the floor, which was just flat-out crazy, and an unheard of spot.

Sabu's ECW debut against Taz was also on the tape; it was the reason I'd sought it out to begin with. It was a batshit crazy match that doesn't hold up now, but in a vacuum was so nutty to watch, with busted tables, suplexes all over the place, huge dives to the floor, brawling in the crowd before it was a staple of wrestling, and more. It was a throwaway match between two debuting men who would, four years later, headline the first ECW pay-per-view.



“Then Sabu placed thick, unbreakable tables in the ring and hit moonsaults and legdrops on them, bouncing off with force and writhing in pain thereafter”

© GEORGE TAHINOS



Two of the greatest daredevils of their generation, Sabu and Hayabusa, pose for this photograph

Rob Naylor is a former WWE Creative Assistant at developmental territory NXT, and is a colour commentator at EVOLVE and SHINE Wrestling. He is a lifelong student of pro wrestling who counts "Raging Bull" Manny Fernandez as his favourite wrestler.



Another initial Sabu match I saw was a Minnesota bout against Jerry Lynn. This had the infamous “Jesus Christ!” commentary call from Mick Karch after a Liger Bomb from Lynn while he and Sabu stood on a table.

I have vivid memories from all of the early Sabu matches. There were also many with Al Snow at the time, who was the “in” wrestler based on so many good matches with Sabu, and also a showdown in ECW with Chris Benoit. But Snow was doing springboards like Sabu did, and it became a “Can you top this?” competition between the two, which yielded many memorable performances.

## OVER THE TOP

Of course, the man who really put Sabu over the top with hardcore fans and critics alike was Terry Funk. Sabu would trade the ECW title with Funk a time or two, and he, Funk, and Shane Douglas had the infamous *The Night The Line Was Crossed* Triangle match draw that is historical. The Funk versus Sabu match I recall most was never aired: it was a WWN event at the Manhattan Center for Jim Crockett’s never-to-debut promotion, but what a match they had in front of a raucous crowd! I must’ve watched the bootleg of it 10 times.

You can’t mention the hardcore opposition of Sabu without bringing up the name Cactus Jack. In 1994, the idea of a Sabu versus Cactus match was every fan’s dream. The match happened the night of the OJ Simpson police chase, ultimately failed to sell out the ECW Arena, and even more shockingly was not the Match of the Century that everyone had seen in their minds.

Luckily for me, they’d knock it out of the park four months later in Hamburg, Pennsylvania. One of the most memorable live experiences of my entire life was watching Sabu versus Cactus in the famed building that housed so many WWF TV tapings a decade earlier. This was a match that ultimately became known as the “beer bottle” match, with Sabu trying to break a real bottle over Cactus’ head at least five times before it finally shattered and he picked up the win. Prior to that act, an even sicker moment saw Sabu go to hit an Asai moonsault, only to miss and strike the guardrail in a move that surely cracked some ribs.

I’ll never forget how I left the building as buzzed as I did that evening.

Nineteen ninety five brought a ton more exciting moments: the infamous “Fuck Sabu!” night in ECW on April 8, when he no-showed to wrestle in Japan; debuting for New Japan Pro Wrestling and facing Black Tiger (Eddy Guerrero) and Koji Kanemoto in major TV matches; and getting shocking amounts of mainstream exposure by showing up on the first *Nitro* in a vignette and in subsequent matches against the likes of Alex Wright and Mr. JL (Jerry Lynn).

Typically, the action spilt to the floor when Sabu faced Ultraman in January 1995



Sabu had a huge cult following in the mid-’90s, and he slowly became the most imitated wrestler in the game. In 1996, he returned to ECW, and match after match and rivalry after rivalry saw his legend only grow. He had numerous classics against Rob Van Dam, Too Cold Scorpio, and Mikey Whipwreck – bona fide must-see bouts that saw athletic boundaries surpassed. The RVD bout from *A Matter Of Respect*, the Scorpio match from *CyberSlam*, and the Mikey encounter from a random Allentown TV taping all stand the test of time.

Nineteen ninety six also brought the start of a feud that was chock-full of insanity, as Sabu and RVD teamed against The Eliminators. These were car crash, highspot-style bouts that were not everyone’s cup of tea, but I know I couldn’t ever turn away from the screen when they were facing off. Their *November To Remember* match remains a favorite.

## BORN TO BE WIRED

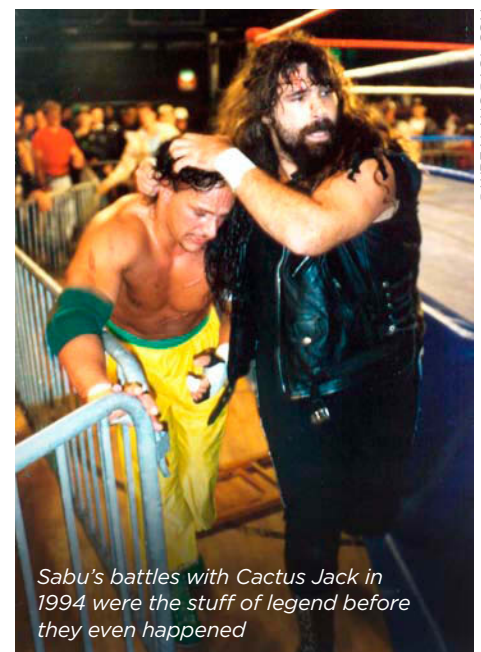
On August 9 – which happens to be my birthday – it’ll have been 20 years since one of the most infamous matches in not just ECW history, but *wrestling* history: the *Born To Be Wired* main event between Sabu and Terry Funk. Even 20 years later, I’m not sure if I’ve cringed as much watching a match as I did with this one. Barbed wire matches are inherently violent spectacles, but you put a “middle aged and crazy” Funk and a man with such little regard for his own safety in a barbed wire enclosure, and you’ve got a recipe for disaster, but also great excitement.

Re-watching this match for this column, it’s crazy how Sabu threw caution to the wind numerous times, running his body full force into the wire. Obviously the most famous moment of these was when he missed the Air Sabu off the chair, and went careening into the corner, slicing his arm to the point you actually see Sabu with a

look of fear on his face, which means the wound must have been enough to send a normal person into blind panic.

If I recall correctly, Paul Heyman has said he wishes he’d never booked this particular match, and that it went far beyond what any wrestling bout should do, as the element of danger was just too high. Yet, it’s also one of the most discussed ECW matches ever, even though it wasn’t on pay-per-view or a high-profile televised card, but was merely a home video release. As it happens, *Born To Be Wired*, as a whole, blew away *Hardcore Heaven* on pay-per-view a couple of weeks later.

Sabu was king of the ECW castle for a short time during the summer of 1997, and as a fan, I couldn’t have been happier. Maybe you can recreate the feeling by checking out his prime years of 1992-1997, when he was *the* wrestler you couldn’t take your eyes off.



Sabu’s battles with Cactus Jack in 1994 were the stuff of legend before they even happened



# NAITO FEVER

Tetsuya Naito was one of the stand-out in-ring performers in New Japan, but it never seemed quite enough. As Alan Counihan reports, however, he has found his calling as the leader of Los Ingobernables de Japón, arguably the finest faction in all of pro wrestling.



*The more dismissive Tetsuya Naito appears to be, the more his popularity grows with New Japan fans*

On August 11, 2013 at Tokyo's Sumo Hall, confetti filled the ring as the greatest G1 Climax in history came to its conclusion. After two weeks of incredible action, the man who stood tall in the ring with the historic tournament trophy in his clutches was "The Stardust Genius" Tetsuya Naito.

It had to be an incredibly happy moment for the 31-year-old. He had made his return that summer after nearly a year on the shelf following major knee surgery. The G1 final victory over company ace Hiroshi Tanahashi was confirmation that, despite his long convalescence, the company still viewed him as a major player, and someone who could main event at the Tokyo Dome.

Yet, four years later, Naito's Tokyo Dome main event has continued to allude him. The booking of the grappler in the months that followed his G1 victory was arguably one of the only examples of a major misstep in New Japan creative during its current boom; Naito was placed in programmes with Masato Tanaka and Yujiro Takahashi that were designed to put him over strong ahead of his IWGP heavyweight title shot at *Wrestle Kingdom*, but instead had the opposite effect.

He was, in fact, cooled off so much over the final quarter of the year that New Japan felt the need to



*When Takaaki Watanabe returned to New Japan in 2015, he was known as EVIL*

do something unprecedented. A fan vote was thus held to determine whether Naito versus Kazuchika Okada for the IWGP heavyweight title or the Intercontinental title match pitting Hiroshi Tanahashi against Shinsuke Nakamura would be the main event on January 4, 2014. The crowd support was strongly in favour of the old guard, leaving Okada and Naito to settle for the semi-main event position.



It was a crushing blow to both men, and while Okada was able to dust off the smear, Naito seemed unable to shake the vibe that he had received the push of a lifetime, only for it to fail.

In the year-and-a-half that followed, Naito had plenty of strong matches, but he was someone who pretty much every New Japan fan had written off at the main event level. Certainly, he seemed firmly behind Okada, Tanahashi, Nakamura, AJ Styles, Kota Ibushi, and arguably even Katsuyori Shibata and Hirooki Goto in the pecking order. At the 2015 Dome show, he was used to put over Styles in what was a very good match, but not one that made Naito look like any kind of superstar.

Unsurprisingly, crowd reactions to Naito were at best mixed in the months that followed. He needed to get away from them, and the fans needed a break from him, too. He was going nowhere fast on home soil, so a trip abroad was just what the doctor ordered, and having done well in Mexico as part of his learning excursion, Naito going back there for a little while was a no-brainer.

It was exactly the type of move that was the making of Shinsuke Nakamura, and it would be what did the trick for Tetsuya Naito, too.

## A CHANGE OF SCENARIO

At the time in CMLL, there were a group of wrestlers known as Los Ingobernables. There is no direct translation from the Spanish term, but essentially it means guys that won't be controlled - ingovernable, if you will. The group's core members were Rush, La Sombra, and La Mascara. In Mexico - particularly in CMLL, in which tradition is so strong - young wrestlers often have a hard time breaking through and gaining full acceptance from fans and promoters alike, and in that company, legends like Atlantis and Ultimo Guerrero were such safe, established figures at the top of the card that it blocked Rush and Sombra from main events. Both were given babyface pushes, and were rejected to a degree.

Given this, it's not surprising that Naito would bond with Los Ingobernables both on screen and off. As they began to gain success in Mexico by essentially acting like they didn't care about fan approval or the company itself, they started to become quite a phenomenon: Los Ingobernables merchandise became the prevalent attire for fans at Arena Mexico on Friday nights, and the more that Rush, Sombra, and Mascara shunned the fans, the more they were idolised.

All of a sudden, Tetsuya Naito and New Japan could see how to turn his career around.

At *Dominion 2015* in Osaka (the city that had given Naito the hardest time), the same *Stardust Genius* music hit, but a very different Tetsuya Naito walked out for his mid-card tag match. Seemingly completely disinterested by everything that was going on around him, Naito abandoned his partner and casually walked backstage. It was bizarre, but also his most interesting storyline move in years.

Naito would saunter through the G1 with the same attitude on display, but with one key talent that he was able to harness straight away: he could work this gimmick, and still maintain a high level of match quality. To be able to do this during the G1, when



*Rather than diluting it, BUSHI only added to Los Ingobernables de Japon's chemistry*

match quality is at it's most important, showed that New Japan was onto a winner with the new persona.

## UNA HERMOSA PAREJA

Naito's act really began to gain some steam heading into the winter months, and when he started talking about a "pareja" (literal translation: couple) who would be joining him in Japan, everyone assumed that either Rush or Sombra were on there way in. Nobody, however, envisioned that New Japan had much bigger plans for the Los Ingobernables brand, other than to just have it represented by Naito wearing its merchandise. The idea was something with far more potential: a very specific Japanese version of the faction that could stand on its own merits. It's not given the attention it deserves historically, but in the late-1990s, nWo Japan was a phenomenon in that country, and helped make Masahiro Chono, The Great Muta, and their teammates even bigger stars.

It would be much the same for Los Ingobernables de Japón.

When former New Japan young lion Takaaki Watanabe returned at *Power Struggle 2015* under the name EVIL and placed himself with Naito, Los Ingobernables de Japón was born. The "pareja" that Naito spoke of wasn't Rush or Sombra, but rather someone from the New Japan system whom the company could bring back into the fold with an immediate platform of credibility. The group wasn't going to close ranks with EVIL, however, as Naito proclaimed there was another pareja on the horizon, and it wouldn't be long until his identity was revealed.

Animal Hamiguchi is a name that is known to long-time Japanese wrestling fans, primarily for his work alongside Riki Choshu during the hugely successful 1980s boom in both New Japan and All Japan. A rock solid competitor inside the ring who always conveyed the intensity that the wars of the decade demanded, Hamiguchi is less known but

**“Naito abandoned his partner and casually walked to the back. It was bizarre, but also his most interesting storyline move in years.”**

When SANADA helped Naito with the IWGP title, he was barely recognisable from his time in TNA



every bit as relevant for his work as a trainer in the 1990s and 2000s. His dojo worked almost like a feeder group for many promotions, as he would take talented athletes and get them well drilled in the basics of professional wrestling before they would join an established promotion. His students included Satoshi Kojima, Shinjiro Ohtani, Shingo Takagi, Yoshihiro Tajiri, and Tomoaki Honma, and there were dozens of other who would go on to some form of notoriety in the business. Two of those were Naito and EVIL, and another was the next man to join Los Ingobrnables de Japón, and form the original trio that lead the group into 2016: former All Japan junior-heavyweight BUSHI.

The chemistry that the trio showed in the early months of the year was astounding, as they clicked better than anyone could have expected without knowing of their bond from the Hamiguchi gym. The sum of the parts was good, but the whole was *great*: Naito was the cock-sure leader in total control of every situation he found himself in, BUSHI was the arrogant, mouthy little guy who stirred the pot, and EVIL was the silent, brooding muscle. As characters they complemented each other both in and out of the ring.

The matches pitting LIJ against members of Okada's CHAOS faction were a home run every time, but particularly at Korakuen Hall.

## THE NIGHT LIJ RULED RYOGOKU

As an act and as a brand, Los Ingobrnables de Japón caught fire in the lead in up *Invasion Attack 2016* on April 10 at Sumo Hall. The feud with CHAOS was a major hit, and Naito's upcoming challenge for Okada's title felt like a major confrontation. Naito had won the New Japan Cup on March 12 defeating one of Okada's team-mates in every round. His matches

were fantastic, and he was being treated like a star by both the company and the fans. But Naito had learnt from his pals in Mexico that he would have to remain at arms' length from the fans embrace, at least for a while; it was his dismissive, aloof attitude that got him over, and it was that that would keep him over.

In the media, Naito played his character to perfection. He took shots at New Japan and its hand-picked face of the company. He spoke out defiantly against management with no fear of repercussion – something that is far less common in Japanese culture than in the Western world – making him the coolest guy on the scene to a young generation of fans. LIJ merchandise was flying off the stands, and on April 10, Tokyo's JR train line from the Tokyo Dome to Ryogoku was awash with the group's shirts and hats. Naito, EVIL, and BUSHI had donned the cover of the weekly wrestling magazines leading up to the show, and were the hot act.

"Look, if you don't say what's on your mind, nothing gets done," Naito proclaimed on New Japan television in March 2016. "I say what I feel because keeping it in does no good."

"A lot's changed; I have the Ingobrnables with me, and a lot of people are booing me," he added. "But fundamentally, I'm still myself. My fundamentals aren't different. Am I happy being booed? No, frankly. Everyone likes adulation, likes being cheered. But I'm speaking my mind, putting myself out there. You see [Hirooki] Goto in Osaka get booed, and say after, 'I want to disappear.' How little depth of character does that show? How shallow is he?"

In the very building in which he won the 2013 G1, Naito would topple Okada to the delight of the 11,000 fans in attendance. The newest member of his faction would debut in New Japan that night, too, with SANADA – who was almost unrecognisable from his run in TNA – interfering in the match to help Naito win. Once again the new addition to the team was not chosen at random, as SANADA was BUSHI's classmate when they broke into All Japan together in 2007. As the show closed out, all four LIJ members stood tall, with Naito on the microphone running through his newly established catchphrases. The crowd chanted along with every word, completely wrapped up in the group and the new title-holder.

Somewhat surprisingly, Naito's reign was not an overly long one. He had just one successful defence (a high-end Match of the Year epic against Tomohiro Ishii on May 3) before dropping it back to Okada in Osaka-jo Hall on June 19. Still, in an era when only the elite of New Japan hold the IWGP heavyweight title, his reign was a statement; since January 2011, only four men have held that belt, and Naito is one of them. The reign gave him credibility, and it absolutely made him a bigger star to the public.

Following an impressive G1 Climax that will be remembered in large part for the epic August 13 Naito versus Kenny Omega match in Sumo Hall, Naito would set his sights on a new target to give him direction heading into *Wrestle Kingdom*. The IWGP Intercontinental title became a lucrative prize in the epic reigns of Shinsuke Nakamura, and in 2016 the belt was defended admirably by powerful gaijin Michael Elgin. The Canadian will go down as one of Naito's greatest opponents; some wrestlers were



just meant to fight each other, and that's clearly the case with them. Naito has a knack for making Elgin's impressive power moves look even more brutal than usual, and their G1 match (July 24), Naito's title win (September 25), and his successful defence in one of 2017's best matches at *New Beginning* (February 11) form a trilogy that stands up against the elite rivalries in wrestling history.

Naito has won all three bouts, with "Big Mike" coming a little closer on each occasion, telling the story that Naito just about has his number.

If Elgin eventually gets that big win, though, it will be a great sporting moment.

## MASTERS AND STUDENTS

Los Ingobernables de Japón as a unit was really ticking along nicely coming into the New Year. There didn't seem much of a need to mess with the formula, as all three of Naito's team-mates came into their own, and the four-man group was credible in holding its own against some of New Japan's bigger factions. However, there was someone on his way back home who would prove to be the most ideal complement as the fifth man.

When Naito was a main trainer in the New Japan dojo in his younger years, one of his closest protégés was a youngster named Hiromu Takahashi. Spreading his wings from the camps of Britain to Reseda, California with an impactful stint in Arena Mexico in between, Takahashi's learning excursion was a colourful one. That's also the perfect adjective to describe his reappearance in New Japan, as he confronted KUSHIDA in November as the newly christened "Ticking Timebomb". Clad in his outrageous punk-rock inspired jacket, Hiromu was eye-catching from the off, but he backed up all of the flash once he started wrestling again. From his junior-heavyweight title-winning performance at the Dome to his June 11 loss to KUSHIDA in his fourth defence, he left a trail of jaws on the floor with a death-defying style that's both terrified and enthralled viewers.

As the lovable lunatic that is loyal to his trainer, Hiromu has gained huge popularity. His bond with Naito and the warmth that is reciprocated by the usually cold LIJ leader have really allowed fans to grow even closer to the group, as it is acknowledged that they are close-knit. The addition of their new mascot in Hiromu's new curiously named cat, Daryl, is certainly not making the group any less endearing.

For Naito personally, 2017 has been about his efforts to surpass his mentor, the great Hiroshi Tanahashi, even if he claimed he didn't care for Tanahashi's Intercontinental championship. Their Tokyo Dome match for the belt was a masterclass in storytelling; the New Japan legend fought with everything he had to combat the younger athlete, but Naito had too much for him, and picked up a career-defining win. A post-match gesture of Naito placing his fist to Tanahashi's heart was both a sign of respect and also a signal that he felt he had driven the stake through the chest of Tanahashi's career as a top of the card performer.

You just can't count "The Ace Of The Universe" out, though, and he spent the next six months working himself back into contention for a huge re-match at what will go down as one of the most



*Hiromu Takahashi has been a whirlwind of excitement since his return to the promotion*

famous New Japan shows ever: *Dominion 2017*. Another great tale was weaved between the two wrestling geniuses, and this time a motivated Tanahashi forced his Tokyo Dome conqueror into the most reluctant of submissions.

The two great rivals will lock horns for the third time this year during the G1 Climax, and that match may well tell us exactly where Tetsuya Naito goes from here. Many feel his dropping of the Intercontinental title was to facilitate a G1 victory and come full circle on his *Wrestle Kingdom* IWGP heavyweight title contendership. Only this time, unlike in 2014, it will be in the main event, as Naito challenges Okada with all eyes on New Japan's brightest homegrown stars.

Until then, as the LIJ leader loves to tell us, "Tranquilo..."

**“Takahashi left a trail of jaws on the floor with a death-defying style that's both terrified and enthralled viewers”**



# THE CORNETTE CONCLUSION

OTHER TERRITORIES MAY HAVE HAD THEIR TRADITIONS, BUT TO **JIM CORNETTE** IN SMOKY MOUNTAIN WRESTLING, THE MONTH OF AUGUST WAS AS SPECIAL AS ANYTHING. THIS MONTH, HE RECALLS THE PLAN TO MAKE KNOXVILLE HIS BASE TOWN, AND THE STRUGGLE IT TOOK TO MAKE IT.

I've written numerous times in the past about the great "seasons" of wrestling during the territory days – the holiday spectaculars of Thanksgiving and Christmas, the *Great American Bash* yours of July et cetera – but one that's very special to my heart is the month of August. I don't know that any of the classic territories considered August their best month, but through a series of random events, it became a lifesaver for me in Smoky Mountain Wrestling in the 1990s. Not only did three of the four biggest gates SMW ever drew all take place in August, but my little throwback territory, against all odds, drew three of the biggest non-WWF or WCW crowds of the decade in the U.S., two of those occurring in August.

Why that month? Well, it's complicated.

In the U.S. territories, geographical differences played a big part in determining the good business seasons. In the South, the summertime was always the "hot" time of year for business – kids are out of school, parents have vacation days, the weather nears 90 or 100°F, causing people to want to enjoy air-conditioned arenas – and the Southern territories always planned big angles to increase their already strong summer business. In the North, it was totally

reversed. In Verne Gagne's AWA, they barely even ran a summer schedule, plotting all their big programs for wintertime, because in those states, the weather was so cold for most of the year that folks liked to get outside in the summer months, take vacations to the lakes, and not go inside when they didn't have to.

Of course, all that went to shite in the late-1980s when the WWF's national expansion and the chaos WCW was in under the Turner Broadcasting takeover sucked up a lot of the wrestling talent and at the same time killed all the traditions with the demise of the territories. In 1992, SMW's first year of operation, the only other full-time territory with broadcast TV was Memphis Wrestling, which would last until 1997 and need a virtual stake in its heart courtesy of a conman named Larry Burton to die.

But that's another tale. Point is, in 1992, SMW was brand new, and had no traditions. But I knew that, for the good of the future, we couldn't waste any time in establishing some.

## SUMMER SLAM

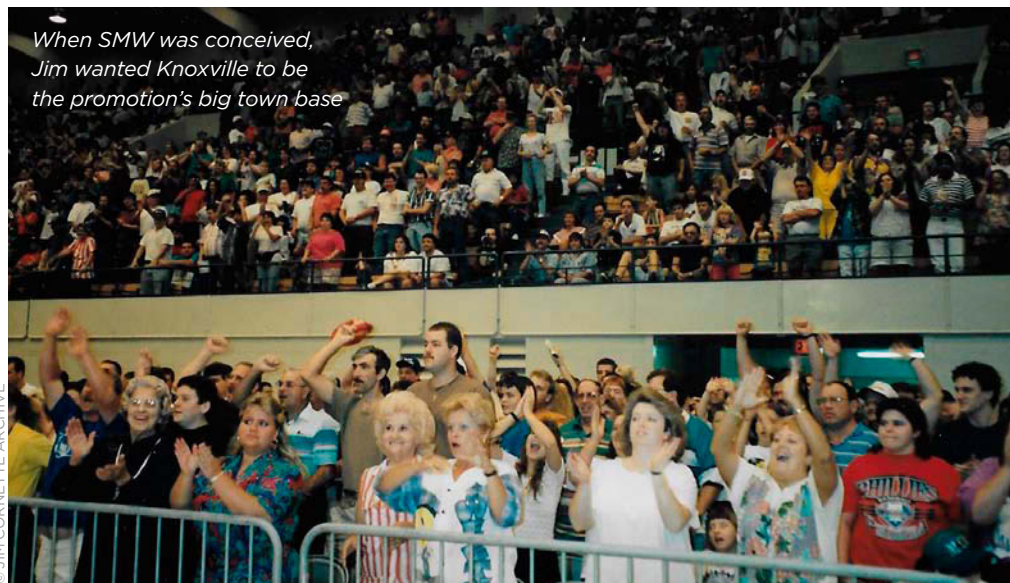
The first big "themed" show we ran was *Volunteer Slam I* on May 22, 1992 at the Knoxville, Tennessee



© TONY KNOX

**“In 1992, Smoky Mountain's first year of operation, the only other full-time territory with broadcast TV was Memphis Wrestling”**

*When SMW was conceived, Jim wanted Knoxville to be the promotion's big town base*



© JIM CORNETTE ARCHIVE

Having worked as a manager, booker, and promoter during his wrestling career, Jim Cornette would be an invaluable columnist even if it were not for his encyclopedic knowledge of the history of the business. You can read more from "The Louisville Lip" at [www.JimCornette.com](http://www.JimCornette.com), where he also sells his personal merchandise, including his new book *Tuesday Night At The Gardens - Pro Wrestling In Louisville*.



*The original Fire On The Mountain pitted the new Fantastics against The Heavenly Bodies*



© JIM CORNETTE ARCHIVE

Civic Coliseum. Knoxville was to be our base, our “big town”, like Memphis was for its territory at the other end of the state. The previous Knoxville promotion, Continental Wrestling, had gone under three years before, and there had been no big promotion in town since, just a few shows a year from WCW or local, outlaw events at small buildings in the outlying areas. We chose May simply because it was a rule of thumb in the territory days that when you got a TV clearance in a market, you ran the TV for at least 12 weeks before running live events in the town. In 1970, Jerry Jarrett had opened Louisville with a stunning six weeks of lead TV time, and lasted 27 years.

Those were simpler times, and a lot of damage had been done to wrestling in the intervening 20 years. If we could have afforded it, we should have run the TV for six to 9 months to build anticipation. Today, the formula would probably be about a year, and that would be iffy. However, going to war with the army we had, since we had been able to clear the local Knoxville FOX network affiliate, WKCH-43, in February 1992, we booked our first monthly date at the Coliseum in May, and I booked a “genesis” card.

In my mind, if people are starting to watch a new wrestling promotion, the most important first chapter in the story is to sell the idea of watching the first champions be crowned. So, the first *Volunteer Slam* – the name “researched” from Charlie Daniels’ hit series of concerts in Tennessee – featured an eight-man, one-night tournament for the SMW heavyweight championship, and the finals of the tournament for the Tag Team titles. Out of a field that included Buddy Landell, Robert Gibson, Tim Horner, Jimmy Golden, Dixie Dy-No-Mite and The Dirty White Boy with manager Ron Wright, “Prime Time” Brian Lee defeated Paul Orndorff in the finals to become the first singles champion by disqualification, therefore necessitating rematches. “Sweet” Stan Lane and “Dr” Tom Prichard defeated Johnny and Davey Rich in the finals of a tag tournament that had been running on TV.

Tournaments are a notoriously hard draw because, past the first round, you can’t advertise any of the matches ahead of time, but it was important to start by educating the fans that the titles were the most important goal. In addition to the weekly TV show, we did local radio advertising, the TV station ran extra spots for us, and we ran a promotion where kids under 12 were admitted for 43 cents with a paid adult. We flooded local media with press releases. Knoxville icon Les Thatcher was there to call the matches for a later video release. On the night of the event, we drew a not disastrous, but certainly disheartening, 984 fans paying \$4,177.00 (remember, tickets were \$8 and \$6, and kids even cheaper).

You gotta start somewhere.

Bear in mind, however, we are speaking 1990s wrestling economics. My partner Sandy Scott had negotiated a wonderful monthly rental fee with the manager of the Coliseum, who remembered the goldmine wrestling had been in years gone by, for a low, flat guarantee versus a percentage. So we paid – for a 5000-plus seat arena, for rent, ticket sellers and takers, 10 police officers, six ushers, Ticketmaster fees, a back door guard, and a stagehand to run a spotlight – the princely sum of \$2,605.64. And when he saw the statement, Sandy made them cut four cops for the next show.

The talent cost was in 1990s economics as well, and all 19 wrestlers, three announcers and three referees on the card were paid a total of \$4,025, with an additional \$688 in transportation and hotel. All in all, counting the \$3,000 we dropped on advertising, we lost about six grand on the show, and eventually made about half of it back on the video release.

It was not a promising start for Knoxville.

## POWER TRIO

The idea for having a big show in August actually originated with Johnson City, Tennessee, about 90 miles Northeast of Knoxville. Johnson City is part of a trio of cities in a close area, joining Kingsport, Tennessee, and Bristol, Virginia, that have a great wrestling history. We cleared the SMW TV show on the NBC affiliate, WCYB-5, in April 1992, and for the duration of SMW’s run it remained our most powerful station, reaching homes in a 150-mile radius over four states. We were to debut at Johnson City’s Freedom Hall in August,



*At Rage In The Cage, Bob Armstrong’s sternum was cracked in an angle with Jim*

© JIM CORNETTE ARCHIVE

The timing was perfect at K-Town Showdown, when Jim faced "Bullet" Bob Armstrong



and by then, with a more impressive talent roster and a more established history, the card I was able to put together was stronger as well.

Trying to get the vibe of a Dusty Rhodes-style *Great American Bash* combined with a Bill Watts-style Mid-South Wrestling "package show", the inaugural *Fire On The Mountain* – "researched" from the great Marshall Tucker Band song – on August 8, 1992 was a critical success and a good indication that we were gaining traction and building interest. We drew 1,617 fans paying \$8,086.00 – about double our Knoxville debut, in a much smaller city. Sandy Scott had a great relationship with the arena staff, so this beautiful, 6,500-seat arena with all personnel and ticket charges ran \$3,100.

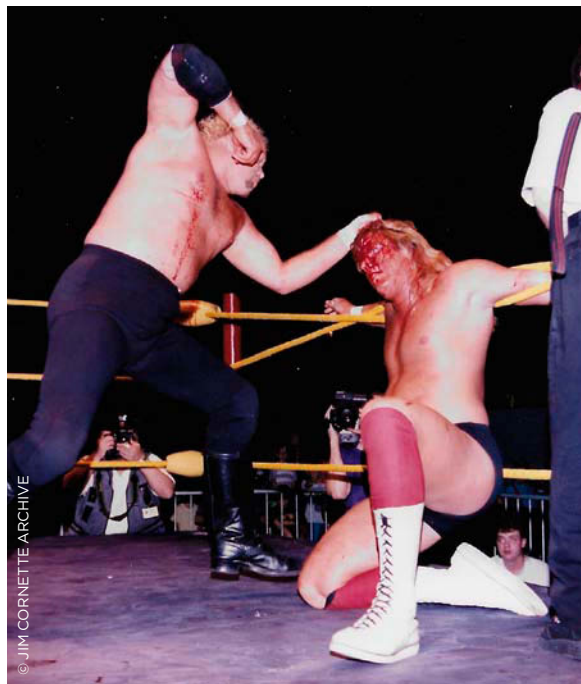
The card was top notch, with Orndorff versus Ronnie Garvin in a Piledriver match; the reunion of Ricky and Robert, The Rock 'n' Roll Express, against Robert Fuller and Jimmy Golden; Brian Lee versus The Dirty White Boy for the SMW title; and The Fantastics (Bobby and Jackie Fulton) against The Heavenly Bodies in a Barbed Wire Cage match for the Tag Team titles, with Commissioner Bob Armstrong the referee. On the undercard was the infamous incident where I fired Buddy Landell, bless him, for singing *Moon River* on the mic while in a Tim Horner submission hold during an I Quit match. With talent and advertising and the home video about the same as Knoxville, we lost very little, and I decided that Johnson City should get the big August show every year.

### MOUNTAIN TIME

Especially after the August event in Knoxville, when a similar line-up to *Fire On The Mountain* (minus The Fantastics, who were in Japan) drew a whopping 461 fans. The area spot shows were taking off: we drew 526 in Pikeville, Kentucky two days after drawing 461 in Knoxville, and the debut in Johnson City showed a lot of interest after four months in the market and six months in business. But Knoxville was a tough nut to crack.

That nut lasted until August 20, 1993. By then, we had drawn bigger houses in Johnson City, Pikeville, and

The Dirty White Boy and Brian Lee lived up to the event's name of Sunday Bloody Sunday



Barbourville, Kentucky, and several other towns than some of our efforts in Knoxville, and we had yet to crack a five-figure house at the Coliseum. My summer 1993 program centered on my rivalry with Commissioner Bob Armstrong, and while I had intended for "Bullet" Bob to return to the ring from day one, I felt we had to wait over a year to pull the trigger on it or it would be wasted. And, as a Knoxville legend, I thought Bob had to suffer his indignity, and gain his revenge, in Knoxville.

We began it on May 9 in Knoxville at *Volunteer Slam II* with the Rage in the Cage match. Brian Lee and The Rock 'n' Roll Express were joined by Fuller and Golden to battle the Bodies, Killer Kyle, Kevin Sullivan, and The Tazmaniac, with Armstrong the referee. After the match, Armstrong was handcuffed to the cage and, while all the heels kept everyone at bay, I smashed him repeatedly with the racket – actually causing him a cracked sternum in the assault. An ambulance was called, and Bob was taken to the hospital where he spent the night, in full view of everyone.

What history doesn't record is that even this famous show only drew 1,131 fans paying \$7,338.

In June, Bob's sons Scott and Steve returned to face the Bodies to gain revenge for him. In July, he returned for six-man tags with me in the ring. Gates picked up everywhere else, but Knoxville lagged. So I hedged my bet: Johnson City would still get the big August show, *Fire On The Mountain II*. The main event would be the Rage In The Cage II, with the Armstrongs and the Rock 'n' Roll against me, the Bodies, and The Bruise Brothers. That event ended up drawing 1,324 fans paying \$9,968.00, better than any of our Knoxville Coliseum shows had done to date.

But Knoxville would get the single match between me and Bob, and I knew the only stipulation I could do on it from the start. I "researched" the money-back guarantee Austin Idol and Jerry Lawler had done in 1987 in Memphis, and applied it to our situation. At the July event, in the six-man tag, I had "accidentally" pinned Bob while we were both knocked out. Afterwards, on TV, he cut one of his incredible, fire and brimstone promos declaring that he had never been so



embarrassed in being “beaten” by me, and that he was going to face me one-on-one on August 20 at the *K-Town Showdown* in a Lumberjack match. I would have four lumberjacks (the Bodies and The Bruise Brothers), and he would have four, his sons and the Rock ‘n’ Roll. Each lumberjack would be armed with a tennis racket. The referee would be The Big Bossman, a man who everyone knew I had a past with, but who was at that point the symbol of law and order.

And, most importantly, if Bob didn’t win the match and send me to the same hospital in the same ambulance that I sent him in, he would refund the money of every man, woman, and child who bought a ticket to see the match.

You can only do this one once in a generation, folks, but if you do it at the right time, it works. After they saw Bob bloody me up and finish me off with two piledrivers and a foot on my chest, the fans stayed half-an-hour to see the ambulance take me away. As a matter of fact, one of the fans actually followed me to the hospital and into the x-ray area, but I digress. We had a great undercard: the four tag teams in an Elimination match; Tracy Smothers versus Brian Lee in a Coal Miner’s Glove match; Big Bossman versus Kevin Sullivan, and others, and it finally paid off, with 2,754 fans paying \$17,962.00.

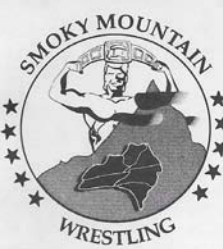
This time, when all was said and done, we made over eight grand that night, and Knoxville started warming up to SMW.




### BE PREPARED

We weren’t really prepared for the next Knoxville breakthrough, although the TV ratings were consistently good and the Coliseum houses began showing life. After drawing 1,880 fans in Knoxville on Christmas Night 1993, the arena didn’t have a good January date, so we decided to come back on Sunday, February 13, 1994. I thought after a break of almost two months in Knoxville, after *Christmas Chaos* but before *Bluegrass Brawl* in April, we could get away with doing a “themed” show and promoting it across all the local TVs. A U2 song happened to be on the radio when I determined that *Sunday Bloody Sunday* would be a cool name for a wrestling card. I stacked the matches up as best I could while daydreaming of a “Superdome” show: for the SMW title, a Tennessee Chain match with The Dirty White Boy versus Brian Lee (Ron Wright and Tammy Fytch in the corners); The Bruise Brothers versus The Moondogs in a cage; Bob Armstrong versus Terry Funk (with yours truly) in a Texas Death match for Bob to regain control of SMW; The Bodies versus The Rock ‘n’ Roll for the Tag Team titles (an added match, with the Bodies facing local UT football heroes Mike and Doug Furnas); and Tracy Smothers facing Chris Candido. That day just happened to be when Lance Storm and Chris Jericho visited SMW with the thought of coming to work there, and the atmosphere sold them.

We hoped it would do well, but that event shattered all previous SMW records, drawing 3,900 fans paying \$31,080.00. We made \$20,000 with one show, and one of my great regrets is that I didn’t plan to shoot a home video that day.

But it proved they would come in big numbers, now we just had to get them back. We did a *Volunteer Slam III* that May, but even with a double main event of Jake Roberts versus The Dirty White Boy for the title and Randy Savage versus Bruiser Bedlam with The Bullet and I in the corners, we only drew 1,945 paying \$15,182.

		<h1>NIGHT OF THE LEGENDS</h1> <p>FRIDAY, AUGUST 5, 1994 • 8:00 P.M. KNOXVILLE CIVIC COLISEUM</p>	
<b>OFFICIAL LINEUP</b>			
COWARD WAVES THE FLAG!			
<b>DORY &amp; TERRY FUNK &amp; BRUISER BEDLAM</b> W/JIM CORNETTE		<b>BOB ARMSTRONG, TRACY SMOTHERS &amp; ROAD WARRIOR HAWK</b> W/RON WRIGHT	
SMOKY MOUNTAIN TITLE			
<b>DIRTY WHITE BOY</b>		<b>FREEBIRD TERRY GORDY</b>	
GRUDGE MATCH			
<b>JIM CORNETTE'S HEAVENLY BODIES</b>		<b>THE THRILLSEEKERS</b>	
SMW TAG TEAM TITLE			
TAMMY FYTCH HANDCUFFED TO RICKY GIBSON			
<b>BRIAN LEE &amp; CHRIS CANDIDO</b>		<b>THE ROCK &amp; ROLL EXPRESS</b>	
LEGENDS TAG MATCH			
<b>RONNIE GARVIN &amp; MONGOLIAN STOMPER</b>		<b>DICK SLATER &amp; BOB ORTON, JR.</b>	
STRONG MAN CHALLENGE			
<b>DOUG FURNAS</b>		<b>KILLER KYLE</b>	
<b>CONAN CHRIS WALKER</b>		<b>RICHARD SLINGER</b>	
<b>PLUS LES THATCHER &amp; PHIL RAINEY HOST</b> THE KNOXVILLE WRESTLING HALL OF FAME INDUCTIONS, WITH THE LEGENDS APPEARING LIVE TONITE!			
READ ABOUT YOUR CHILDHOOD HEROES IN THIS LIMITED EDITION COLLECTOR'S ITEM PROGRAM!			

© JIM CORNETTE ARCHIVE

I saw that the fans seemed happy to come the previous August, so was it the attraction or the season? I decided to give them both in August 1994.

### LEGENDS LIVE ON

Randy Hales had done a *Memphis Memories* tribute show at the Mid-South Coliseum that spring, and I decided to expand on that concept. Not only would I have as many Knoxville legends as possible at the show, but we would do a series of historical videos through the summer. Not only would we have the legends ceremony, but I would stack the card with SMW angles and top name stars and shoot it as a home video as well, this one with a professional TV truck. We’d get a week of our broadcast TV out of the show, just by airing highlights. We would combine it with our second annual SMW Fan Week, where dozens of out of area fans paid to travel with SMW for a week and see our shows. And the legends angle would get us great publicity locally and be fun to do. It was a great concept all around, and I love planning and promoting “big” shows.

The result was the single most favorite show I have ever promoted, *Night Of The Legends* in Knoxville on August 5, 1994. After interest in the history segments had picked up to the point where our last TV show of July did an eight rating locally, we drew a whopping 4,600 paying \$35,120 (\$57,850 today), including 800 or so comps in the arena through

“Even spending \$6,000 for the pro production of the home video, we profited over 15 grand on the Night Of The Legends”

Lance Storm and Chris Jericho memorably worked the Night Of The Legends event



© JIM CORNETTE ARCHIVE

sponsors and advertising trades. The \$15 Golden Circle front row tickets were sold out almost immediately. Even spending \$6,000 for the pro production – a four-camera shoot including Jim Ross on the mike – we profited over 15 grand on the show, and then doubled that over the life of the home video.

In attendance at the Legends ceremony were greats like Ron and Don Wright, Don and Al Greene, Ricky Gibson, “The Angel” Frank Morrell, Corsica Joe, and more. The card was fantastic, with Killer Kyle facing Doug Furnas; Dick Slater and Bob Orton Jr. reprising their classic team against Ronnie Garvin and The Mongolian Stomper in the legends match; Brian Lee and Chris Candido (with Tammy Fytch) battling The Rock ‘n’ Roll Express for the Tag Team titles; The Thrillseekers (Storm and Jericho) facing The Heavenly Bodies in a bloodbath; The Dirty White Boy defending the SMW title against Terry Gordy; and finally, in a Coward Waves The Flag match, Bob Armstrong, Tracy Smothers, and Road Warrior Hawk (with Ron Wright) prevailed over my team of Bruiser Bedlam and the Funks.

It wasn’t just a great night, it was a great week. The following night, August 6, was *Fire On The Mountain III*, and it drew 1,665 paying \$14,849. As a matter of fact, in the first 14 days of August, SMW ran 11 shows, grossing over \$68,000 (\$112,000 today) and selling over 8,600 tickets, in a geographic rectangle about 250 miles by 150 miles. We had a few thousand dollars a month in sponsorships coming in, and Fan Week grossed \$20,000, and profited at least 40% of that.

Things were looking up at this point, but I started wondering how I could equal, much less top, a now-annual tradition of a mega show in Knoxville in August.

## SMW TOUCHES DOWN

Once again, the holiday season and early part of 1995 were good in Knoxville, then things took a turn for the worse, as usual, in late-spring and early-summer. But I came up with my August concept earlier that spring: the name *Super Bowl Of Wrestling* had been used many times, but my theme was that multiple organizations’ titles would be defended. As a matter of fact, the tag line “champions from every major organization” was a slap at WCW and ECW because they were the only ones not represented.

I already had a relationship with the NWA through my friend Dennis Coralluzzo, and booked Dan Severn to defend the NWA World title against Bobby Blaze. The SMW Tag Team titles would be on the line with the first-ever meeting of The Rock ‘n’ Roll Express and Tracy Smothers and The Dirty White Boy, although real-life would get in the way and

Tracy and Tony Anthony would instead face the returning Heavenly Bodies. From Memphis, PG-13 would defend the USWA Tag Team titles against Jackie Fulton and Curtis Thompson, and the USWA title would be on the line between Billy Jack Haynes and Brad Armstrong. Detroit-based Midwest Wrestling had recently put their title on SMW’s Al Snow, so he defended against Marty Jannetty in a classic half-hour wrestling match, and Bullet Bob faced my enforcer The Punisher (later Bull Buchanan).

But it was the two feature matches that put things over the top. Due to my connection with the WWF, I was able to land The Undertaker – who lived three hours away in Nashville – and my friend Paul Bearer to have their first in-ring meeting with masked SMW heel Unabom (later Kane). For the main event, I wanted to promote a WWF World title match, but the champion at the time was Diesel, and I knew that Kevin Nash was not going to put forth the effort to have an SMW quality main event, even if the office booked him and he didn’t talk his way out of it. So I asked for the Intercontinental title instead, then held by Jeff Jarrett, who I knew would have a great match with Buddy Landell.

Fate intervened, though, as right before my show, the WWF planned to switch that belt to Shawn Michaels. So I got Michaels on my card, but had to promote it as the “winner of Jarrett versus Michaels” until the last week. Nevertheless, to his credit, Michaels came and had a barnburner with Buddy, who as a hometown Knoxvillean was starting his babyface turn in this match. The SMW version of *The Super Bowl Of Wrestling* drew 4,287 fans paying \$37,775.00, with another few grand in sponsorships, and was another 20 grand in profit for SMW.

Hard to believe, then, that it was the last major house in Knoxville for SMW. By the end of November, we would shut down. The problems were varied: for every major show, there were a lot more minor ones that either broke even or lost a few grand. The prospects of breaking into new, adjoining TV markets the size of Knoxville and Johnson City to develop more locations for “mega-shows” were getting slimmer, and existing TV production and airtime costs were getting fatter. We had great talent, but were running short on new talent to come in to be difference-makers and/or replace those that got stale. It didn’t seem like wrestling was coming out of its industry-wide slump – even the WWF lost millions that year. I decided to give it up while we could still pay everyone what we owed.

But with the big-show houses we were drawing in Knoxville and Johnson City, in an era when WCW was struggling to put 1,000 fans in the Omni in Atlanta, I always imagine what our houses would’ve been like during the boom period of 1997-2001, when even local indie shows were drawing big, or if we had been able to get TV markets like Asheville, North Carolina or Charleston, West Virginia to develop like Knoxville. They say timing is everything, in wrestling or in life, and we were a little ahead of the curve.

But I still have fond memories of August in SMW, when we put numbers on the board the whole industry had to take notice of. No indie in the U.S. would top numbers like that in small or mid-size markets for years, until OVW started drawing big in the Louisville Gardens in 2000-2001.

I wonder what those two promotions had in common..?



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PARTS UNKNOWN

While certainly not the most famous name, Seamus Dunleavy is as revered a wrestler as anyone who ever emerged from Ireland. John Lister talks to him about a life that had more than its fair share of action, both in and out of the ring.

# Greetings, Grapple Fans

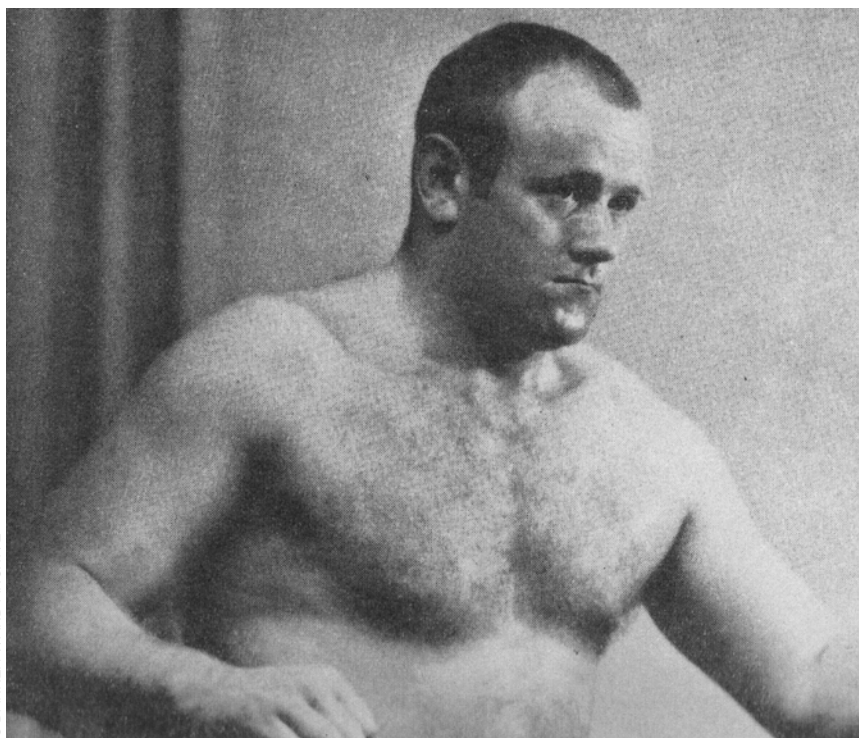
## SEAMUS DUNLEAVY

Growing up in the rural Irish town of Charlestown (current population 914), Seamus Dunleavy followed many of his peers by taking the ferry to Liverpool to find work. He always dreamt of a professional career in the ring, but it was boxing rather than wrestling in which he thought his future lay.

He began training at Duffy's Boxing Club, but soon realised that his stocky frame was not ideally suited to boxing: most opponents of a similar weight were taller with a longer reach, putting him at a disadvantage. However, the same building also played host to the Pegasus Wrestling Club three nights a week, and he found his raw strength was more suited to amateur grappling.

He eventually progressed to the point of being a runner-up in the Northern Counties championships, qualifying him for the All-England championships at Haringey Arena in London (which happened to have been the capital's major venue for professional shows in the post-war years.) Here, he progressed through three preliminary bouts before being defeated by the eventual winner, Harry Kendall, a mute grappler

*Seamus Dunleavy built himself a successful career in both the wrestling and property industries*



© DARREN WARD ARCHIVE

who would go on to be an opponent in the professional ranks.

The highlight of the event for Dunleavy, however, was the introduction of a special guest.

"When I grew up, there was a small little pub in this little country town. At the time I had a set of weights in the back yard which I built myself. This man, a stone mason, used to come into the pub and knew I was training a bit and said, 'When you grow up, you might be a wrestler.' He'd say there was a great wrestler called [George] Hackenschmidt, and I often wondered who Hackenschmidt was. I got to read books about him and heard he was a fantastic wrestler, who wrestled everyone all over the world.

"All of a sudden, at the British championships, the lights went up they said there was a very famous person in the audience, who turned out to be Hackenschmidt. I met him and shook hands with him. It was absolutely amazing, because I grew up hearing the name and didn't know if he was big or small or fat or bald or whatever, and here I am shaking hands with him. It was akin to meeting the Pope!"

### BIRMINGHAM BOUND

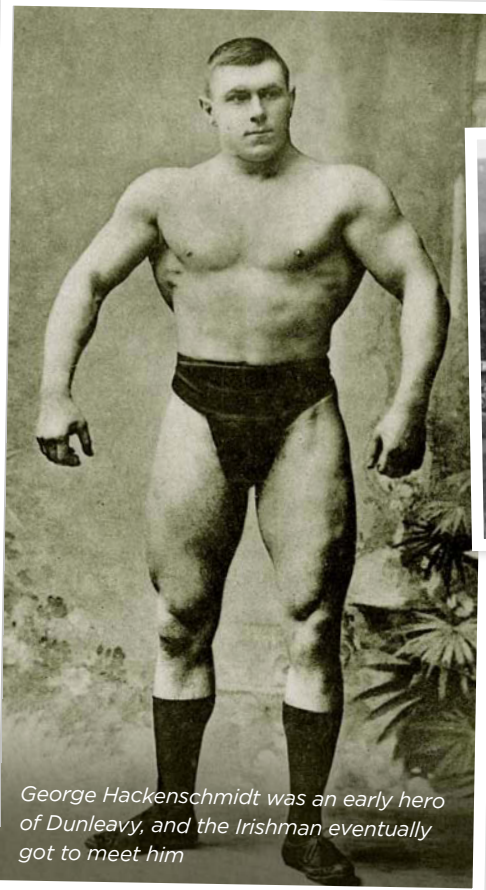
After working in a series of construction and factory jobs and moving to Birmingham, Dunleavy decided turning pro would give him a better life. He notes that, "I think if the mixed martial arts had been around at the time, I would probably have ended up in that street." Instead, pro wrestling was his best option.

He had a lucky break when he took on work as a doorman and found that the club's owner was married to the daughter of catch wrestling pioneer Billy Riley. With a good word put in place, Dunleavy began training at the infamous Snake Pit in Wigan, where he recalls that the regular crew included four of the eight reigning British champions: heavyweight Billy Joyce, light-heavyweight Ernie Riley, welterweight Jack Dempsey, and lightweight Melvin Riss. Perhaps surprisingly, he didn't just learn the art of legitimate submissions at Wigan, but – with the aid of a punching bag – worked on some more spectacular moves, such as dropkicks.

Once he was deemed ready to work shows, Dunleavy was sent to the boxing and wrestling booth circuits. Traditionally this would be where a wrestler would learn the basics of crowd psychology and making an entertaining match, even with an uncooperative opponent. However, Dunleavy was never comfortable with the idea of risking himself for the sake of making his challenger look good.

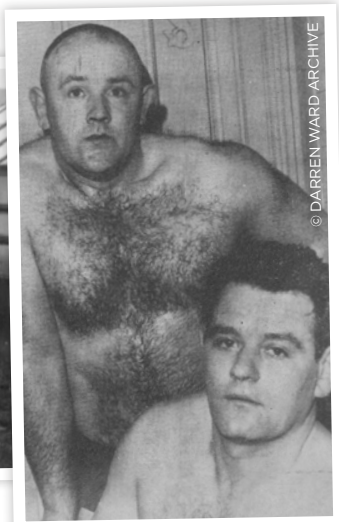
"It was very serious: you had all sorts of idiots and drunks and hard men and everything. They were





*George Hackenschmidt was an early hero of Dunleavy, and the Irishman eventually got to meet him*

*A chance connection to Billy Riley enabled Dunleavy to train at his Snake Pit gym in Wigan*



*While Seamus wrestled mainly in the North, brother Mick Dunleavy did likewise in the south of England*

just as I'm walking in down the aisle, the MC's saying, 'Seamus Dunleavy hasn't appeared, so we have a substitute.' I shouted, "'I'm here, I'm here!'"

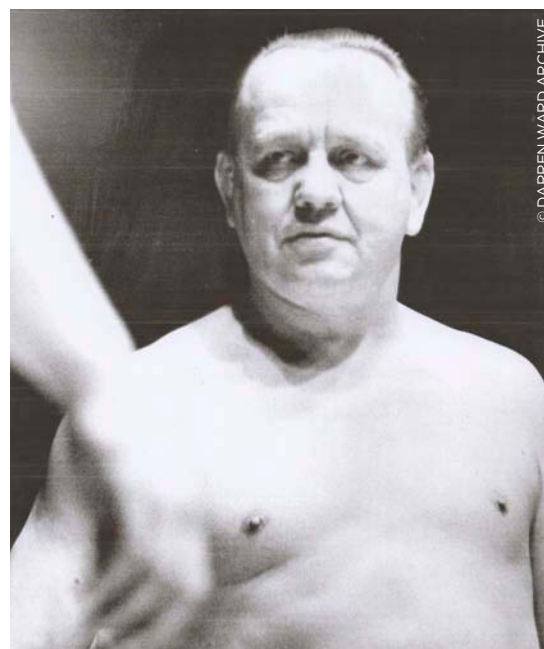
Another trip that ended with a surprise began when Dunleavy returned from an Isle of Man show.

"I'd parked my car in Liverpool, and when I came back to drive to Birmingham, I met Les Kellett, who said, 'I'm on in Birmingham', so I gave him a lift, dropped him off at the hall, and went home. When I came back down to the hall, I found I was actually wrestling against Kellett. He was a peculiar man and never spoke a word to me on the journey on the way down. We'd travelled down together, you could imagine we were very good friends, but [in the ring] he did his level best to kill me! That was Kellett."

## IRISH IMMIGRANTS

As an ex-pat, Dunleavy would often come across fellow members of the Irish community, some more surprising than others.

"You'd wrestle and meet two or three lads from home that you grew up with, particularly in London. I was in Torquay one night and there was the bank manager from my little town. Growing up, we were very, very, very poor, and the bank manager wouldn't speak to us much. But here, all of a sudden, I heard someone shout, 'Up Charlestown!', so I looked through the crowd and there he was.



**"Here I am shaking hands with [George] Hackenschmidt. It was akin to meeting the Pope!"**

*Like so many wrestlers, Dunleavy has a story to tell about the legendary Les Kellett*

egged on by their mates to have a go for five or £10, and so you had to be on top of your game to not let them win any money, and keep yourself safe."

That's not to say it wasn't a great learning experience, and it did help ease him into one particular aspect of turning pro.

"[I worked there] for a while to get the feel of the ring; in amateur wrestling you only wrestled on the mats, and had no ropes or anything"

Dunleavy went on to make his pro debut against Alec Bray in Colne, and soon worked his way up to the TV ranks, first facing Bill Howes in 1961. While Seamus was the bigger star (both figuratively and physically), he was actually beaten to the small screen by a few weeks by younger brother Mick, who had unsuccessfully challenged for Dempsey's welterweight crown.

The brothers would eventually tag up to some success, though for large parts of their careers, they primarily worked different circuits: Mick in the North and Seamus for Dale Martin in the Midlands and South. The Birmingham base made him well-placed for venues around the country, however, and he particularly enjoyed the travel in the early years.

"I love driving. I used to love driving in the summer. I might be in, say, Doncaster: I'd leave at 12, get there early, find out where the hall was, get my bag in and my gear, then look for a cinema. Growing up at home, the cinema was three doors away from us, so we grew up in the cinema. I had a little Volkswagen car, then when we got married, my wife came with me. That was lovely; we'd always have a Chinese meal on the way back. Nothing beats youth: when you're young, married to a nice girl [and travelling around], that was as good as it got."

Not every trip went quite to plan however.

"I went to Bournemouth one night, but it turned out the wrestling was at Weymouth. I had to get across as fast as I could, find the hall, park up, and

Not only was he a great wrestler, but Dunleavy also trained the likes of Pete Roberts



© DARREN WARD ARCHIVE

“Being recognised gives you a great buzz: it means you’ve arrived.”

Sometimes Dunleavy did the recognising, though.

“Growing up, there was a circus strongman called Young Atlas who came to our town and would lift weights that none of the local boys could manage – they used to check to see if they were real! He also used to demonstrate the sleeperhold, and have volunteers and cut the blood off to their head. I don’t know why people used to volunteer: I saw him put seven in a row out one night, all lined up.

“He went off to America and I forgot all about him. Then I went to work a show in London and was billed against Timmy Geoghegan, who turned out to be Young Atlas. That was amazing, to actually wrestle somebody I’d seen and admired all my life. He wasn’t a very good wrestler; he was immensely strong, but his technique wasn’t all that good.”

Said technique was something Dunleavy would work on when he had a hand in training several wrestlers, including Pete Roberts and Pat Roach.

“Pete Roberts was an exceptionally good wrestler. Pat was very good, and he was a very good boxer – in fact, I don’t know why he didn’t stick to boxing. There was nothing vicious about him, but he was a hell of a big man. I also helped train another lad, Pete Evans,

who I see today. He’s 70-odd now and still trains. I get embarrassed with it, but then I ask myself, how could I train at over 80?!”

While he made his career in the UK, Dunleavy would eventually have a homecoming when he was booked on a show at Tolka Park, the home of several Dublin football teams. It proved a trip of mixed emotions.

“It was peculiar. I was wrestling for the first time in Ireland. When I came to Dublin, my family lived 150 miles away. Nobody had sent me a wire or a telegram and I thought, ‘That’s funny’, and nobody had come up to the show. I thought maybe my mum or dad would come up, but nobody appeared at all.

“I wrestled anyway and then got the bus home. When I got to the last town before mine, a schoolteacher got on that lived

in my town. He came up to me with commiserations and said, ‘I’m sorry about your mum’, and I knew right away and asked, ‘Is she dead?’ I knew she was sick, but it turned out that she died just after I wrestled. It was said she waited until my wrestling match was over. Amazing, really. She knew I was there and would be coming home, so that was bittersweet.”

## PROPERTY PLAYER

As well as wrestling, Dunleavy had begun a side business of buying up properties in Birmingham and renting them to mainly Irish labourers, later moving on to own a series of nightclubs. It was an incident at one of these clubs that was the most likely cause of one of Dunleavy’s most memorable moments, though what really sparked it remains a mystery.

As he was returning home in the early hours and getting out of his car, an unknown assailant fired five shots, hitting the car, the wall of the house and, with one bullet, the top of Dunleavy’s head. He escaped without stiches, though that was not so much through a lack of damage, but rather because the bullet had cleanly taken away a chunk of flesh. The incident led to a surprise gift when promoter Jack Atherton gave him what he euphemistically referred to as “material” for protection: two loaded handguns and a machete. Despite such incidents, the property business flourished, and Dunleavy decided to hang up his boots at the age of 35.

“As you get older, your injuries seem to accumulate a lot more, and you don’t recover from them as quick as you would when you’re young and very fit. Plus, I wanted to spend more time with my kids and the good lady.”

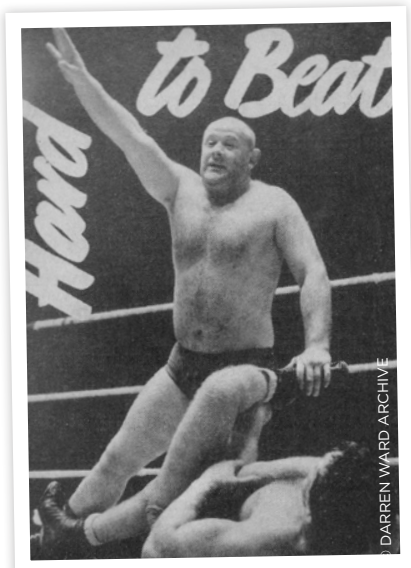
While the businesses proved successful, Dunleavy had heeded the advice of many back home to avoid paying tax in the UK wherever possible. That turned out to be a costly error, and at one stage he had to return home for several years to escape the reach of the Inland Revenue. Ironically, not only did he return to Birmingham and eventually settle the debt, but the family business expanded into commercial property, and he eventually owned the building in King’s Lynn from which his annual tax demand was sent.

On the sporting side, to this day the respect offered to Dunleavy is second to none.

“When Billy Robinson did that talk for us at our September 2013 reunion, there were about 70 people in the audience, and Bill had a word and a photo with anyone who went up to him, but he didn’t make a fuss of anyone,” said Leeds reunion organiser, Darren Ward. “Seamus and his wife arrived late, and they quietly walked in and got sat down as Billy was halfway through a story. But when Billy saw him, he put the microphone down, went over, gave Seamus a big hug, a long handshake, and had a private word with him. Then he went and picked the mic back up, and carried on with his story. I thought, ‘Wow! For Billy Robinson to show someone that much respect, he had to have been something special.”

“I enjoyed my life,” Dunleavy summarised. “I had both cartilages out through the wrestling, but apart from that, I didn’t end up with any serious back injuries, which is the worst in our game.

“I’m 83 and still alive, and can still throw my missus about, so I’m not too bad!”



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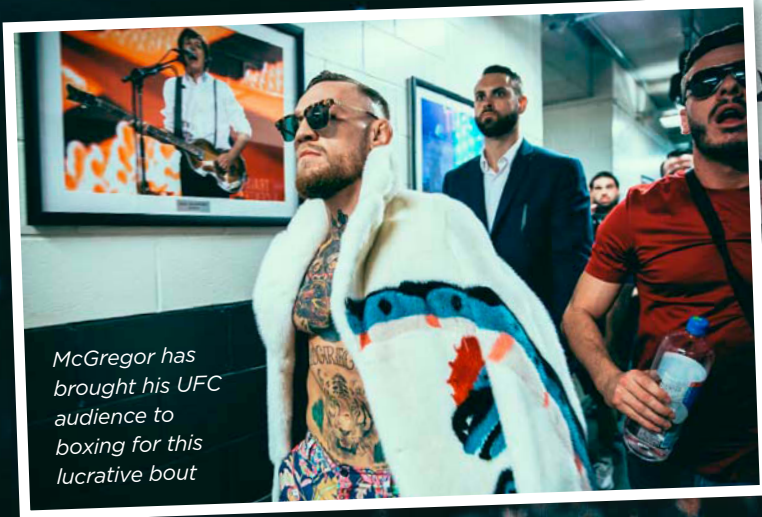


**Everyone Welcome  
#ThisIsProgress**

Floyd Mayweather Jr. is making all the rules in his August 26 boxing match with Conor McGregor

# THE IMPOSSIBLE FIGHT

With potentially the biggest fight of all-time just around the corner, Will Cooling previews Floyd Mayweather Jr. vs. Conor McGregor, and states what each man stands to gain - and lose - from the Las Vegas showdown.



McGregor has brought his UFC audience to boxing for this lucrative bout

On June 15, 2017, the impossible fight was finally announced, as Floyd Mayweather Jr. was confirmed to be coming out of retirement to face UFC lightweight champion Conor McGregor in a boxing match. It promises to be one of the biggest sporting events in history. At the most basic level, McGregor conforms to the mould of opponents such as Canelo Alvarez or Victor Ortiz, against whom Mayweather has done his best business; he's a younger, bigger, and stronger man who regularly knocks out his opponents. That dynamic is already seeing a surprising number of people favour McGregor to knock out a boxing legend who has never even been knocked down. Furthermore, Mayweather works best as a special attraction, with his returns from periodic retirements usually doing the best business.

But of course, this fight is much more than that. For the first time since at least Tyson versus Lewis in June 2002, pay-per-view's two biggest draws will meet in the squared circle, and for the first time in history the champion of a rival combat sport will compete in a high-profile boxing match. There's also the story of Mayweather looking to go one better than famed heavyweight champion Rocky Marciano's 49-0 record, so it's no wonder that the expectation is for the August 26 extravaganza to at least equal the

revenue records set by Mayweather versus Pacquiao on May 2, 2015.

For Floyd Mayweather, the impossible fight was one that would've been foolish to resist. The best boxer of his generation could equal his record-setting payday and finally secure his perfect 50 in a fight in which he would be overwhelmingly favoured. Why McGregor or the UFC gave a long-standing critic of mixed martial arts his dream payday is a mystery that deserves examination.

## FOR MONEY OR GLORY?

It goes without saying that money is at the heart of most decisions in professional sports, let alone prizefighting, but never has money called into question the motives of one of the participants like it does with Mayweather versus McGregor.

Conor McGregor is not only UFC's biggest star, but the champion of its deepest division. His last five fights were purchased by more than six million households across North America, cementing him as the new king of pay-per-view, and yet he likely earned less than a quarter of the \$240million Mayweather received for beating Manny Pacquiao.

It's worth stressing that the disparity reflects poorly on boxing, not mixed martial arts. There are many





@CoffeePayet99 Even though it's boxing, WWE has tuned into UFC and UFC turned into WWE

facing Mayweather as a competitor or a businessman; it may be unfair, but the possibility that he is looking to cash in on his fame by taking on a hopeless cause cannot be discounted. Sports business pundit Darren Rovell reported that McGregor could be looking to earn \$110million from this one fight, which is more than he could earn in 9 UFC championship bouts. As the quick implosion of Lesnar and Rousey shows, there's no guarantee that McGregor could continue to perform at the level required to earn eight figures for such a sustained period.

That's also why arguments that McGregor risks his future drawing power are wide of the mark. Yes, a bad loss may diminish his marketability for UFC title fights, but he'll almost certainly earn more in one night than he would stand to do by working a lot harder over the next three years.

Of course, this does then raise the question as to why the Ultimate Fighting Championship would let its biggest star move to its fiercest rivals.

## WE CAN WORK IT OUT

It's not strictly accurate to say that the UFC has refused to work with other promotions. Company president Dana White did send Chuck Liddell to compete in a 2004 Pride Grand Prix tournament, worked closely with WWE to bring back Brock Lesnar for *UFC 200*, broadcast other promotions' fights on Fight Pass, and showed a remarkable willingness to let their fighters compete in grappling competitions. Still, it's undoubtedly true that the UFC has been loathed to share its profits with a co-promoter (hence Fedor Emelianenko never fighting in the Octagon) or let its biggest stars compete on pay-per-view for a rival company (we're still yet to see a UFC fighter with no prior experience of pro wrestling compete in WWE). The last major fighter to flirt with boxing was Nick Diaz, whose Strikeforce contract allowed him to box. Upon buying Strikeforce, however, the UFC quickly offered more money and a shot at Georges St-Pierre to stop him from stepping into the squared circle. So, it's fair to say that the promotion's change of heart is somewhat surprising.

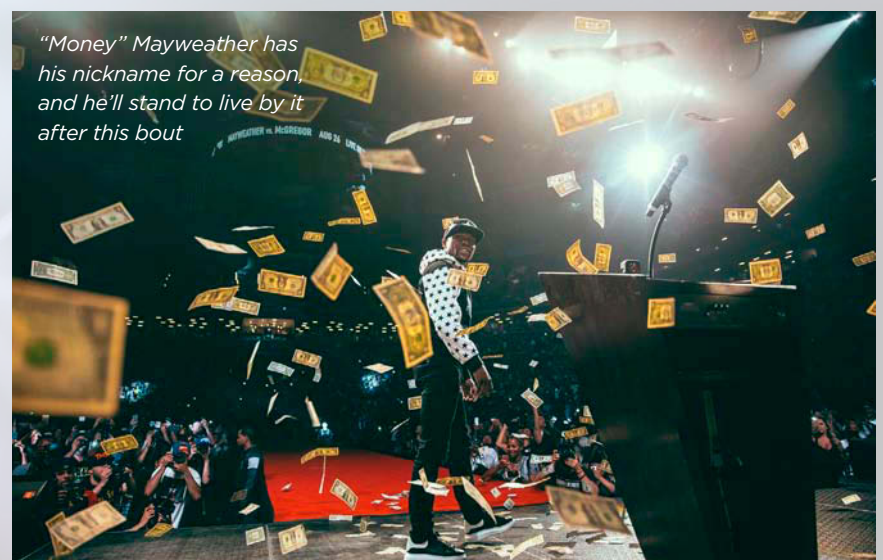
Obviously, like everyone involved, there's a lot of money to be made. The UFC will be richly rewarded for allowing McGregor to step inside the boxing ring,

**“McGregor would not be human if he did not compare his purses with Mayweather, even more so when there's a good argument that McGregor is a stronger draw on pay-per-view”**

things wrong with the UFC, but its efforts to resist hyperinflation in headliner pay is not one of them. Anyone who follows boxing knows that the sport can only afford Mayweather's outsized purses by cutting corners on undercards and smaller events; the UFC model is highly redistributive, using superstars and supershow to generate the resources necessary to provide less marketable fighters with a living, and run major shows in smaller markets.

That's scant consolation to McGregor, who would not be human if he did not compare his purses with Mayweather, even more so when there's a good argument that he is a stronger draw on pay-per-view, with Mayweather having failed to pass one million buys in four out of his last six fights. Crucially, whereas previous fighters to challenge Mayweather's pay-per-view supremacy could never meet him inside the ring due to their size (Brock Lesnar) or gender (Ronda Rousey), and were in any case both primarily grapplers, McGregor is a plausible opponent: he's almost exclusively a striker, and is only slightly bigger.

To be fair to him, McGregor quickly understood the unique opportunity, and was openly talking about wanting to face Mayweather even before he defeated Jose Aldo on December 12, 2015. What we don't know is whether McGregor was talking about







*McGregor's undoubted charisma is a huge selling point for non-UFC fans*

with Rovell reporting that its cut of the total revenues should be at least \$25million, and could be as much as \$40million. While that may not sound like much in the context of a company that in 2015/16 had a turnover of \$608million, it is still significantly more than it could hope to net from any single pay-per-view since, and given that the UFC is not responsible for staging the event, whatever it makes here will be pure profit. In 2015/16, the promotion made a profit of \$157million, and the year before its profit was only \$77million. To place that in further perspective, in 2015/16, WWE only made \$30million in profit.

The money, though, doesn't alter the fact that there are significant dangers to the UFC in allowing the fight. If its biggest star is made to look foolish, that may well hurt the reputation of mixed martial arts. While the potential riches on offer to McGregor justify risking personal humiliation, the lesser rewards on offer for the promotion make for a different cost/benefit analysis, especially when one considers the possibility that with over \$100million in the bank, McGregor may no longer be interested in fighting within the Octagon unless the UFC significantly increases how much he earns. Indeed, one can already see how McGregor's crossover match is placing pressure on the UFC's wage structure, with fighters such as Stipe Miocic and Jimi Manuwa openly challenging boxers in the hope of greater paydays.

So why did the UFC's owners, WME-IMG, let him fight? Certainly, there's been a spectre stalking the negotiations, and ironically it is named after the last champion boxer to compete in a high-profile mixed match: Muhammad Ali.

## **AN OFFER THEY COULDN'T REFUSE**

The Muhammad Ali Reform Act was passed in 1999 to enhance the freedom of boxers, and it is an increasing point of controversy within MMA, as rebel fighters, rival promotions, and even politicians argue its provisions should extend to mixed martial arts. It's an argument that somehow manages to be both redundant and nonsensical. It's redundant because much of the act is focused on regulating the work of state athletic commissions, and so fighters and fans indirectly benefit due to sharing a common regulatory framework with boxing. So, what critics of the UFC mean when they talk about wanting to extend the Ali Act is adopting its regulation of boxer

contracts, but most of these provisions wouldn't make sense in MMA due to the sport's structures.

However, the case of McGregor wanting to box might be an example in which the act is directly relevant, as all UFC contracts have clauses that require fighters to secure its permission should they want to box. One could make an argument that such a clause runs counter to the Ali Act, by denying a boxer the freedom to compete. Lesser logic has proven convincing to judges.

While he has not revealed his motives, it seems McGregor was laying the groundwork to sue the UFC if it blocked him from facing Mayweather. He secured a boxing licence before the UFC dropped its hostility to the fight, which could easily have been an attempt to create a legally valid identity as a boxer. That he went to California and not Nevada for the licence may also have been an attempt to create a pretext for avoiding the latter's pro-UFC legal system. Furthermore, his repeated promise to not fight in 2017 unless it was against Mayweather may have been designed with an eye on the act's provision that boxing contracts shouldn't last more than one year.

It's easy to see how the UFC decided that working with McGregor might be the smarter strategy; not only would it stand to profit from the fight, but it would avoid a lengthy legal battle that could have seen it lose the ability to stop other fighters from stepping into the boxing ring. It's a stunning reversal from the UFC's victory over McGregor during the politicking over whether he would headline *UFC 200*.

The Ali Act has led to one final quirk, with the biggest combat sports promotion in the world blocked from promoting the biggest match one of its athletes has ever competed in. One of the key provisions of the Ali Act is the ban on promoters acting as managers for championship-level fighters, and while the UFC does not normally do so, it has clearly acted as McGregor's manager throughout his negotiations with Mayweather Promotions, and it's almost certainly in that capacity that it will be paid. As noted by MMA insider Front Row Brian, in doing so the UFC lost its ability to act as a co-promoter. The early marketing confirms its secondary status, with the UFC's logo nowhere to be found on advertising.

And that has a lot of knock-on consequences.

## **THIS IS THE BOXING BUSINESS**

If you don't follow boxing, the presentation for Mayweather versus McGregor is going to be very different to what you've become accustomed with the UFC. Most obviously, nobody should expect a card as deep as *UFC 205* or *UFC 196* since, as with any major boxing match, paying the headliners such gigantic sums means that the money's simply not there for any other major fights.

In America, this will be a Showtime Boxing presentation, but whereas the UFC produces only one English-language broadcast, American boxing promoters typically allow their overseas partners to do their own thing. At the time of writing, it's not yet confirmed who will broadcast the fight in Britain, but the strong expectation is that Sky Sports will secure the rights. While the big American fights typically go to BoxNation here, only Sky can successfully sell the fight as a pay-per-view, and this is undoubtedly a



fight worthy of that platform. There is, however, talk that ITV's nascent pay-per-view channel, ITV Box Office, may scoop the established market leader.

Given Mayweather's praise for Sky Sports at the London press conference, one should expect Sky Sports to secure the rights. Should that be the case, the bout will do huge business. Mayweather has twice broken the Sky's pay-per-view record. The first was as the heel antagonist to local hero Ricky Hatton in the first fight that announced Britain as a major pay-per-view market. The second was against Manny Pacquiao, with British boxing promoter Eddie Hearn saying that the spectacle surrounding "The Fight of the Century" led to around 1.2million households buying the show through Sky Sports Box Office. Mayweather versus McGregor promises to be both. McGregor may be Irish, but the success of Barry McGuigan in the 1980s shows how British people are inclined to adopt any Irish success as their own. Despite the UFC's laughably non-existent promotion of him within Great Britain, McGregor already receives far more coverage from the BBC or Sky than any previous UFC fighter. The idea of a "cagefighter" competing against the best boxer in the world will also, of course, create a unique spectacle, and it goes without saying that it will break all records for Sky Sports Box Office business across Ireland.

Whether its Sky or ITV, both will struggle to include somebody on the broadcast who is familiar with the UFC. In America, Showtime has the advantage of having veteran MMA commentator Mauro Ranallo as its play-by-play man. Likewise, it will be interesting to see whether the presentation will make any direct allusions to McGregor's status as an outsider by incorporating UFC mainstays such as Bruce Buffer or Joe Rogan. There's already been the first hint of the twists we may witness, with the global tour seeing UFC President Dana White, sporting a rather interesting Zuffa Boxing t-shirt, perform enthusiastic introductions for McGregor.

But no matter how much money he earns, few who understand both sports favour McGregor to win.

## SO YOU WANNA BE A BOXER?

Anyone who talks with absolute certainty about McGregor's chances against Mayweather is making a mistake; not only can anything happen in a fight, but we simply don't know enough about McGregor as a boxer. Yes, we've seen him fight in the Octagon, but that's a poor guide to how he will perform on August 27. The bigger gloves will change his boxing guard, the lack of kicks will change his striking stance, and the switch to the squared circle will change his footwork. There is no certainty about what strengths or weaknesses will translate to a different sport. Take McGregor's problem with pacing himself over long fights, as seen against Nate Diaz; will the switch to three-minute rounds help him more than the greater length of the fight hurts him? Then there's the question of the referee. The extent to which McGregor can indulge in "dirty boxing" depends on how quickly the man in the middle separates them.

There are reasons to think he may do okay. The fight is at 154lbs, a concession that spares McGregor a punishing cut to the boxer's preferred weight of 147lbs. Having previously fought barefoot, wearing

boxing boots should increase the power of McGregor's punches. Boxing rings tend to be smaller than the Octagon, and have corners, which may make it easier for McGregor to walk Mayweather down. And McGregor is a genuinely astute tactician; if there's a weakness in Mayweather's game, then McGregor has the brains to find it.

Nevertheless, it's hard to see how the Irishman doesn't lose badly. Whilst McGregor does punch hard, his knockouts usually come not from a single punch, but from putting together fast combinations that overwhelm his opponent, and it's rare that Mayweather's foes land one major punch, let alone put together a sequence of telling blows. Secondly, McGregor relies on his speed, which is why he badly struggled against Diaz whenever he tired. Against Mayweather, he's clearly going to be the slower man. Thirdly, while McGregor is a good technical boxer by UFC standards, he repeatedly leaves himself open to counterpunches, with even a puncher like Diaz repeatedly able to tag him. A skilled boxer like Mayweather should pepper him all night long.

Then there's managing the change in sports. Mayweather has lived and breathed boxing all his life, so everything he does comes as second nature. That will not be the case with McGregor; by stepping into the boxing ring, he will be trying to reprogramme himself, and throughout the fight he'll need to resist the temptation to kick or elbow his opponent. That means he cannot trust his own instincts, and that may well create a split-second delay that stops him capitalising on opportunities or defending himself.

But above all else, one must ask, if McGregor is the best boxer in the world, why did he go into MMA in the first place? Ireland has a proud boxing tradition, he trained in boxing as a child, and when he went professional in 2008 the country was far from an MMA hotbed. Furthermore, his younger fighting weight placed him in the lucrative boxing welterweight division rather than the virtually non-existent featherweight division of the time.

The most convincing explanation is the simplest; he knew he wasn't good enough to reach the heights in boxing that he did in MMA. There's no reason to think that 9 years removed from his MMA debut, he's suddenly become a better boxer.

But no matter, the world will be watching, just to be sure.

**"Anyone who talks with absolute certainty about McGregor's chances against Mayweather is making a mistake"**





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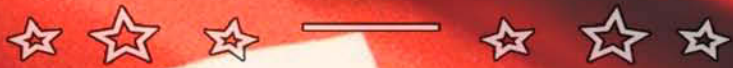


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# WWE THE KEVIN OWENS STORY



The last time **FSM** reviewed a DVD set dedicated to Kevin Steen, it was the ROH release *Hell Rising*, which was quickly taken off the shelves after it broke a verbal agreement that neither ROH nor Jim Cornette would disparage the other after

Cornette left the company. In the four years since then, Steen (now Kevin Owens) has transformed from indie darling into one of WWE's most dependable performers.

From the off in this main feature documentary, viewers get a real flavour of the man behind the character. Although he may play a selfish miscreant on television, he is very much a warm family man outside of the WWE universe. It is this universe that is quickly discussed, as various people claim that due to his look, they didn't think he would ever make it to WWE, let alone become a World champion.

Sami Zayn and Steve Corino give an insight into the cocksure character with some great footage from IWS, CZW, and ROH, and by WWE standards, his team and subsequent feud with Zayn (then El Generico) in ROH is covered in depth; even today, it does take some getting used to hearing other promotions discussed so freely on a WWE production. Steen describes his own ROH title win as an anti-climax, because at that point, fans had accepted that it was inevitable.

Footage of his WWE tryout is included, along with the full promo that largely got him the job. It's an intensely verbose couple of minutes in which he describes his friendship with Zayn, and how he is coming to destroy him for signing his WWE contract in front of his face. It's also interesting to note that he was signed on the basis of solely being an NXT talent, with no prospect of making it to the main roster.

The second half of the documentary is pretty standard fare, as it goes through all the notable moments of his NXT and WWE career so far, although there are some standout points. A backstage meeting with Hulk Hogan shows Owens essentially reduced to a teenage fan as he looks overwhelmed meeting one of the icons of the sport. Behind the scenes footage following his NXT title win shows him sitting with his head in his hands in a moment of quiet reflection for what he has achieved. John Cena describes him as someone who demands attention, and whose in-ring skills are unparalleled, and this was especially true during their amazing feud. Both men held up their end, and Cena certainly did his utmost to create a new star. The lead-up to Owens' Universal title victory, and his pride that the company had enough faith in him to carry that brand, does seem to truly humble another wise self-assured man.



© WWE

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## GETTING GOOSEBUMPS

The matches on this set include Owens' NXT debut opposite CJ Parker (who bloodied him with an errant palm strike), the brutal NXT title victory over Zayn, and the goosebump-inducing moment when he walked out on *Raw* to challenge Cena. A Last Man Standing match against Dean Ambrose is supremely intense. The rarest bout is from a house show in Paris in which Owens and Triple-H battle Zayn and Ambrose, and although this is taken from a handheld camera, and is much poorer than other footage, it does have a certain charm. His Universal title win on *Raw* is still a great surprise, and although it's heavy on interference from the aforementioned Triple-H, it does play into Owens' gimmick. The final two matches feature his best friend turned adversary Chris Jericho, as firstly they combine to thwart Seth Rollins' attempt to win the Universal title in a Hell in a Cell match, before they face each other at *WrestleMania*, in what is quietly one of the best matches of the night.

The Blu-ray exclusives are unfortunately nothing special, but rather steady bouts against Rollins and Reigns. That said, a battle against Neville from NXT and a good scrap with Zayn from *Payback* are pretty good.

Owens is probably the leading example of WWE's modern way of mapping a talent's career: he made his name in the independents, was given an opportunity in NXT, and successfully transitioned onto the main roster. Indeed, the major thing that sticks out from this release is that Owens has proven that having talent is truly all that matters, and looking a certain way is no longer a prerequisite for making money in WWE's brand of pro wrestling.

This collection is heartily recommended as a document of a genuinely interesting talent who has honed his craft everywhere from the smallest of settings to *WrestleMania* itself.

**COLIN HOLMES**



© ANTON

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1. Despite not originally being signed with a view to the main roster, Kevin Owens has excelled there 2. To some surprise, Owens' time in ROH is not glossed over in the main feature

*"Although he may play a selfish miscreant on television, Owens is very much a warm family man outside of WWE's bubble"*





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RETIRED WRESTLER AND HANDLER OF TOXIC CHEMICALS, MAD MAN MANSON

**You weren't a wrestling fan before you started training. Did that bring any advantages when you did so?**

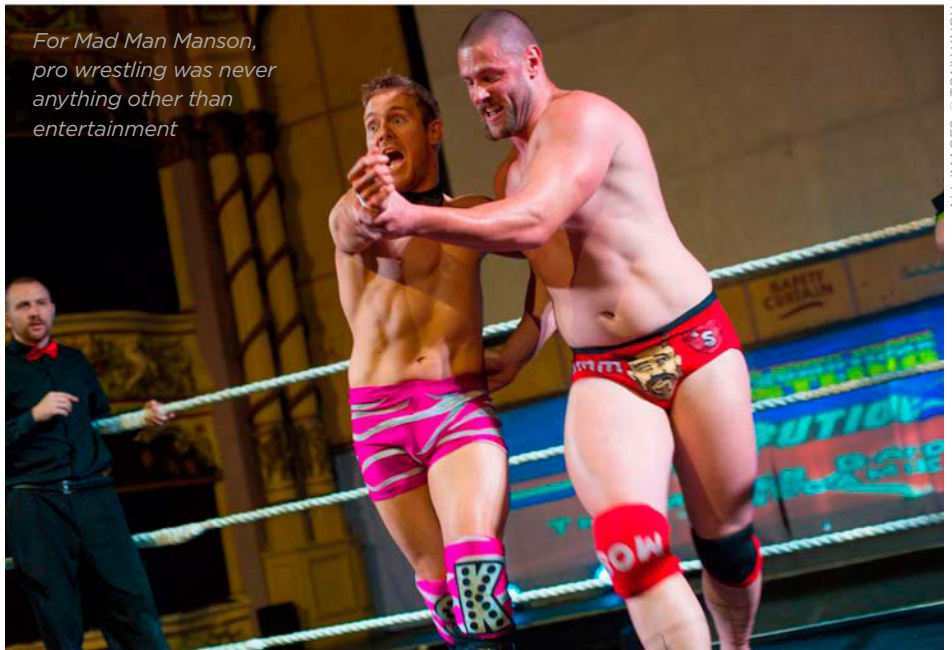
I went in and immediately knew it was a form of entertainment. I never thought it was a sport. I never had to fight to show how real wrestling is, like when you see a trainee put up a picture of the rope burns on his back or the chops on his chest. That's a cry to tell people, "Wrestling is tough, wrestling is real, wrestling [gets people] injured" whereas I never fell victim to that mistake. I think if you treat it as a sport you'll fall away and you won't understand how to entertain people properly. If you treat it as an entertainment business, you'll go much further. That's just my opinion and I'm not in WWE, so people who are in WWE know a lot more than me.

The rules [in wrestling] aren't different. Something I still hear nowadays is "the business"; everybody calls it "the business" as if it's something special and something different from normal business. If you treat it as a normal business and set yourself a price, like an electrician does, like a plumber does, you'll never drop below that price because an electrician or a plumber wouldn't. But if you treat it as "the business", you'll negotiate and you'll go up and go down and devalue yourself and not see yourself as a product.

**How should you move from being a trainee to getting paid?**

I would say to people that you work for free for your home training promotion for as long as you feel you are still training. So for me, Irish Whip Wrestling was my home promotion, the first place I ever got inside a ring, and therefore, I think the first year-and-a-half, I worked completely for free, never asked for money, and money was never discussed. As I became more useful – rather than being useful in a wrestling sense, which I never was the best at that – because I became a ring man, I was able to charge for setting up the ring, taking it down, storing it,

*For Mad Man Manson, pro wrestling was never anything other than entertainment*



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and from that, I was then able to increase my charge to include wrestling as well. This was decided by the promoter I was wrestling for, a chap called Simon [Rochford]. He was the one who decided, "Listen, there's an extra 20 quid in your pay packet because we did well that night."

That's how I started to get paid, and once that promoter sets that precedent of giving you 20 quid once, that now becomes your wage, if you accept it. Once you start getting paid, you make sure that you never, ever lose money on a job. Once you start getting paid, you've now finished your apprenticeship; you're not a professional wrestler yet, because it's not paying your rent, but you are a working wrestler. You're a person who needs to keep everything sound for the other guys. You need to make sure you're not screwing anyone over with your price being too low, so I would say the minimum wage you should be working for in this country is £30. Some people will say it's

too low, some people will say it's too high, but to me that's the minimum you should be working for.

**Of course £30 is right around the National Minimum Wage for the three or four hours you need to be at the building.**

That's the thing. This is rule one of normal business, not "the business". I'm now a manager of a chemical and solvent company and the most important thing is that you're not selling your product at a loss. Rihanna doesn't go on stage and spend 30 grand on staging and sell 20 grand of tickets; she spends 20 grand on staging and sells 30 grand of tickets. It's real simple business stuff, and you have to make sure you apply the rules of normal business to yourself.

There are some times when that rule won't work, though. For example, when I first worked for IPW, they contacted me and said, "Manson, we're interested in using you; let me know if you're in the Doncaster



T-Bone winds up a big forearm on Ashton Smith during Futureshock's June 30 event

area." So I looked up online, saw he had the first anniversary show on, and I said, "Oh Steven [Gauntley], I'm actually over visiting my friend G-man who lives in Nottingham and I'm free on the Saturday. What are the chances of that?!" And he said, "Okay, come along to the show and we'll get you on."

So I lied. I said I was going to be in Doncaster, I booked myself a flight there and then, which cost me about £60 return, so I took a chance. I invested £60 on possibly making a loss. I got there, I acted up nicely, I did lots of meet and greet with fans, I was good in the locker-room, I was generally a nice person to be around. It's all an act, but that's part of what I did. At the end of it he said, "That's great, I really liked what you did, here's the cheque." The cheque was for £150. So I took the chance, I invested £60 in getting there, and I got back £150. I took a risk and it paid off, but I was willing to take that £60 risk because I was sure that my act would catch on for that promotion.

I broke my own rule, which is always making a profit, and it turned out to prove the rule because I made a profit!

#### How do you go about setting a price?

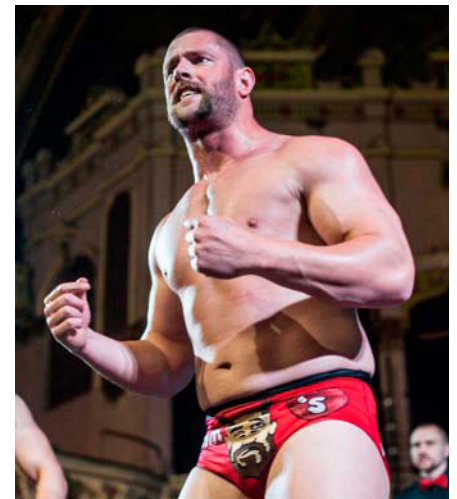
With promoters who are ex-wrestlers or current wrestlers, you can't really bullshit your price on them - they know your price or thereabouts. For example, my price in general was £60, and near the end was £80 or a £100. For the boys, if I'm working for T-Bone or Dave Mastiff or Ligerero, they'd know I'd get into that ring and dick around for £60, therefore they'd offer me £60. And I'd take it and there'd be no problem.

But when you get joebloggs@gmail.com contacting you saying, "Hi Mad Man Manson, do you want to work on my show on this date at this working man's club in this place?", I'd look around and say, "Does this guy exist?" I'd Google him and say, "I've never heard of ABC Wrestling" so I'll get back to him and say £120, but I also say, "I live with T-Bone, I travel with him, his price is £120. I can also provide you with..." and give a list of the people I represented at the time, guys like Stixx, El Ligerero, girls like Jetta, all that gang. I'd get us together because we'd do a bit of price fixing. It's looked down on in some business as more of a cartel, but you need to fix prices, you need to look after yourself, you need to look after the interests of people around you.

If I'd not done that and just said, "Yep, great, I'll work for £120; here's my mate T-Bone's email" and then T-Bone says, "Yep, it's £100", I've fucked myself because they'll pick him over me, but I've also fucked him



“Once you start getting paid, you’ve now finished your apprenticeship; you’re not a professional wrestler yet, because it’s not paying your rent, but you are a working wrestler”



because I know I could have got him £120. That's an old example by the way, because now T-Bone's way over my level, and he's working for big money for the fucking yanks (laughs).

(Name redacted) was always good for that. If he could get a good booking, he'd put the word out to all of us and say, "Listen, there's this shitbox promoter, I've given him your email, and I'm charging £150." So he's not telling us what to charge - he's telling us what he's charging. Because in my mind I'm not as good and never will be as good as him, so if he's charging £150, I'll say right, I'm charging £120. The reason being that I'm not fucking him by charging £30 and I'm not fucking myself by asking for £400. That was the basics of price fixing: it seems like a negative way to explain it, but I don't have a

positive word or phrase. I guess I'd just say "valuing ourselves".

Don't make money a fucking taboo subject. I was more than happy to talk about money in front of everyone, talk about money backstage, and be very candid because in business that's what you do anyway. Everyone here in my office know what we pay for these solvents, and they know what we sell them on to customers for. There's no surprise about these things.

In wrestling there used to be this absolute secrecy: "We can't talk about what we get paid." Nonsense! Talk about money, talk about it with your friends, with your trainer in particular.

If your trainer is half good, he'll know all these things.

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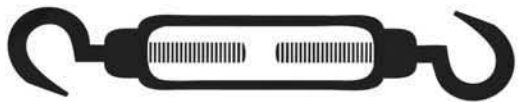
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