

**THE OPERATIONAL AESTHETIC
IN THE PERFORMANCE
OF PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING**

A Dissertation

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by

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the relationship between professional wrestling as performance and its fans. For decades, professional wrestling has been characterized as a fraudulent sport of scams and illusion rather than actual and fair competition between athletes. Why then is wrestling so popular? I pursue the question by taking a close look at professional wrestling in four different cultural venues or sites of production: the historical archive, the live wrestling event, the televised event, and the Internet. In each site, I focus on what components define professional wrestling, how they operate, and what appears to be their purpose. Drawing on Neil Harris's concept of an "operational aesthetic," I feature components that expose rather than veil their operations and thereby invite the audience to scrutinize how they work. In addition to Harris, I call on several other theorists to articulate what operations are revealed, and the results or ramifications of the exposure. Roland Barthes and John Fiske help me understand the event as a "spectacle of excess." I also use Barthes' and Fiske's models of readerly, writerly, and producerly texts to analyze the relationship between the event and the fans. The theories and perspectives of Harris, Barthes, and Fiske summon aspects of Bertolt Brecht's aims for theatre. By means of devices that expose rather than veil the apparatus of theatre, Brecht hoped to provoke audience members to be like sporting experts in their passionate critical viewing of the event.

The results of the study suggest that wrestling fans understand and value wrestling because it is a performance and because they play a part in producing it. Far from being duped by the wrestling illusion, fans are able to enjoy wrestling with a double voice,

producing pleasurable meanings for themselves through critical detachment and critical detachment through pleasure.

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

At its worst, a wrestling performance is an oversimplistic display of male bravado and vulgar social clichés. But at its best, wrestling is a sophisticated theatricalized representation of the violent urges repressed by the social code, of the transgressive impulses present in the most civilized of people. Most of all, wrestling activates its audience through a series of specific strategies. Instead of leaving passive onlookers in the dark, the wrestlers, through their play, make spectators an integral and essential part of the performance. (Mazer, “The Doggie Doggie World of Professional Wrestling” 97)

Professional wrestling is an enormously popular form of entertainment in the US.

Yet, mention professional wrestling in conversation and the response is likely to be a roll of the eyes, a groan of disgust, or “that stuff is so fake.” Nevertheless, professional wrestling is deeply entrenched in US culture. How popular is it? On the PBS current affairs program, Frontline, media critic Douglas Rushkoff claims, “Professional wrestling is the most popular form of entertainment among teenage boys in America” (“Merchants of Cool”). John Leland writes that the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) television show, Raw is War, is “watched by about 5 million households weekly” and “is the highest-rated show on cable; Smackdown! seen in another 5 million [households] is the top-rated show on [cable network] UPN” (46). In a ten day period, TV Guide Online lists over thirty-one hours of wrestling programming, including repeats of pay-per-view broadcasts. Subscribers can order a pay-per-view wrestling program through their local cable company and watch the live event as it airs or purchase the program to watch at their convenience. Further, thousands buy tickets to attend live wrestling events in person.

In “Why America’s Hooked on Wrestling,” Leland observes that the popularity of wrestling extends beyond the live and televised events to consumer merchandise:

The WWF's home videos routinely rank No.1 in sports, its action figures outsell Pokemon's and its Web site is one of the first outlets to turn streaming video into profits. The autobiographies of two WWF wrestlers, Mankind (Mick Foley) and the Rock (Dwayne Johnson), are currently Nos. 1 and 3 on the New York Times best-seller list. Add in revenue from live ticket sales, pay-per-views, platinum-selling CDs and a new theme restaurant, all in turn promoting the shows and each other. (47)

In short, professional wrestling has become a floating signifier popular enough to be applied to most any product and in turn consumed by the public.

Of course, many US sports can make similar claims of popular commercial success, such as football, basketball, and baseball. A key difference is that professional wrestling is an "illegitimate" sport since the results of the matches are predetermined. While this pre-planned or, in wrestling parlance, "worked" aspect has played a part in professional wrestling since the late nineteenth century, it was not until the 1980s that the wrestling world began to admit, reluctantly, to the artifice. Many feared that if they acknowledged wrestling as a performed work, it would lose its appeal as a sport and revenues would suffer. Vince McMahon, owner of the WWF, believed otherwise. In May 2002, he changed the name of the WWF to World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). By means of the "corporate re-branding," McMahon highlighted the "'E' for entertainment" in wrestling and thereby aimed to broaden rather than lessen wrestling's appeal ("World Wrestling Entertainment Announces New Stock Ticker Symbol"). As Michael Solomon points out, "once you say you're an entertainment, it allows you to entertain in a much broader spectrum than you could before when you were a quasi-sport" (19).

The "broader spectrum" to which Solomon refers includes the aforementioned sale of products, the purchase of which allows fans the pleasing illusion that they own a

piece of their beloved sport, team, or hero. The entertainment emphasis also has led to an increased use of spectacle. Music, theatrical lighting, pyrotechnics, video technology, and primary and peripheral characters are infused unabashedly into wrestling matches. Wrestlers play characters, wear costumes, flaunt their athletic abilities, and display the violence of agonistic sport in what often appears to be a presentational rather than representational manner. Again, however, many sports, legitimate sports, use like theatrics to entertain their audiences and, of course, appealing to the masses through product marketing is no new trick.

McMahon's admission is broad in that it embraces what many fans and non-fans alike knew already; namely, that the outcome of the matches and the violence are preplanned or "worked on" to appear real. Fans know professional wrestling offers a performance that is unlike that of other sports where the results and the violence are real (or so we assume) and, given their support, wrestling fans apparently value this difference. Such a claim runs contrary to those who cast the wrestling fan as gullible, as is the case with some cultural critics, sports journalists, and even wrestling practitioners. Their rationale is based on the historical tradition of promoters marketing the sport as legitimate until McMahon spilled the beans, as early as 1989. Another reason derives from the perceived economic class of wrestling fans. Due to the association of professional wrestling with the carnival tradition, its low budget staging requirements, and the explicit display of the physical body, professional wrestling is perceived as a sport of the blue-collar working class. Apparently less educated in formal terms than middle and upper class individuals, the working class has and continues to be constructed as ignorant folk who consume the realistic illusion of wrestling and respond to it in

purely emotional terms. They can hardly be expected to engage in and evaluate the meta-level operations of wrestling as performance. As John Twitchell quips in Carnival Culture: The Trashing of Taste in America, “the standard joke among wrestlers used to be: ‘What has fourteen teeth and an IQ of 50? Answer: The first ten rows of a wrestling match’” (227).

Another possible reason for constructing wrestling fans as dupes is that if they are recognized as smart fans, the recognition also attributes a positive value to sport and/as performance. In other words, “sports entertainment” threatens the sacred distinction between sport and performance activities. In these terms, we might theorize that professional wrestling is more honest about what it is and how it operates than sports that assume to separate the entertaining spectacle from the actual contest. As Sharon Mazer theorizes, we also might understand that professional wrestling offers a more “sophisticated” treatment of our culture’s “violent urges” than do other sports, where the violence is real, not pretend (“Doggie Doggie World” 97). After all, what is a more civil cultural *praxis* for expressing human aggression: men working cooperatively to stage violence that is pretend or men actually harming each other under the auspices of legitimate sport?

In this study, I am interested in the relationship between professional wrestling as performance and its fans. Since professional wrestling is a fake sport, why is it so popular? My question arises from the understanding that in US mass culture, legitimate sport carries more currency than cultural products termed entertainment or performance. So, while there are more football fans than professional wrestling fans, why are there wrestling fans; what is the appeal? My question also is based on the understanding that

in US popular culture the dominant mode of representation is realism, or the use of conventions to craft events that appear to be spontaneous real life as compared to made-up or pretend – i.e., constructed fictions. Whether used in mass marketed fiction films, television dramas, situation comedies, and the recent rash of “reality” shows, the mode and conventions of realism prevail. Granting that legitimate sport is unplanned, spontaneous real action, its immense popularity makes good sense. It is the real real thing. So why then is professional wrestling popular too? If the punches and kicks rarely land with full force, the body locks seldom applied with full strength, and the outcome of the match always decided in advance, what is it that keeps spectators intrigued?

I pursue the question by taking a close look at professional wrestling in four different cultural venues or sites of production: the historical archive, the live wrestling event, the televised event, and the Internet. As I engage each site, I focus on what components define professional wrestling, how they operate, and what appears to be the purpose or aim of the components in operation. From a cultural economy perspective, one purpose is to persuade spectators that professional wrestling is of value, worthy of their investment, and I am intrigued by the seeming appeal of fan investment given that professional wrestling is not or not viewed as a legitimate sport.

In my description of each production site, I assume the perspective of a naïve viewer or, at least, someone new to the wrestling game in an attempt to collect and document what components stand out and how they imply or state tacit rules for the event and its participants, the fans in particular. However, following McMahon’s lead and my own research interests, my “naïve” perspective is slanted toward performance. I look for components that we associate with theatrical stage performance, such as a framed playing

area, performers and audience, characters and costumes, and I use the same (theatre/performance) terminology to identify them. I also understand these and other performance components in conceptual terms. As Richard Schechner might observe, they are components that signify “restored behavior” or “twice-behaved behavior” (36). That is, we have seen or heard them before; they signify prior use in our cultural expressions and, as such, they signify an event that is a “performance.” According to Schechner’s definition, then, all sport is a performance. Differences arise in what is restored, how, why, and the degree to which the restored behavior et al. are acknowledged as such, as restored expressions that we have and continue to perform. Whereas legitimate sport restores the agonistic (and quotidian) ritual of spontaneous competition, professional wrestling restores the agonistic (and quotidian) ritual of rehearsed competition. It is “not real” or, in performance vernacular, it is “not not real.”

Performance and culture based theories and perspectives also inform my analysis of the four sites of wrestling production. I draw on Neil Harris’s study, Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum, to analyze if and how professional wrestling functions in terms of an “operational aesthetic” (57). As Harris argues, though often fraudulent, Barnum’s displays “enabled – or at least invited – audiences and participants to learn how they worked” (57). In some way, they exposed rather than veiled their operations and encouraged viewers to perceive and evaluate the same. Harris’s theory urges me to move beyond the real/fake opposition and investigate how professional wrestling operates as a “fake” sport or a “not not real” performance. Does it expose rather than veil its operations to the viewers? Which ones? Are viewers interested in the exposure or do they prefer the veiled illusions?

Harris's theory serves to frame my analyses of the various production sites while other theories and perspectives help me articulate what operations are revealed, how, and the results or ramifications of the exposure. In his seminal essay, "The World of Wrestling," Roland Barthes describes wrestling as a "spectacle of excess" or a "stage-managed sport" of grand gestures (e.g., of Justice) that fans understand as such and expect of the event (15). Similarly, John Fiske views wrestling as an excessive, carnivalesque performance. He argues that the event, the televised event in his case, stimulates the viewer to produce a self-as-spectacle identity that counters the social identities "proposed by the dominant ideology" (240). Harris's operational aesthetic and Barthes' and Fiske's perspectives on how fans respond to wrestling summon aspects of Bertolt Brecht's aims for theatre. By means of devices that expose rather than veil the apparatus of theatre, Brecht hoped to provoke the audience to take a passionate critical view of the event, its subject matter, and the social laws in terms of which they operate. Thereby, like "the sporting public," the audience members become experts, with opinions, rather than passive consumers of the theatrical event and the broader world and values it represents (6).

By addressing four different sites of wrestling production and drawing on multiple perspectives that address performance-audience dynamics in wrestling or performances like it, I hope to contribute significantly to scholarship on how professional wrestling operates and the part wrestling fans play in said operations. Because wrestling was and is viewed as a lowbrow fraudulent sport, it has attracted little scholarly attention and, typically, wrestling fans are demeaned as gullible. It is my view that many wrestling fans understand and value wrestling because it is a performance and, as Fiske argues,

because they play a part in producing it. The operations of wrestling do not write them off as “a cowed, credulous, hypnotized mass” (Brecht 188). Rather, components of professional wrestling encourage fans to “tinker with the social order: to vent, celebrate, laugh and cry” (Feigenbaum 88). While some may view the sport of professional wrestling as fake, wrestling fans view the performance of the sport as very real. As Morton and O’Brien submit, to ask a fan if “‘pro rasslin’ is a rigged show needs no more comment than would a play or novel that a naïve reviewer called a lie” (56).

Below, I discuss the subject, informing theories, and significance of the study in further detail. I also integrate an overview of the upcoming chapters.

Subject

In this study, I concentrate on the performance of professional wrestling in the US as it is produced in historical studies, at live events, on television, and on the Internet. Although I use the terms wrestling and professional wrestling interchangeably, I do not intend my use to refer to the amateur sport of wrestling as it is practiced in community leagues or clubs, high schools, colleges, and in the Olympic Games. Amateur and professional wrestling differ from each other in that professional wrestlers are paid for their efforts and the outcome of most professional matches is predetermined. In wrestling jargon, they are “works,” not “shoots.” This pre-planned component has played a part in professional wrestling since the late nineteenth century and, by the 1920s, was commonplace. So too in the 1920s, short, suspenseful matches with highly acrobatic moves replaced so-called “scientific” style wrestling, where wrestlers spent most their time down on the mat, grappling with each other in close proximity. A test of consistent

strength and endurance interrupted occasionally by lightning quick moves, scientific wrestling is associated with amateur wrestling today.

In Chapter Two, I enter the archive of historical studies on professional wrestling in the US and, in a history of my own, document what I find there. I engage this site of wrestling production in order to track the wrestling forms and conventions that remain constant, fade away, emerge, or are integrated with other cultural practices over time. Thereby, I gain insight as to what operations are restored in the performance of wrestling today and how in function they compare and contrast with past aims. Since, throughout much of wrestling history, wrestlers and promoters veiled the “worked” or predetermined component of matches, the idea that wrestling is an operational aesthetic that invites inquiry on the part of the spectator seems in doubt. However, other wrestling conventions, such as an array of rules and styles and wrestlers playing broad character types, do expose their operations. Furthermore, the scams and fixed matches left discernible traces that reporters and the public generally noticed and investigated. The fervent activity of veiling, on the one hand, and exposing, on the other, became part of the operations of wrestling – the exposure giving rise to publicity that, in 1919, marked wrestling as “the smelliest sport in the world” (Griffin 17). Over the years, promoters have responded to the lowbrow connotations associated with the “smelly” accusation by amending or embracing the same in how they compose the wrestling event.

The same activity is at work in the production of wrestling histories or the paltry lack thereof. In order to keep the fixed aspects of wrestling under wraps, wrestlers and promoters failed to keep accurate records if they kept records at all. Another reason for the sketchy documentation is the lack of an official governing body to oversee the

collection and standardization of wrestling records. At best, the multiple organizations that emerged in the mid 1900s kept their own records, which resulted in multiple histories that often contradict each other. Again, falsifying records appears to have been a commonplace practice, necessary to conserving the “big secret” of wrestling and helpful to the embellishment of wrestlers’ records and thereby their appeal. While the sporting press showed great interest in wrestling in the late nineteenth century, the coverage was local for the most part. “The big wire services, such as the United Press, Associated Press, International News Service and Universal Service . . . failed to report the results to member papers” (Griffin 37). Furthermore, once wrestling began to “smell” and the smell impacted public interest, the legitimate press lost interest too.

As a result, there are relatively few wrestling histories in print, although in the last few years more have surfaced. Many of the recent histories are descriptive and intended for the popular marketplace (see Albano and Sugar; Archer; Greenberg; Hunter; Meltzer, Tributes; Pope and Wheebe Jr). In the history I offer in Chapter Two, I call on many of these histories for details but rely most consistently on the research of Aaron Feigenbaum, Gerald Morton and George O’Brien, and Marcus Griffin. I also am indebted to Lawrence Levine’s more general study of US culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In “Professional Wrestling, Sports Entertainment and the Liminal Experience in American Culture,” Feigenbaum recounts the history of professional wrestling from the post bellum period through to McMahon’s WWF monopoly in the late twentieth century. Feigenbaum not only documents the complex history of wrestling but is sensitive to the contradictions and narrative gaps in the multiple accounts he draws on. As the title of his

study implies, Feigenbaum views the events in wrestling history from a ritual perspective, aiming to explicate how wrestling is a symbolic enactment of the quotidian experience of transience in US culture.

In Wrestling to Rasslin': Ancient Sport to American Spectacle, Morton and O'Brien provide a broad though exceptionally well documented history of wrestling from its roots in ancient Greek practice to televised wrestling in contemporary US culture. One of the many arguments they advance is that there was never a "clear, clean line between sport and show in professional wrestling" (37). In one way or another, the sport of wrestling was always a rasslin' show. For support, they draw on some astounding finds in the archival record and take a close look at televised wrestling between 1950 and 1985.

First published in 1937, Griffin's Fall Guys: The Barnums of Bounce offers the earliest survey of wrestling I found. From what appears to be an insider's perspective, Griffin documents wrestling history from the late nineteenth century through the 1930s. He recounts the minutia of well known wrestlers and the operational strategies of the early promoters who controlled the wrestling business. Griffin does not feign objectivity but states his opinions with the uppercass confidence of a Barnum barker. For instance, regarding the highly controversial Frank Gotch-George Hackenschmidt bouts of 1908 and 1911, he favors the loser, Hackenschmidt, who claimed Gotch cheated. Add in the questionable outcome of the Joe Stecher-Earl Caddock match in 1917 and Griffin has all the evidence he needs to advance the odiferous remark I mentioned above. Current wrestling aficionados question some of Griffin's insider information but, since

differences are commonplace in wrestling histories, their questions operate less to devalue Griffin's history than to signal a general lack of certainties on all hands.

The different histories do agree that, in the US, professional wrestling emerged as a legitimate sport in the post bellum period. As with other sports, the lack of a central organization resulted in wrestlers and promoters contracting matches on an independent basis, which gave rise to a range of different venues, rules, styles, and championship titles. A commonplace venue was the traveling carnival show, which offered wrestlers consistent match opportunities. Due to the transient nature of the carnival, the same wrestlers could tangle with each other in town after town or they could engage the local toughs. Betting was a common component of the wrestling show and, so too, the scam of the fixed match. While many bouts in both carnival and other venues were legitimate contests, the taint of lowbrow humbuggery affixed itself to the sport and, by the late nineteenth century, "many Americans associated the ring and the mat with gamblers, parasites, riff-raff, and the pugs" (Betts 169).

In the twentieth century, key trends in wrestling history included promoters' attempts to amend or take advantage of the lowbrow label in an effort to increase public interest and revenues. Simultaneously, the wrestling trade became more organized and standardized as promoters created partnerships, agreed to fixed territories within established organizations, and competed for control of the wrestling trade. The current corporate champ is Vince McMahon, who monopolizes wrestling at the national level.

These basic trends parallel those Levine observes in US culture generally from the post bellum period through the early twentieth century. In Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America, Levine investigates how, in the post bellum

period, class and race base fears gave rise to the categorization and segregation of cultural practices and, so too, the people with whom they were associated. Whereas prior to the Civil War, Shakespeare's plays, opera, and symphonic music were embraced – enjoyed, performed, variously amended, and criticized – by people of diverse class and racial cultures, during reconstruction and thereafter, the white middle and upper classes took charge of cleaning up the motley mix so as to distinguish and distance themselves from the working class, its immigrant hordes, and the now “free” black community. The self-assumed arbiters of taste isolated the highbrow classics from the lowbrow riff-raff. The former became “sacralized” or institutionalized, studied and practiced as distinct disciplines in the burgeoning institutions of higher learning and performed or displayed in the discipline-specific institutions of the Art Museum or Symphonic Hall or Classic Theatre. In addition to the increased segregation of cultural practices, people, and public space, the highbrow/lowbrow distinctions made marketing the arts easier since consumers could be targeted in terms of their social-economic class and assumed tastes.

Due to the association of wrestling with carnival venues, scams, betting, and the display of the physical body, wrestling was expunged from highbrow consideration. As Morton and O'Brien explain,

Burly sports did not fit into the selectivity of the gentleman's athletic club, early YMCA exercise programs or fledgling collegiate sports. There was a pagan delight in display of muscle, in the strongman stunts, the braggadocio, and even scanty costumes of wrestlers that offended the nice people, those who advocated muscular Christianity in the schools and promoted Victorian team sports in public. Also wrestling and boxing as immediately intelligible contests quickly attracted the immigrant hordes as participants and spectators. The new arrivals were changing both the ethnic mix and the labor force in America. For all these reasons the ruling set saw wrestling and boxing as manifestations of forces in America they disliked [and] feared. (32)

Although a lowbrow practice, wrestling has become a cultural institution and, under McMahon's "ruling" hand, a recent corporate giant. As such, questions arise as to the impact of corporate control and commercialization on the practice, its class politics, and fan participation. In the upcoming chapter, I entertain this and other trends that arise in the histories of professional wrestling and its performance.

McMahon's corporation, WWE, is best known for its televised matches, staged in large arenas across the country and broadcast nationally on programs such as RAW and Smackdown! However, WWE also produces smaller "house shows," which are not televised and intended for the live audience only. Further, there are several independent regional organizations that stage live shows in small cities and towns. In the third chapter, I document and analyze my experiences at house shows produced by Turnbuckle Championship Wrestling (TCW) and WWE. TCW is a regional organization with offices in East Cobb county Georgia, just north of Atlanta. TCW stages matches in towns across Georgia, Tennessee, and Alabama. The matches I attended took place in Dothan, Alabama on July 7, 2001, and in Carrollton, Georgia on February 1, 15, and 22, 2002. The WWE house show, titled "Superstars of Smackdown!" was staged in Dothan, Alabama on April 4, 2004.

To document the events, I drew on basic ethnographic practices, although I do not assume to offer a complete ethnographic account of live wrestling events, the wrestlers and fans. Rather, my aim is to recount my experiences of specific events as a fledgling audience-participant and observer. My accounts are guided by Clifford Geertz's method of "thick description" (235), which encourages the researcher to experience and thereby document as much of the phenomena as is feasibly possible, while also acknowledging

his subjective position and perspectives. To aid in my documentation, I took field notes, photographs, and made audio recordings, hoping to attend to “the phenomenon as it operates in natural contexts” (Lindlof 22). In my first foray into the field, I was intimidated by the unfamiliar setting and overwhelmed by the acoustic excess and, as a result, my account highlights audience responses and sounds for the most part. As I attended more shows and gained confidence, my observational skills increased and I also collected interviews from a number of fans and a “ring mistress.”

While the live events replicate many of the wrestling conventions seen on televised wrestling, the reproduction is more modest in scale – due I presume to budgetary restrictions. Typically, televised events occur in large arenas before several thousand audience members. The TCW shows I attended were staged in the Houston County Farm Center in Dothan and the VFW facility in Carrollton. All the shows drew approximately three hundred spectators. The WWE matches were held in the civic center in Dothan before a crowd of two thousand people. Ring announcers and signature music for the wrestlers’ entrances were used in all the shows. Theatrical lighting was apparent in the WWE show and the TCW bouts staged in Carrollton. While all the wrestlers performed certain characters and wore costumes, the TCW wrestlers were less famous than their WWE counterparts and they also tended to be smaller, less muscular, and not as agile. Many TCW wrestlers were known locally, and were either fledgling wrestlers or well past their prime. All the events offered diverse types of matches and in all cases the spectators’ interaction was lively. The latter was pronounced in the TCW matches, due, perhaps, to the smaller size of the venues and my close proximity to the ring and ringside fans.

The third site of wrestling production I undertake is the televised event. Since March 2001, the WWE has had a stranglehold on wrestling programs broadcast nationally. As in the past, regional wrestling promotions can purchase local television time but only one promotion, the WWE, broadcasts on the national airwaves. Recent WWE programs include RAW, shown on cable station Spike TV (formerly TNN), Smackdown! on cable's UPN, and Tough Enough on MTV. In Chapter Four, I draw on representative episodes of Smackdown! and RAW to describe and analyze television wrestling. The Smackdown! program I cite was broadcast on April 29, 2004. The RAW episodes were broadcast on December 10 and 17, 2001, January 21, 2002, and May 3, 2004.

The WWE televised matches feature the most prominent wrestlers in the game and, by means of multi-media excess, their star status is expanded to mythic proportions. Fireworks, signature music, and video footage shown on gigantic screens introduce the wrestlers to the ring. Theatrical lighting focuses attention on their every move while multiple cameras capture their activity in the ring and backstage, in close-up and wide angle, from above, below, and at the level the mat. By means of "mic work," the wrestlers boast and brag of their successes, denigrate their opponents, and coax or goad the audience. In response, the live spectators collectively cheer or boo their hero or villain. Familiar catch phrases used repeatedly by wrestlers spark call and response interaction from the fans. Similarly, the signature music cues the fans to rise to their feet and shout their approval or disgust for the entering combatant. Hundreds of spectators carry posters praising, parodying, or defiling the characters in the ring.

In my description of the televised event, I cover the range of components surveyed above and also address the techniques wrestlers use to create the illusion of violence. In my analysis, I focus on the home viewing experience, and discuss the components that are significant to the television viewer, such as camera work and announcer commentary. As is the case throughout the study, I am interested in if and how the components veil their operations and indulge the viewer in the illusion of real combat or expose their operations, by accident or deliberately, thereby provoking critical reflection. Due to the multi-media excess of the television event, the components often operate in both directions, the excess indulging in and thereby exposing itself.

The fourth site of wrestling performance I entertain is the activity on the Internet. Currently, there are thousands of wrestling websites that fans can visit for diverse reasons. The sites I describe and analyze in Chapter Five represent the range of different possibilities available to the fan and non-fan alike. The World Wrestling Entertainment website offers visitors information and plenty of hype on WWE programming, wrestlers, and merchandise. Fans can exchange views in the “community” chat room and enter contests to win prizes. The site is a slick, high-powered performance of corporate self-promotion. Smart fans who want to discuss wrestling issues in a more serious or specific manner tend to frequent other websites, such as the Lords of Pain.

The Lords of Pain website provides fans with information regarding current developments in wrestling and links to discussion forums. There, they can discuss diverse topics and as they relate to specific wrestling organizations, such as the WWE, the National Wrestling Alliance, and other independent and international promotions. I spent a lot of time in the forums listening to fans voice their opinions on various issues,

such as the development of a character vis-à-vis a wrestler's career and the current promotion of "Arab-American" characters by the WWE.

The Kayfabe Memories website is committed to collecting and preserving the history of wrestling, particular the histories of regional organizations. It charges smart fans to help with the collection and documentation and, in discussion forums, enables their friendly exchange of information, trivia, lore, opinions, and memories regarding wrestling history.

The Gulf Coast Wrestling Magazine represents the wealth of online newsletters and magazines produced by individuals and organizations. Bob Liddil authors the magazine I focus on, which currently contains thirty essays Liddil has written on wrestling promotions in Pensacola, Florida. Liddil is an avid wrestling fan and his enthusiasm for wrestling is contagious. In his essays, he enjoys playing the role of a wrestling "mark" in order to advance certain points regarding the aims and operations of professional wrestling in the past and present.

Wrestling Observer and Wrestling Perspective are newsletters that purport to offer factual, insider information on the world of wrestling. The Wrestling Observer focuses on current events while Wrestling Perspective tends toward a historical viewpoint. In both cases, the approach is investigatory and critical. As the editors of Wrestling Perspective claim, they "dedicate [their] pages to high quality analysis of the wrestling business," "tackle important issues and put them under a microscope" (Wrestling Perspective.com). On both websites, visitors can read one or two full length articles and synopses of others that are printed in full in the newsletters they send to subscribers.

In my analysis of the websites, in Chapter Five, I compare and contrast the operations of the various sites, concentrating how they inscribe a certain role for the fan, which he uses to interact with the site and other visitors.

Method

In this section, I discuss the theories and perspectives that I use to analyze professional wrestling in the upcoming chapters. The selected theorists are concerned with many of the same subject areas I discussed in the previous section, such as wrestling, the mass media, class politics, lowbrow cultural forms and conventions, reader or audience interaction and critical engagement. Generally, the authors are concerned with cultural products that expose and allow the reader-audience to scrutinize the operations and implied values of the production. They support textual and other activities that reveal rather than veil their constructed nature and that refuse a singular perspective on or given truth regarding experience. Lastly, they are concerned with how audiences receive and respond to messages, for instance, as passive consumers or active producers.

In Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum, Harris attributes Barnum's successful marketing of questionable or fraudulent displays to an "operational aesthetic" that encouraged audiences to investigate how they worked (57). According to Harris, Barnum's art was successful because it stimulated the audience's "delight in observing process and examining for literal truth" (79). Barnum's displays and exhibits exposed their operations for examination, encouraged debate regarding the truth or falsity of the displayed items, and privileged the viewer's evaluation of them. If viewers deemed the items to be false, they debated the merits and drawbacks of the created illusion.

Harris asserts that Barnum's operational aesthetic was successful because it reproduced the public character and values of the mid nineteenth century. In other words, Barnum understood his audience. According to Harris, the social-historical conditions of the time gave rise to a growing faith in science, technological progress, egalitarian self-confidence, and a belief in democratic ideals.

[The conditions and beliefs] combined to make many Americans certain of their own opinions – and so, easy prey for the hoaxers. And these traits were supplemented by the sheer exhilaration of debate, the utter fun of the opportunity to learn and evaluate whether the subject was an ancient slave, an exotic mermaid or a politician's honor. Barnum's audiences found the encounter with potential frauds exciting. (75)

Throughout the study, I theorize that professional wrestling is an operational aesthetic. I draw comparisons between Harris's understanding of Barnum's operations and those of the various wrestling performances I undertake. I am compelled to adopt this perspective because just as Barnum's audiences enjoyed investigating how something worked, regardless of its truth or falsity, so too wrestling fans are intrigued by how and how well the illusion of wrestling operates, understanding from the start that wrestling is an illusion, preplanned and worked on. Dave Meltzer, a writer for Wrestling Observer, assumes an operational perspective when he observes that a punch or kick "shouldn't land hard, but it should land. If it misses, it is bad art" ("Re: Wrestling Research"). Similarly, Sharon Mazer uncovers an operational indicator when she observes that wrestling fans "don't so much suspend disbelief as they sustain it while looking for moments in which to believe. They look to see the fake and to see through the fake to the real" (Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle 6). For instance, they might ask if and, if so, how well a wrestler pulls back on a punch in order to create the illusion of a full force blow. Like Barnum's exhibits, I assert that wrestling performances

encourage fans, smart fans in particular, to debate the execution of the wrestling illusion while still leaving room for belief in the extraordinary fiction created by the event.

A key aspect in the operational aesthetic of wrestling is that which Roland Barthes terms its “spectacle of excess.” In “The World of Wrestling,” Barthes writes that wrestling is a “sum of spectacles” that offers “excessive gestures, exploited to the limit of their meaning” (15-16). Barthes’ work is referenced in almost every scholarly study of wrestling to date because, in the essay, Barthes is able to articulate with eloquence a component that is integral to the mat game, namely, icons of excess that together create the spectacle. Barthes observes that wrestlers move and react in such a way that they “constantly help the reading of the fight by means of gestures, attitudes and mimicry which make the intention utterly obvious” (18). In this way, wrestling becomes a sum of spectacles because “it is each moment which is intelligible” (16). Barthes’ perspective implies that every signifier in a wrestling performance communicates socially-shared codes, or myths, that the viewer is able to access. Each punch or kick is a visual and audible icon, carried to its extreme. Each grimace, groan, or glare is projected with force and clarity into the audience. In contrast to wrestlers, boxers often try to hide their pain because, in the sport of boxing, if the athlete is visibly hurt, the match may be called in order to safeguard against further injury. In other words, in legitimate sport, a signifier of pain signifies actual physical damage whereas, in wrestling, it does not. A wrestler may appear to be thoroughly beaten, bloodied, even semi-conscious, only to rise from the mat to defeat his opponent.

Since all the components in wrestling are excessive in their scale, together they create a spectacle that not only indulges the spectator in the desired illusion (in the grand

myths, in Barthes' case) but, potentially, calls attention to the illusion – due to the sheer amount and scale of excess. Further, while each icon may be “utterly obvious” in meaning, the assemblage of icons (particularly in a multi-media wrestling event) may not necessarily cohere in the meanings they transmit. Contradictory, parodic, or ironic meanings may surface and thereby expose gaps in the production and/of myth.

Another aspect of Barthes' work that influences my perspective on wrestling concerns his distinction between readerly and writerly texts. In S/Z, Barthes advocates that the “goal of literary work . . . is to make the reader no longer a consumer but a producer of the text” (4). He proceeds to argue that, in large part, literature consists of readerly texts. Readerly texts assume to offer a single, clear perspective on the material and do not encourage alternative perspectives or invite scrutiny of their operations. They tell us what they are about and how we should read them. “Instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier” (like the author), the reader is left only with the opportunity to “accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a *referendum*” (4; emphasis in original). A writerly text, on the other hand, allows us to enter into it through many doors, to “appreciate what *plural* constitutes it,” such as multiple language styles and perspectives including our own. The writerly text is “*ourselves writing*” in response to the source text (5; emphases in original). I contend that components of professional wrestling, such as the excess of signifiers or the explicit inclusion of fans, operate in a writerly way. They invite the spectator to author or take part in authoring the event.

John Fiske extends Barthes' distinction between readerly and writerly texts by adding a third model of textual practice, which he calls producerly texts. In Television Culture, Fiske explains that a readerly text is one “which ‘reads’ easily, does not

foreground its own nature as discourse, and appears to promote a singular meaning which is not that of the text but of the real” (94). Conversely, a writerly text is “multiple and full of contradictions, it foregrounds its own nature as discourse and resists coherence or unity” (94). It requires that the reader-viewer develop new discursive competencies. Fiske contends that most television programming is best thought of as a producerly text. The producerly text does not challenge viewers’ discursive competencies, but appeals to those they already possess and asks that those competencies be used in a “self-interested, productive way” (95). That is, viewers of television texts bring their own idiosyncrasies, experiences, and values to the text, engage and interact with it, and thereby produce meanings that bring them pleasure. If we integrate Barthes’ and Fiske’s textual models, we might ask if there are producerly texts on television that are readerly and texts that drift toward writerly operations. Perhaps, readerly producer texts are those that uphold the fictive illusion through realism, or “the real,” whereas writerly producer texts do not. In one way or another, they expose “the real” illusion as fictive. Rather than a “referendum” that tells us that we see and hear is “real,” writerly producer texts invite us to scrutinize the operations of realism and imagine alternative possibilities, calling on experiences and discourses we already possess.

In Television Culture, Fiske also addresses professional wrestling. He argues that televised wrestling is an “extreme” form of programming that produces pleasure because it invites the audience to “evade, resist, or scandalize ideology and social control” (240). According to Fiske, by resisting social norms and conventions, the viewer experiences pleasure. In this case, resistance is not revolutionary in the social sense. Rather, it signifies individual agency. The “extremes” encourage the viewer to refuse “the social

identity proposed by the dominant ideology and the social control that goes with it” (241).

To inform his perspective on wrestling, Fiske draws on M. M. Bakhtin’s theories of carnival, where people “celebrate . . . temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and the established order” (Bakhtin10). In carnival, the established order and the forms and conventions that uphold it are turned upside-down, temporally; thereby, new or alternative social identities and relationships are imagined and performed. Key traits of Bakhtin’s carnival are grotesque realism and carnival laughter. The first responds to the topographical division of the public body into high and low domains and, as Bakhtin explains, “the essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (19-20). Carnival laughter is excessive. It “is the laughter of all the people” and “it is universal in scope,” directed at everyone, “including the carnival’s participants.” It also “is ambivalent. . . . It asserts and denies, it buries and revives” (Bakhtin 12).

As Fiske sees it, professional wrestling is a carnival of “excessive bodies” that “perform . . . excessively physical” actions. The bodies and actions do not signify abstract aims or ideas but, rather, their “*presence*” as material bodies of muscle, flesh, blood, sweat, guts, groans, screams, cries (Fiske 243-244). Due to their excessive, physical presence, they invert social order since social order is demonstrated through bodies of discipline; that is, bodies that operate in terms of abstract ideals, such as “good taste” in body display. However, the excessive bodies are signs in so far as they are an

icon for excessive bodies; for more than one; for the populace mass that mocks itself through excess in order to mock and resist that which it is not.

In my study, I apply the terminology of carnival in a general, descriptive way. While I believe that professional wrestling inverts social norms regarding physical display and excess, sport and performance, and class hierarchy, I also believe that professional wrestling sustains social norms. Specifically, it reproduces a social order where aggressive, heterosexual male bodies are in control of public space. Furthermore, throughout the history of professional wrestling and in current WWE practice, ideal male bodies are constructed and advanced in wrestling performances. They are “Supermen” who take themselves or, at least, their physical appearance and athleticism, quite seriously. In short, carnival degradation and inversion are not fully realized in wrestling performances.

As I noted above, Harris’s operational aesthetic and Barthes’ and Fiske’s theories of wrestling and textual forms recall key aspects of Brecht’s aims for theatre. For Brecht, the most important element in the theatrical event is the spectator. The theatre event can not bring about social-political change on its own; however, it can impact the public to think and, potentially, take action in productive ways. According to Brecht, in the theatre of realist illusion, “we see entire rows of human beings transported into a peculiar doped state, wholly passive” (89). The dopey state is due to the emotions of the hero being “fobbed off” on the audience, who then experiences the drama vicariously through the hero and his or her emotions (9). In Barthes’ terms, through Brecht’s eyes, the theatre of illusion is a readerly text. Instead, Brecht envisions a writerly or producerly theatre that foregrounds its operations as “worked on” or constructed. By defamiliarizing the

familiar conventions of illusionist theatre, the event interrupts the spectator's identification with the hero and encourages him to investigate the highlighted operations instead. The defamiliarization/alienation process provokes the spectator to stand back from the drama periodically and question its operations, how they work and why, and form an opinion regarding the same. In turn, it is Brecht's hope that audiences will see how their social reality, like the theatrical reality, is a construct too with operations that can be de- and re-constructed. "By these means," Brecht writes, "we would soon have a theatre full of experts, just as one has sporting arenas full of experts" (44).

For Brecht, sporting events offered a model for the kind of theatre (and social reality) he envisioned. They made contact with the public and their interests, they were fun, and they treated the spectator as an expert.

When people in sporting establishments buy their tickets they know exactly what is going to take place; and that is exactly what does take place once they are in their seats: viz. highly trained persons developing their peculiar powers in the way most suited to them, with the greatest sense of responsibility yet in such a way as to make one feel that they are doing it primarily for their own fun. (Brecht 6)

Brecht's observations seem to anticipate Fiske's concept of a producerly text in so far as the sports scene does not challenge the spectators' discursive competencies, but appeals to those they already possess and asks that those competencies be used in a "self-interested, productive way" (95).

I cannot say if wrestling performances are the kind of agency Brecht had in mind for prompting critical thinking. However, I do propose that components in wrestling performances show their operations and thereby stimulate a critically engaged audience rather than a wholly passive, emotion driven one. Further, if we agree with Brecht that

critical inquiry and forming an opinion is fun, then perhaps we have an idea why professional wrestling is so popular; why it appeals to so many people.

Significance

The study I undertake here contributes to scholarship in several areas. First, it differs from other studies on professional wrestling in that it views wrestling in several different contexts and by means of a perspective that values the exposed more so than the illusionist operations of wrestling performances. The study also enables the wrestling audience to speak for itself in interviews, natural sound recordings, and by means of the online community. While other critical studies have analyzed wrestling in terms of dramatic conventions (Craven and Moseley), jargon (Kerrick), symbolic aspects (Workman), stereotypes (Ball), spectacle (Saunders), melodrama (Jenkins, ““Never Trust a Snake””: WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama”), and liminality (Feigenbaum), very little attention has been paid to how wrestling operations prompt critical investigation on the part of the fans and across diverse production sites. Further, the design of the study allows me to test my theory of an operational aesthetic in multiple contexts, which may expose the limitations of the theory but also in terms of the different production apparatus, such as the live event, television, and the Internet. In other words, limitations in the theory may highlight limitations in the particular apparatus.

The study contributes to scholarship on the history of professional wrestling in the US by viewing that history in terms of the constancy, emergence, and disappearance of wrestling forms and conventions. Further, the influence of Levine’s study on my perspective situates wrestling within a broader critique of class and cultural politics. While several wrestling histories have been written, few view the history of wrestling

through a critical-analytical perspective that broadens the significance of wrestling to US cultural practices and politics generally.

The study also contributes to critical scholarship on popular culture in the US. While John Fiske advances a view of popular culture, its people and products, as politically astute, others, such as James Twitchell, do not. In Carnival Culture: The Trashing of Taste in America, Twitchell argues that popular culture is “vapid,” “noxious,” “junk” (254). While I am not prepared to dismiss professional wrestling as morally corrupt junk, Twitchell’s point is worth pursuing. As I noted above at the end of my discussion on carnival, professional wrestling does seem to perpetuate hetero-normative masculine privilege in our society, which is somewhat noxious. Furthermore, the noted politics play out in diverse cultural contexts besides that of the “popular.” However, since professional wrestling also includes cultural practices that we might understand as productive, it appears that, in professional wrestling, there are different directions of effectivity as regards its conservation/alteration of social norms. It is my hope that the study illustrates this dynamic; namely, that ideologies are constantly contested and that popular culture is the arena in which that contest is most vividly displayed.

This study is significant to the field of performance studies because it investigates the relations between the various producers of the wrestling performance. Elemental to my theory that professional wrestling is an operational aesthetic is the understanding that the spectator plays a part in producing the performance. The fan’s experience or understanding of this point – i.e., that he is a producer too – may explain the popular appeal of professional wrestling. Notably, the appeal is attributable to the interplay of

illusionist and non-illusionist practices and, rather than view either in terms of an accept or reject referendum, the fan may well engage the challenges of both.

A final area of significance is situated in the final chapter of the study. In Chapter Six, I examine a current trend in wrestling known as backyard or extreme wrestling. Backyard wrestlers have appropriated many of the operations of professional wrestling and, likewise, they construct their performance narratives in multiple mediums, such as live events, videotape and the Internet. Further, some backyard wrestlers participate in and prompt in their audiences the “sheer exhilaration of debate” (Harris 75). By means of parodic irony, they critique conventions of established wrestling performances, such as those produced by WWE, while they also veil and expose their own operations, teasing the audience to detect the “work” of wrestling performance.

CHAPTER TWO PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING: A HISTORY

To understand the performance operations of professional wrestling today, it is helpful to look at wrestling's past. As with the production history of any cultural expression, the history or histories of professional wrestling highlight less a coherent evolution of a practice and more so a constantly shifting assemblage of cultural forms and conventions, pieced together by people in light of changing circumstances (c.f., Clifford 338; Roach 28-29). A re-view of wrestling history, then, reveals the constancy of certain forms and conventions, the emergence and integration of alternative practices, and the withering of others, temporarily or, to date, permanently. By tracking the shifts in how wrestling was and is performed, I gain an understanding of not only what informs its productions today, but how the shifts are indicative of wrestling "groups negotiating their identity in [shifting] contexts of domination and exchange" by "patch[ing] themselves together" in different ways (Clifford 338). While, within today's broad cultural exchange, professional wrestlers and fans are constructed as emotion driven enactors and consumers of the product (i.e., non reflexive cultural dupes), their patching together of an operational aesthetic, one which provokes both passionate involvement and critical analysis, suggests otherwise. By reviewing the history of professional wrestling, I hope to discover traces that enable my understanding of how the current operational aesthetic works and why it is an integrated part of the performance of professional wrestling.

In this chapter, I offer a history of professional wrestling in the US with the aforementioned aims in mind. I document what I have pieced together from the historical archive, noting shifts in wrestling practice in light of changing circumstances. In the

concluding section, I summarize the trends that appear to be at work in contemporary practice, paying special heed to those that display rather than veil the operations of professional wrestling. My purpose is not to offer conclusive proof regarding the operational aesthetic; rather, I am interested in what the history of professional wrestling provides me as regards my concerns.

A Much Mixed Affair

Aaron Feigenbaum observes that the history of professional wrestling is veiled in mystery. He writes,

After countless repetitions, certain accounts have come to be regarded as true; however, upon closer inspection, many of these stories simply do not hold up. What we are left with is a collection of stories and anecdotes whose details and circumstances remain something of a mystery and open to interpretation. Indeed, trying to figure out professional wrestling's past can sometimes be like trying to figure out a mystery. (40)

While all histories are mysteries and all historiography interpretive, Feigenbaum is correct to highlight the generalities in this case. The history of professional wrestling in the US is sketchy, downright murky, because until the 1980s few records were kept and those that do remain are dubious. Ironically, the paltry and questionable documentation actually reflects an aspect of wrestling history in so far as keeping (accurate) records ran contrary to the success of what was a scam in many cases. Without an official governing body to keep records and enforce rules, promoters often fabricated wrestlers' records in an effort to draw crowds and fix betting odds. The number of matches a wrestler had won or lost might be adjusted so as to minimize the accomplishments of an experienced wrestler or promote a fledgling as a well-seasoned pro. For similar reasons, promoters often invented championship titles for their wrestlers, such as "the Mid-South Middleweight Champion."

Poor records also were a result of the wrestling schedule. Wrestlers faced one another so many times that they often lost track of how many times they won or lost against a particular opponent. As *The Phantom of the Ring*, historian Ed Garea, asserts, “wrestling doesn’t have a history, it has a past” (Phantom, “The Founding Father”), and as “there is no wrestling history – we must write it ourselves” (Phantom, “Wrestling’s Founding Father”).

Historians who have set about to do just that agree that professional wrestling in the US emerged sometime after the Civil War (Archer 17; Ball 45; Feigenbaum 44; Greenberg 13; Morton and O’Brien 23; Saunders 33; Umbach and Johnson 15). Prior to and during the war, amateur wrestling was popular recreational sport. Derived from European practices, three styles of wrestling prevailed: Greco-Roman, catch-as-catch-can, and collar and elbow (Ball 44). The first two are common in amateur wrestling today, such as in high school, college, and Olympic competitions. In the Greco-Roman style, “tripping below the hip and all holds applied on the legs are prohibited. A fall occurs when both of a man’s shoulders touch the mat simultaneously” (Umbach and Johnson 17). The same is true in the catch-as-catch-can style although holding below the hip is permitted. In the collar and elbow style, the contestants must square off by placing one hand on their opponent’s shoulder and the other hand on their elbow. Tripping and holding below the hips are allowed and, to win the match, one man has to pin the other “at all four points, that is both shoulders and hips touch . . . the ground at the same time” (Morton and O’Brien 21). “Timing, balance, endurance, footwork and quickness” are key attributes of the collar and elbow style and often smaller men can best larger ones (Saunders 33). The latter became

popular among Union troops during the Civil War who used it as an inexpensive training method and to pass the time. After the war, veterans returned home with their skills and soon wrestling became a legitimate public sport, taking its place alongside boxing, horseracing, walking, and cycling competitions and often serving as “the main attraction at social gatherings and fairs” (Umbach and Johnson 15).

Prior to the war, public interest in sports was keen as evidenced by the number of sporting journals and newspapers accounts regarding sports (Morton and O’Brien 22). After the war, interest increased. Sports offered a respite from the serious concerns of reconstruction while they also reflected – were a symbolic enactment of – the competitive temperament of the reconstruction marketplace. Increased urbanization resulted in large crowds attending and demanding more sporting events, which in turn resulted in the commercialization of sports. People were willing to pay to see athletic competitions. “Interest was heightened [further] by growing newspaper coverage of local events as well as by telegraphed reports from around the country and by cabled sporting news from England” (Morton and O’Brien 24).

Along with the aforementioned sports, wrestling helped meet the public’s demand and burgeoning “love for sports” (Morton and O’Brien 24). So too, wrestling matches were covered in the sporting news, the accounts aiding its popularity and also testifying to the “confusion of styles, rules, titles” indicative of wrestling at this time (Morton and O’Brien 27). The “confusion” is apparent in the following accounts from 1880 and 1881:

William Muldoon, the wrestling policeman, and Thiebaud Bauer, the French athlete, wrestled last in Madison Square Garden, for a trophy valued at \$200 and the championship of the world in the Graeco-Roman [sic] style of wrestling. (“Muldoon Defeats Bauer” 2)

The match was the best two out of three falls, Devonshire style, catch as catch can, the English rules being strictly enforced. (“A Brutal Wrestling Match” 8)

Between 300 and 400 persons, including a dozen well dressed women, assembled in Terrace Garden Theatre last night to witness a “mixed wrestling-match between Muldoon, the Graeco-Roman [sic] champion, and John McMahon, the collar-and-elbow champion. They were to wrestle three falls – one Graeco-Roman [sic], one collar-and-elbow and one catch-as-catch-can style for a \$200 gold medal, emblematic of the mixed wrestling championship. (“A Much Mixed Affair” 2)

While the array of styles, rules, and titles does seem confusing, two counter points should be noted. First, the diversity challenges the reporters, and fans generally, to gain expertise in perceiving, articulating, and evaluating the differences; to invest themselves in the physical and discursive operations of wrestling. Second, the seeming confusion arises not only from the diverse styles practiced by wrestlers but from the lack of a regulatory organization to standardize rules and titles. The expectation that there be a governing body, however, reflects our mentality more so than it does those in the mid to late nineteenth century when such institutions did not exist or were in fledgling stages of development. In other words, the much mixed affair was less a problem, less “confusing” likely, to wrestling participants, reporters, and fans at the time than it is to us writing their histories today. Of course, as is Levine’s driving point in Highbrow/Lowbrow, efforts to tidy this motley mix were soon in coming. Riddled by class and race based fears in the aftermath of the war, the white middle and upper class citizenry would see to the emergence or strengthening of social and cultural institutions that would standardize and thereby segregate different people and practices. The sport of wrestling would be impacted variously by such efforts.

In its early development, however, professional wrestling was “unorganized.” Promoters, who at times were the contestants too, operated as independent contractors. On a match to match basis, they would challenge each other, agree upon rules, set a date, secure a location, advertise the match, sell tickets, and hold the event. According to Feigenbaum, because there was “little regulation” of the event, wrestling became a “haven for bettors and swindlers” (44). He also observes that matches at this time were “either . . . serious sporting events which were held in large arenas, theaters, and stadiums, or carnival attractions that were part of traveling vaudeville shows, circuses, and fairs (44). While generally accurate, what is unclear in Feigenbaum’s observation is why matches in large urban arenas were more “serious” than those held in traveling shows and carnivals. Gambling and swindling, as Feigenbaum rightly points out, were commonplace to wrestling regardless of where the match occurred. With money on the line, surely the matches in traveling shows were treated as “seriously” by the contestants and audience as those held in large urban venues. Also, because there were not enough skilled wrestlers in any one locale, urban or otherwise, to sustain wrestling careers, many wrestlers found themselves “on the road,” aiming to build a reputation that would land them a match in an urban center competing for the big bucks.

Carnival Wrestling

In the post bellum period, traveling shows of various kinds became a primary venue for staging wrestling matches. The wrestlers would compete in “At (or Athletic) Shows” and, typically, they would wear “colorful costumes” indicative of their “equally colorful nicknames, and fictionalized biographies” (Albano and Sugar 14). During the

shows, wrestlers competed against one another or accepted challenges from the audience. To make money, the promoter and wrestlers practiced a variety of scams. Often, the audience challenger was a “plant” or “confederate” who would meander through the crowd prior to the match, “strike up friendships and proclaim that he could beat any of the wrestlers if given the chance. Once he had convinced enough audience members of his ability and had secured their financial backing, the promoter would accept his challenge and all bets” (Feigenbaum 45). The plant then would lose the match and split the profits with the organizers. On occasions, the plant would “thrill the crowd by beating the strongman” (Greenberg 13). In either case, the match was “worked” and its outcome determined by how the audience wagered.

Sometimes the promoter would employ a “hooker.” Hookers were wrestlers who were able to apply crippling holds that disabled their opponents. Chapman explains that “true hookers . . . were able to lock a man’s joints – an elbow or an ankle or a knee – into a tight hold which, at best, was merely very painful and, at the worst, would result in a torn ligament, snapped tendon or badly broken bone” (36). On those occasions when a local tough guy was not part of the scam and proved to be particularly skilled, the hooker would use a “hook” move to injure or immobilize him. Thus, the match was ended before the local fighter could win any money. Still, some challengers could hold their own with carnival wrestlers. In such cases, “the hooker would maneuver [the challenger] into a backdrop, where he would be whacked on the head with a two-by-four by a confederate, ending his daredevilry and preserving the carnival’s money” (Albano and Sugar 15).

While scams were common in carnival contexts, carnivals and other transient venues served as fertile sites for scouting young talent, training aspiring wrestlers, building one's reputation, and stimulating interest in the sport. Two men, William Muldoon and Frank Gotch, contributed significantly to the latter, Muldoon rising to prominence through the carnivalesque site of the urban barroom and Gotch through his varied travels, from his rural homestead in Iowa to the Alaskan Yukon to Comiskey Park in Chicago.

Muldoon and Gotch

Often referred to as the “father of American wrestling,” William Muldoon is credited with moving wrestling from the carnival venue into the sporting arenas, ball parks, and theaters of urban America (Greenberg 14). A Civil War veteran, Muldoon had represented his unit at army wrestling matches during the war. Afterwards, he moved to New York City and became a policeman. In his spare time, he made extra money “fighting in bareknuckle bouts staged in the rough taverns of the Bowery district” (Morton and O'Brien 24). One tavern in particular, Harry Hill's saloon, had been a venue for backroom fistfights or wrestling matches since the 1860s. The saloon attracted large crowds, sports writers, and the infamous P. T. Barnum. Morton and O'Brien report that at Harry Hill's all the “requisites for professional sport” fell into place.

There were the men of the press to give coverage to matches, to stir up matches, to proclaim champions. There was Harry himself who provided the arena and carried the costs. But even more importantly, Harry set house rules and on occasion refereed so that the contest would be fair lest the rugged betting fans become an unruly mob. And of course there was a popular young star, Bill Muldoon. (Morton and O'Brien 25)

When Muldoon defeated the Frenchman, Thiebaud Bauer, in a highly publicized match, both Muldoon and professional wrestling emerged into the limelight. The New

York Times devoted “six paragraphs in its coverage” of the match, “an unheard of amount of print for a sport event at that time” (Morton and O’Brien 26). A Times sports writer noted that there “was an assemblage of nearly 4,000 persons to witness the struggle, and from appearances, the gathering was an unusually respectable one” (“Muldoon Defeats Bauer” 2). Wrestling was now a bona fide professional sport.

Muldoon may have been the father of professional wrestling, but it was Frank Gotch, “the peerless champion” and the “Humboldt Thunderbolt” (Griffin 11 & 13), who became the “first great superstar of American professional wrestling” (Feigenbaum 46). Gotch began wrestling in the late 1890s and held the title of world heavyweight champion from 1908 to 1913. However, historians question the fidelity of Gotch’s matches, particularly his title matches against George Hackenschmidt, the “Russian Lion.” Also, while Morton and O’Brien report that Gotch won “a career total of 154 out of 160 matches” (39), Griffin claims that Gotch’s “record shows almost a thousand championship bouts and many more exhibitions engaged in with his record almost unsullied” (13). Understanding Gotch, the man, is even more slippery. Feigenbaum describes him as a “master showman as well as an excellent wrestler” whose skill was so great that during his time no one questioned the “veracity of his matches” (47). However, Feigenbaum also notes that Gotch had a “reputation as a ruthless brute who took delight in maiming inferior wrestlers who were foolish enough to challenge him” (47). Griffin calls Gotch a “supreme bluffer” who was “short-tempered,” “irritable,” and took a “fiendish delight in breaking bones and maiming less fortunate and skilled adversaries” (12). Gotch also is known as the “peerless champion” (Griffin 11), and wrestling historian Mike Chapman writes that

Gotch was so popular he “remained in the public spotlight for decades after his untimely death (278). Whatever the case, Gotch was a national celebrity who participated in wrestling’s first ““match of the century”” (quoted in Greenberg 15), and his impact on professional wrestling is unparalleled.

Frank Gotch was born in Humboldt, Iowa on April 27, 1878. He was the son of German immigrants and grew up on a farm. He also was a gifted athlete, exceptionally strong, and more than able to defend himself in a fight. The story goes that Dan McLeod, a professional wrestler, ventured through Gotch’s hometown in April 1899. According to Chapman, McLeod figured he could earn a few dollars by wrestling one of the local tough guys. He ended up wrestling Frank Gotch. Just less than a grueling hour later, McLeod was able to pin Gotch and win the match. In Griffin’s account, however, the outcome is reversed. McLeod “tangle[d] with the rural pride and was soundly trounced for his pains” (13). While the outcome of the match is unclear, it is evident that McLeod was so impressed with Gotch that he recommended him to Farmer Burns, a “famous trainer of athletes and a wrestler of no mean ability himself” (Griffin 13). Together, Gotch and Burns became a formidable wrestling team.

From Burns, Gotch learned the finer points of wrestling in addition to strength training and conditioning. In 1900, he fought many minor bouts under Burns’ tutelage before learning of wrestling opportunities in the Alaskan Yukon Territory. Hearing that miners and loggers were eager to wager money on wrestling matches, Gotch moved to Alaska. There, he wrestled under the pseudonym, Frank Kennedy, fearful that his reputation would scare away potential bettors. Within a year, Gotch was the Yukon

heavyweight wrestling champion and returned home with “over thirty thousand dollars” (Chapman 49). Gotch now set his sights on a world championship.

Once again, Gotch trained with Farmer Burns and the pair wrestled publicly several times to stimulate interest in their rivalry. Gotch then defeated his mentor Burns and “lay claim to a title shot against the ‘World Champion’ Tom Jenkins” (Feigenbaum 46). With each victory Gotch gained increased publicity and the “mat game developed into the greatest attention getter of all sports prominent in that era” (Griffin 13). On January 28, 1904, Gotch defeated Tom Jenkins and became “World Champion.” But, like so much else in wrestling, the title of “World Champion” was in dispute.

For reasons that are unclear, Jenkins refused to “relinquish claim to his title” (Feigenbaum 47). One reason for his refusal may have been that most of the country was unaware of his defeat. Griffin reports that in “Gotch’s day, the result of a bout usually remained the private property of the local fans and newspapers readers” (14). Another reason is offered by Ed Garea, a.k.a. The Phantom of the Ring, who believes Jenkins agreed to lose his title to different wrestlers at different times for financial gain (in Feigenbaum 82). Morton and O’Brien argue there were two matches between Gotch and Jenkins. Gotch won the 1904 match and Jenkins won the rematch a year later in New York (38). What is clear is that Jenkins lost a match to George Hackenschmidt in 1905, after which Hackenschmidt declared himself World Champion. Three more years would pass before Hackenschmidt and Gotch would meet in the ring for a championship showdown.

George Hackenschmidt, the Russian Lion, claimed wrestling prominence in Europe first. Also known as “Hack,” he was an “avid physical culturist” (Feigenbaum 48), or what we would call a weight lifter and body builder today. In addition to weight lifting, Hack also was an active runner, swimmer, and cyclist and toured the European continent “preaching the values of physical culture” (Feigenbaum 48). In 1898, Hack won the amateur Greco-Roman wrestling tournament in Vienna and by June 1900 he was wrestling professionally (Gentle 1). In 1901, he won the “prestigious Paris tournament and was proclaimed ‘World Champion’” (Feigenbaum 48). A few years later, Gotch and Jenkins wrangled over another “World Champion” title in the US, which Hackenschmidt addressed by defeating Jenkins. Nonetheless, the public “clamor[ed] for a match between Gotch and Hackenschmidt” (Feigenbaum 48), a clamor that did not cease until the two met in 1908.

Between 1905 and 1908, Gotch continued to wrestle and win victories over opponents from all over the US and the world. Gotch and his handlers knew that Gotch’s superiority spelled trouble in that the audience might become bored with Gotch if all his matches were predictable wins. To stimulate fan interest, Gotch and his team decided to stage a match in which Gotch would lose. Feigenbaum explains,

[On] December 1, 1906, Gotch and his handlers staged “the first great upset” in professional wrestling. Fred Beall [or Beell], a good, but certainly not great wrestler from Wisconsin, defeated Gotch and won the “World Championship.” Beall’s victory renewed interest in the game, and a rematch between the two was quickly scheduled. A few weeks later, the two met in Kansas City, Missouri. Gotch won the rematch and reclaimed his title. (47)

Griffin describes Gotch as a “consummate showman” who was “running out of opponents” and lost to Beall after he was “‘pitched’ against a ring post and was unable to continue”

(14). Whether a shoot or work, Gotch's defeat appeared to have the desired effect on the wrestling audience as capacity crowds came out to see Gotch wrestle.

Finally, on April 3, 1908, the "match of the century" took place as "Gotch and Hackenschmidt squared off in one of the biggest and most controversial bouts in wrestling history" (Feigenbaum 48). The match was staged at Chicago's Dexter Park Pavilion near the stockyards. Chapman reports that the pavilion could hold over ten thousand fans and there was a capacity crowd for the match. The contest lasted a little over two hours and ended when Hackenschmidt refused to continue, yielding the match to Gotch. After two hours of grappling with one another, Gotch was able to throw the Russian Lion to the mat. Gotch then applied a toe hold, "the most dreaded hold in all of wrestling" (Chapman 161). The match was scheduled for two falls, that is, whoever pinned their opponent twice would be declared the victor. But, after two hours of fighting, Hackenschmidt apparently had had enough. He accepted the first fall and forfeited the second fall and the world championship. Afterwards, Hack complained that Gotch had fouled him repeatedly during the match by punching, biting, and gouging his eyes. He also claimed that Gotch had "won by oiling his body to slip out of holds and greasing his hair with a turpentine pomade which he rubbed into [Hackenschmidt's] eyes" (Morton and O'Brien 39). By the Russian Lion's account, he was an honest wrestler relying on skill, strength, and determination alone while Gotch was as a cheat who would stop at nothing to win the championship.

Marcus Griffin apparently believed Hack's claims. It is unclear whether Griffin attended the match, although, in Fall Guys: The Barnums of Bounce, he reports,

The olfactory odor from the Yards has never since equalled [sic] that left by the contest's aftermath. It was one of the most disgraceful exhibitions ever witnessed

by a capacity audience of enthusiastic mat devotees, and it started the ball rolling down through the years toward the general discrediting of wrestling and grapplers. . . . Hackenschmidt received the rawest deal ever accorded a visiting foreign athlete defending his leg of the championship title. It was evident the Gotch crowd wanted to win an undisputed claim to the championship, and the Humboldt Horror started right out for blood by gouging, heeling, slugging, biting and kneeling his foreign adversary. (15)

Years later, Hackenschmidt continued to maintain that he was fouled during the first match with Gotch. Griffin quotes Hack in a report from the Manchester News of England:

“Gotch’s thumbs and fingers were constantly hovering near my eyes and when our heads came together he rubbed his hair into my eyes so that some terrible chemical exuded from his hair and trickled into my eyes, causing intense pain and blinding me. And the match went on with Gotch getting worse in his tactics. He gouged me and pulled my hair – and yet no word of protest was raised by the referee . . . presumably in the interests of fair play and American sportsmanship. After two hours my body was exhausted. I could scarcely breathe or swallow, I was done in, trying to cope with conditions that were a disgrace to Gotch and his country. So in the end I pushed Gotch aside and walked off the mat and Gotch won, but I wasn’t beaten by Gotch, but by the oil which had been rubbed into his body during his many months of training for the bout for me.” (15)

Gotch, of course, denied using any underhanded tactics and claimed he beat Hackenschmidt fairly.

In 1908, wrestling was considered a legitimate athletic contest. Morton and O’Brien use the phrase “early legitimate title matches” when they refer to the first two Gotch-Hackenschmidt bouts (39). However, Feigenbaum argues that the first match was a work. Feigenbaum alleges that since “Hackenschmidt was to receive a bigger share of the purse than the more popular Gotch, it is reasonable to assume, that Hackenschmidt was to drop the match to Gotch” (49). In this light, Hack’s allegations that Gotch cheated appear to be a strategy to protect his own reputation and to stimulate interest in a rematch, which indeed took place three years later on September 4, 1911.

The Gotch-Hackenschmidt rematch was staged in Comiskey Park, a baseball stadium built by Charles Comiskey, owner of the Chicago White Sox. A crowd of over thirty thousand (Chapman claims thirty-three, Feigenbaum thirty-seven, and Ball forty thousand) turned out to watch the bout between the two wrestlers. It was to be a best out of three falls match. How it became the “greatest fiasco ever perpetrated on the American public” remains in question to this day (Griffin 59).

While it is apparent that Hackenschmidt came to the contest with a knee injury, the cause and severity of the injury are debated. Griffin quotes Hackenschmidt as saying he was injured by Dr. Benjamin Roller during a training session (59). Roller was a well respected wrestler who was helping Hack get into shape for the match. Griffin implies that Roller was hired by Gotch’s camp to injure Hackenschmidt. However, Greenberg claims that Gotch “installed a hooker named Ad Santell in Hackenschmidt’s training camp,” and that it was Santell, not Roller, who “purposely injured the challenger’s knee” (15). Likewise, Albano and Sugar allege that Santell was the hooker who did damage to Hack’s knee (18). Others believe that Gotch had nothing to do with Hack’s injury.

Historians also debate whether the match was a “work.” Paul MacArthur of Wrestling Perspective writes simply, “Gotch/Hack matches were works” (MacArthur). Others specify that there was an agreement between the two wrestlers to let Hackenschmidt pin Gotch one time during the match. This “worked” element would make the contest seem more competitive and appease the fans, many of whom had wagered on the outcome. Some historians believe Gotch agreed to the tactic, but then double crossed the injured Hack and quickly pinned him twice. Others believe there was no such

agreement. Garea speculates that Gotch saw that Hack was injured, became furious that the injury had been withheld from him, and quickly dispatched the Russian in two quick falls (in Feigenbaum 51). Was Gotch still angry that Hack had accused him of cheating in the first match? Or did Gotch really hire a hooker to do his dirty work and then intentionally humiliate Hackenschmidt in the ring? Whatever the case, wrestling was tainted by accusations of cheating and fixed matches. The public began to question the veracity of the sport.

Although the two Gotch-Hackenschmidt bouts aroused suspicions among many wrestling fans, Frank Gotch retained his superstar status. He even went on tour with a stage play called All About a Bout. Gotch continued wrestling competitively until 1913 when he retired as world champion. From 1913 to 1915, he wrestled in exhibitions and for a time toured with the Sells-Floto circus. Gotch offered two hundred and fifty dollars to any man who could last fifteen minutes in the ring with him. He never paid once. By 1917, Frank Gotch was dead of kidney failure brought on by uremic poisoning. He was thirty-nine years old. Gotch's name and popularity endured for decades, particularly in the state of Iowa, and many historians still rank him as the greatest wrestler of all time (Chapman 278).

Wrestling in Decline

In 1915, wrestling crowned another champion, Joe Stecher. Feigenbaum notes that "Stecher's uneventful reign lasted two years and ended with another black eye for the wrestling business" (51). Griffin points out that while the Gotch-Hackenschmidt matches were controversial, the "game didn't really begin to fall into disrepute . . . until Stecher and

Earl Caddock . . . tangled in Omaha on April 9, 1917” (16-17). Stecher was, and is, highly regarded by experts as a technical wrestler who used his powerful legs in a scissor hold to defeat many of his opponents. Stecher became world champion at the age of twenty-two, the youngest ever, but always seemed to labor in the shadow of the great Frank Gotch.

No surprise, the details of the Stecher-Caddock match are unclear. Apparently, the pair was scheduled to wrestle a best of three falls match. Stecher won the first fall and Caddock the second. During early wrestling matches, wrestlers took breaks after each fall and often retired to their dressing room for a rest period. After the second fall, Stecher refused to return to the ring and “Caddock was named victor by ‘default’” (Griffin 17). Understandably, spectators and bettors alike were upset by the unexplained outcome and it “plunged the wrestling business into a deep crisis” (Feigenbaum 51). Why did Stecher refuse to return? Perhaps he was too exhausted to continue. Maybe he was injured. In his online biographical essay, “Joe Stecher,” Steven Yohe argues that, while Stecher claims he was never told to return to the ring, Stecher and Caddock were actually in cahoots. Stecher agreed to lose to Caddock to increase public interest in their rivalry and then, in a later match, he would defeat Caddock to reclaim the title (Yohe). If a staged rematch was the plan, it was dashed by US involvement in World War I. Both Stecher and Caddock enlisted in the military and served during the war.

With the outbreak of World War I, public attention turned to the war effort. Young men, among them many wrestlers, joined the military and served overseas. Much like today, sports or entertainment seemed trivial in light of the deaths and devastation wrought by war. Further, the Gotch-Hackenschmidt and Stecher-Caddock matches raised serious

questions about wrestling in the mind of the public, as did other less notable cases. Across the country, wrestling fans witnessed matches with dubious outcomes and, as the “nineteen twenties began, the future of wrestling as a viable enterprise was in serious doubt” (Feigenbaum 52). Over the years, wrestling had gained immense popularity, from its practice in the Civil War camps and barrooms, to the county fairs and carnivals, to the larger outdoor pavilions and major league stadiums. In the early 1900s, Frank Gotch, George Hackenschmidt, and many others were highly paid athletes adored by Americans and Europeans alike. But, by 1919, the “wrestling game” had become “the smelliest sport in the world” and the word “wrestler . . . synonymous with ‘gypper’” (Griffin 17). How could wrestling recapture the public’s imagination and reclaim its place in popular culture?

The Gold Dust Trio

By the end of World War I, wrestling’s image was tarnished by charges that matches were fixed. Additionally, audiences were bored with wrestling as a sport. Wrestling matches could be lengthy affairs that consisted of little more than two men pushing one another around the ring or lying on the mat with their arms and legs entwined. Typically, the matches were the best of three falls, which meant one wrestler had to pin the other twice to win the match. In between falls, there was a rest period of several minutes. Regarding a Muldoon-Miller bout, Morton and O’Brien observe, “Muldoon’s first title defense against William Miller, a fellow strongman, pugilist and wrestler, was a dull though evenly fought match that dragged on more than six hours and ended in a draw. Fair epic struggles, unfortunately, do not bring back paying customers” (26). Similarly, the first Gotch versus Hackenschmidt match lasted over two hours.

Like contemporary collegiate and Olympic style wrestling, the commonplace style of the early twentieth century required wrestlers to spend a lot of their time down on the mat, attempting to pin their opponent. Termed “scientific,” this style was characterized by rule-bound maneuvers and holds of strength and endurance that progressed, or seemed to progress, slowly. By 1919, crowds no longer found this style to be entertaining and their attendance at bouts dwindled. Thus, the time was right for a new approach and such an approach was sparked by three men who came to be known as the Gold Dust Trio. They were Ed “Strangler” Lewis, Billy Sandow, and Joseph “Toots” Mondt.

Sandow and Lewis met in Louisville, Kentucky. Sandow was a wrestling promoter and, one night, one of his wrestlers walked out on a match. Scrambling to find an opponent for Yussif Hussane, known as the “Terrible Turk,” Sandow called on Robert Fredericks, a local wrestler and wrestling coach. Besides fighting Hussane, Sandow wanted Fredericks to drop or lose the match quickly so that Sandow and Hussane could catch a late night train out of town. Fredericks was less than cooperative:

[He] explained [to Sandow] that he was a coach in the area, and if he did not give at least a decent account of himself, his reputation would be ruined. Sandow was furious at Fredericks and suggested that Hussane may as well shoot and embarrass Fredericks. Fredericks accepted the challenge, and not only lasted more than twenty minutes, but also defeated “the Terrible Turk.” (Feigenbaum 53)

Sandow took the train out of Louisville and showed up three days later in “Chicago with a new competitor for the grapplers to cope with. He was, of course, none other than Robert Julius Fredericks . . . who had changed his name to ‘Ed ‘Strangler’ Lewis’” (Griffin 18). Apparently, Fredericks pirated his new name from a wrestler of the late 1800s, Evan

“Strangler” Lewis (Greenberg 17). Like the earlier version, this Strangler relied on a headlock or strangulation hold to subdue his opponents.

Joseph “Toots” Mondt joined up with Sandow and Lewis after training with Farmer Burns. Mondt also worked in vaudeville and as a carnival wrestler. Burns recommended Mondt to Lewis and Sandow and he joined their camp to serve as a “sparring partner, trainer, sometime opponent and valuable policeman” (Phantom, “The Founding Father”). In wrestling terminology, a policeman enforces the rules or agreements between wrestlers. For example, two wrestlers agree that a match will result in a particular outcome or finish. One wrestler decides to double cross the other and pins him, thereby winning the match and enhancing his own reputation. The job of the policeman is to exact revenge on the double crossing wrestler, sometimes in the ring during a match or afterwards in the dressing room. Mondt made sure that “every Lewis opponent knew the ‘rules’ of that night’s contest” (Phantom, “The Founding Father”). He was a very tough individual who apparently had no trouble meting out physical or financial punishment to other wrestlers.

Strangler Lewis was the wrestling star of the triumvirate. Mondt, an accomplished wrestler in his own right, sometimes filled in as an opponent for Lewis when needed. According to Feigenbaum, it was Sandow who “took care of the financial and logistical aspects of the business as well as participating in the theatrical development of shows.” Sandow “scouted out new talent, made sure that wrestlers were rewarded for working, and that fans were rewarded for buying tickets. He understood that fans were looking for a show and created characters that would make the show more interesting” (55). Garea, on the other hand, argues that today’s wrestling is a direct offspring of Mondt’s creation, not

Sandow's (Phantom, "The Founding Father"). To compete with the condensed, action packed form of storytelling common to newspapers, radio, and film, Mondt advocated short, suspenseful matches. Greenberg agrees with Garea and asserts that it was Mondt who "introduced time limits, so fans would no longer be forced to watch tiresome, seven hour bouts. Instead of endlessly exchanging holds while lying on the mat, wrestlers were encouraged to use moves like the flying dropkick, which consisted of a wrestler leaping off the mat to batter an opponent with both feet" (16). Mondt's background in vaudeville was the source of many of the elements he brought to the mat game. For instance, it was his idea to combine "features of boxing, Greco-Roman wrestling, freestyle wrestling and the old lumber-camp-style of fighting" into what he called "'Slam Bang Western Style Wrestling'" (Phantom, "The Founding Father"). Mondt felt that short but elaborate and precisely choreographed bouts would attract a huge following in the 1920s. And he was right.

In addition to more exciting matches, Mondt introduced the concept of program matches. A program was a series of bouts where wrestlers battled one another for the chance to meet the champion. Thereby, a program "served to build up wrestlers and develop interest in future matches" (Feigenbaum 54). The short, intense bouts held the audience's interest in individual matches while the series, which culminated in a showdown between the champion and "number one contender," kept the audience involved over several weeks or even months.

Mondt also is credited with developing "standardized" matches (Feigenbaum 54), or "packaged" shows (Greenberg 15). The package match is when two wrestlers work

together to give the same performance night after night in different cities. They do “not have to worry about creating new performances every night,” but can “continuously practice and refine their dramatic performance” (Feigenbaum 54). Since, in the 1920s, reporters were leery of wrestling and often failed to cover bouts, the lack of scrutiny benefited wrestlers in that they could give the same performance in different towns night after night. In turn, the wrestling matches became well rehearsed, tightly executed performances that sold well as legitimate events. Wrestlers worked hard to make their rehearsed moves appear spontaneous or realistic without harming one another. If one wrestler had his opponent’s arm twisted behind his back, the wrestler would scream as if in agony, contort his face as if in pain. Wrestlers would punch one another, but “pull” or hold back their punch just enough so that it landed with little force. Greenberg explains,

When a grappler threw a punch, he tried to connect using a forearm instead of a fist, softening the blow. Kicks landed on the shoulder, stomach or arm, instead of the head. A man diving on a foe from the ropes actually grazed the man with a knee or elbow, rather than landing on him directly and causing injury. (16)

Similar to acrobats and circus tumblers, wrestlers worked in a cooperative manner to create dynamic, dramatic wrestling performances for their audiences. According to Feigenbaum, “audiences believed that wrestling was back on the level again” and, as a result, it also was back in business (54).

In the limelight of their popularity, the Gold Dust Trio had little trouble convincing other wrestlers of the advantages of their wrestling programs. Dozens of wrestlers signed contracts with the Gold Dust Trio, finding they could make more money working for them than wrestling independently. In turn, by signing wrestlers to contracts, the Trio reduced the threat that they would be exposed as frauds. Still, there was always the possibility of a

double cross. A wrestler might not adhere to the scripted outcome, defeat Strangler Lewis, and become the recognized champion. Or a rival promoter might talk to the news media about the Trio's "programs." Griffin asserts that the Trio "left nothing to chance" and that "code names and terms were used to designate wrestlers and the results of bouts" (21).

Feigenbaum notes that the team "went to great lengths to protect their business.

Sometimes they required wrestlers to post guarantees of thousands of dollars to insure that they would adhere to the Trio's storyline. They avoided written documents whenever possible and used code when they had to write or send telegrams" (55). Then, there was the ever present threat of Toots Mondt, the policeman, who was so respected that few in the Trio's employ dared challenge or double cross him.

The Gold Dust Trio was the dominant force in wrestling for much of the 1920s. The team was constantly on the look out for new ideas that would increase wrestling's appeal. For example, they devised unpredictable conclusions to matches that kept audiences on the edges of their seats. Furthermore, they made wrestling more "fan friendly" by banning the "bad odor" of gambling from the arenas (Phantom, "The Founding Father"). They also integrated athletes from other sports into wrestling, a practice that continues today. Feigenbaum explains the Trio's rationale for bringing in All-American football players:

After the horrific experiences of World War I, the United States had turned inward. A conservative and isolationist public was hungry for "All-American" heroes like Babe Ruth and Jack Dempsey. College football was very popular, and it produced the kind of clean cut All-Americans that the Trio felt could compete with the likes of Ruth and Dempsey, as well as provide a much-needed wholesome image for the game. (55-56)

The Trio introduced Wayne “Big” Munn, a University of Nebraska All-American, to the wrestling world. Other football players that became wrestlers were Gus Sonnenberg and Chicago Bears star Bronco Nagurski. Munn’s arrival, however, spelled the beginning of the end for the Gold Dust Trio.

Although Munn was hired to stimulate fan interest, he was not a particularly skilled wrestler. The Trio’s plan was to let Munn win the championship from Strangler Lewis and then develop a program whereby Lewis would work his way back to a rematch with Munn. Over a period of months, Lewis would wrestle and defeat several high profile wrestlers while Munn would defeat all challengers and retain his championship title. Wrestling fans would clamor for a rematch and the stage would be set for Lewis to challenge Munn and regain his championship belt. The strategy worked initially. Audiences were astounded when Munn defeated Lewis and were eager to see a rematch between the two. However, the Trio made a tactical error. On April 15, 1925, Munn was scheduled to wrestle Stanislaus Zbyszko, a Polish wrestler, who had been around since the heyday of Frank Gotch. Although a superior wrestler, Zbyszko agreed to lose the match to Munn. Unbeknownst to the Trio, Zbyszko was involved with rival promoters known as the Big Four and he pulled a double cross. Zbyszko beat Munn easily, pinning his opponent twice in less than twelve minutes. The Gold Dust Trio found themselves in an awkward position. Feigenbaum recounts,

Wrestling audiences were stunned. How could Ed “Strangler” Lewis, the greatest wrestler of the day, have lost to Wayne Munn who had lost to an aged Stanislaus Zbyszko? Munn was now discredited, and Lewis would have to work very hard to get his reputation back. The Trio’s hopes for a record setting payday from a Lewis-Munn rematch also vanished. (57)

Zbyszko became the World Heavyweight Champion and then, as planned, he lost the title to Joe Stecher, who held the title for three years. Predictably, Stecher was under contract with the Big Four. As a result, the Big Four came to dominate the wrestling ring, muscling the Trio to the periphery.

In 1928, Joe Stecher agreed to lose the title to Strangler Lewis, but the Gold Dust Trio was past repair. A rift had developed between Sandow and Mondt, and Mondt left the triumvirate in 1928 to team up with several others to promote Jim Londos, the “Golden Greek.” Although Londos would become a successful wrestler, tough times lay directly ahead. Within a year, the US was mired in an economic depression. Professional wrestling, like the country itself, faced an uncertain future.

Stereotypes, Tag Teams, and Freaks

During the 1930s, the popularity of wrestling waned. The Great Depression was in full swing and “the public was loath to spend what little disposable income it had on such a marginal sport” (Feigenbaum 59). Jim Londos had been wrestling for many years when Mondt and his new partners took over his promotion. By reinventing Londos as the Golden Greek, the promoters turned Londos into one of wrestling’s first “ethnic” stars and a crowd favorite in cities of the northeastern US.

Born in Argos, Greece, Londos began wrestling in the US during World War I. Initially, his wrestling persona was that of a hardworking, blue collar stiff, a “wrestling plasterer” (Greenberg 20). Since wrestling was “a game without a history,” his promoters figured that Londos “could be repackaged” in such a way as to enhance his good looks and benefit further from his “huge female following” (Feigenbaum 58). According to

Greenberg, the transformation of Londos from a regular guy into the Golden Greek saved “professional wrestling as it struggled through the Depression” (19).

The ethnic stereotype emerged in wrestling as a way to appeal to various hometown crowds, particularly in the New York metropolitan area. In short, Londos represented the immigrant, a man “of foreign ancestry . . . willing to suffer a punishing toll to achieve success in America” (Greenberg 20). Feigenbaum contends that while the All-American stereotype was used successfully in the 1920s, “the ethnic stereotype would dominate the thirties” (59). It was one of Toots Mondt’s new partners, Jack Pfeffer, who understood the appeal of ethnic stereotypes. He developed “an Italian champion for the Italian neighborhood, Jewish champions for the Jewish neighborhoods, and Russian champions for the Russian neighborhoods” (Feigenbaum 60). Always portrayed positively, the ethnic champs “instilled a sense of pride and hope for people who were suffering through hard times” (Feigenbaum 60).

The portrayal of ethnic good guys gave rise to the more general staging of good versus evil in the ring. Wrestling matches became condensed versions of morality plays or melodramas. Good guys and bad guys, or “baby faces” and “heels,” became the stock characters of the wrestling trade. Feigenbaum observes,

Wrestlers became symbols of proper or improper moral behavior, appropriate lifestyles, and ethnic pride. Stereotypes . . . often borrowed from movies and theater, were reformulated and reintroduced to fit the times. Stereotyped wrestlers would serve as rallying points for ethnic pride, as well as targets or scapegoats for audiences to vent their frustrations. (59)

Over the years, multiple and diverse ethnicities have been represented in the wrestling ring, such as American Indians, Arabs, Iranians, Samoans, and Germans. In

Ritual Drama in American Popular Culture: The Case of Professional Wrestling, Michael Ball identifies additional stereotypes used in wrestling. They include the foreign menace, the titled snob, the pointy headed intellectual, the sonofabitch, the masked villain, the hero, the black, the Hispanic, the red Indian, the nature boy, the cowboy, and the hillbilly (vi). Although their numbers were limited, African American wrestlers began to appear in the 1930s and 1940s. During World War II, the “Japanese were portrayed as sneaky, yellow and cowardly,” while hillbillies were presented as “simple, unkempt, rough-and-tumble types” (Feigenbaum 60).

The use of ethnic stereotypes was one of several gimmicks used by wrestling promoters to attract fans to the matches. Tag team wrestling became popular in the 1930s. A tag team match usually involves two teams of two wrestlers. The match begins with two opposing wrestlers in the ring and their partners standing outside the ring in opposite corners. When a wrestler grows tired, he attempts to “tag out” or touch the hand of his teammate, who then replaces him in the ring. Tag team matches, then and now, often conclude with all four wrestlers in the ring slugging it out until one team emerges victorious. Thus, the spectacle of two embattled bodies in the ring is intensified to a greater level. In the thirties, another gimmick of spectacular excess involved filling the ring with ice cream, Jell-O, or “mud, berries and molasses” (Greenberg 18). According to Feigenbaum, even “fish wrestling” became part of the show (59).

Promoters offered up an array of tricks to make wrestling matches more exciting and stimulating to the senses. Often, the Golden Greek was matched against “freaks,” or men who possessed some extraordinary or grotesque physical characteristic. Griffin

observes that due to Mondt's publicity skills, every "kind of a freak imaginable was introduced to the wrestling rings of New York and Pennsylvania and the country at large" (43). Mondt's freaks included "big necked Ferenc Holuban," "long armed Leon Pinetzki," and "big footed Ivan Poddubny" (Griffin 43). Morton and O'Brien claim that during the thirties, "women and midget matches added to the carnival atmosphere as people sought distraction and thrills at the expense of sport" (43). Increasingly, wrestlers tested new maneuvers, punches, and kicks that would electrify the audience. Rather than engage in scientific wrestling, wrestlers used the ropes to slingshot themselves across the ring, hurling themselves into one another. They also leapt off the top rope onto their opponent and threw each other from the ring into the audience.

Wrestling matches became spectacles of violence. While, at times, the violence was actual, most often wrestlers worked together so as not to harm one another. The trick was to create the illusion of violence for the audience. To do so, a wrestler might conceal a razor blade in his wrestling trunks and at a certain point in the match use it to cut his forehead, thereby producing a gush of blood down his face. Blood capsules also were used. A wrestler might spit out fake blood from his mouth or, if he squeezed the capsule between his fingers and wiped the blood on his nose or face, he might create the illusion that he was bleeding from a fierce punch or laceration.

Despite the gimmicks, wrestling promoters struggled to sell tickets during the 1930s. The country was in the grip of the Depression and "people without enough money to fill their bellies with food had very little extra to spend on frills and extravagancies such as entertainment" (Albano and Sugar 20). Promoters battled one another for control of the

wrestling business and, lacking a unifying organization, their business had little stability as an entertainment entity. Further, the use of ethnic stereotypes, so-called “freaks,” and physical excess and violence subverted wrestling’s mainstream appeal. Many Americans felt that wrestling was an unsuitable form of entertainment and not worth their hard earned dollar. Although wrestling would survive the Depression, its future as a “viable enterprise was once again in doubt” (Feigenbaum 61). However, much like its rebirth in the twenties, wrestling would realize immense popularity just after World War II, aided by the advent of television, its visual appeal, and programming needs.

Gorgeous George and the Age of Television

During the thirties and early forties, wrestling’s slow ticket sales were impacted by the mass media. For the most part, sports writers ignored wrestling matches and the “new medium of radio” proved unkind to wrestling because of its oral rather than visual appeal (Morton and O’Brien 43). Morton and O’Brien explain,

wrestling presents nearly insurmountable problems for oral transmission. First of all, it is extremely difficult to describe wrestling holds and moves in words. It requires something approaching the conventions of a text of gross human anatomy to convey information accurately. There are approximately three hundred basic routines and up to one thousand terms for the estimated three thousand wrestling holds, moves and positions. Such a rich vocabulary would tax both the announcer and the audience. (46)

Just as wrestling seemed on the brink of extinction, the broadcast television industry arrived in the US. Professional wrestling and television were made for each other. Morton and O’Brien note the “symbiosis of TV and wrestling” and assert that with the “advent of television – the medium of the moment, the visual, the spectacle – wrestling came into the mainstream of American popular culture” (46-47). Feigenbaum observes

that television “provided what professional wrestling needed most, publicity” (62). If wrestling needed publicity, television needed programming.

In the early days of television, networks were needful of programs to fill their broadcast hours and replace the infamous “test pattern” that filled the screen several hours a day. As melodramas, news programs, westerns, and variety shows made the transition from radio to television, wrestling also helped fill the programming void. “[E]ager for cheap programming that could attract large audiences,” television executives welcomed wrestling to the new medium (Feigenbaum 62), and, as Morton and O’Brien discuss, they benefited from the merger:

For the viewers, professional wrestling is a crowd sport and may have had added appeal in the early days of television when relatives and neighbors gathered for the communal experience of an evening of TV watching. They could chatter and socialize while following the action on the little screen. As for the industry, production costs and fees for performers were low for live wrestling broadcasts. The game fit quite neatly into a television studio with floor cameras focused on a stage or ring that allowed close-up shots which were ideal on the six-inch home television screens of the day. (47)

The impact of television on professional wrestling was significant. First, it gave wrestling much needed publicity. During televised matches, both announcers and wrestlers could promote upcoming live events around the country. Viewers then could go see their favorite wrestlers in person when the wrestling show came to town. Second, television was able to capture the visual specifics of wrestling as compared to other sporting events, such as baseball and football. Due to the small scale of early television screens, players of team sports “looked like ants on a lawn when viewed on” TV (Saunders 35). Since the mat game could be shot in the television studio, close-ups of the wrestlers’ movements and expressions were possible. Not only were wrestlers “recognizably human”

on the small screen (Morton and O'Brien 47), but their personalities and athletic prowess were communicated too. Similarly, the wrestling event – the sounds of struggle in the ring, the referee's calls, the cheers and jeers of the studio audience – was made immediate to the home viewer. Third, the concentrated focus of the camera on the event “stimulated wrestlers toward greater exaggeration, showmanship, histrionics and acrobatics” (Morton and O'Brien 47). Rather than scale down their performances, wrestlers attempted to transcend their seeming containment within a small screen.

As the forties ended and the fifties began, wrestling had several superstars, including Killer Kowalski, Lou Thesz, Verne Gagne, The Sheik, The French Angel, and Antonino “Argentina” Rocca. But it was George Wagner, otherwise known as Gorgeous George, who was the first television superstar of wrestling. Gorgeous George was among the “first, and certainly the best, to adapt his act to the television era” (Feigenbaum 62). He would become one of wrestling's greatest villains and a popular culture phenomenon during the fifties and early sixties. Even today, many non-wrestling fans recognize the name of Gorgeous George.

Although Gorgeous George was a competent wrestler, it was the appearance, attitude, and demeanor of his wrestling character that people loved to hate. Gorgeous George had long, curly hair that he dyed blonde and kept “in place with gold-colored bobby pins, called ‘Georgie pins,’” that he would toss to the crowd as he made his grand entrance to the ring (Greenberg 25). It is speculated that George was the first to use music to signal his entrance. As he “walked across a red carpet to the ring . . . the graduation song ‘Pomp and Circumstance’ played” while the ring announcer “declared that the

‘human orchid, the sensation of the nation, the toast of the coast’ had arrived” (Greenberg 26). Simultaneously, George would address audience members as “peasants” (Greenberg 26), who were “beneath contempt” (Albano and Sugar 69). When he stepped into the ring, a valet would hold “the ropes just far enough apart so that George wouldn’t have to bend too far, and [George would] wipe his dainty shoes on the red carpet the valet had ever-so-respectfully laid out for him in the corner” (Albano and Sugar 69). He then made a big production of removing his hair net and robe, the latter which he would hand to his valet for an “ostentatious folding ritual” (Albano and Sugar 69). George had both male and female valets over the course of his career and, besides the aforementioned duties, they also were in charge of “spraying the ring with perfume held in a jar called ‘the atomizer.’ George claimed that he’d once gotten an infection from wrestling on dirty mats and that the atomizer contained a special disinfectant” (Greenberg 26). When the referee would attempt to inspect George for any illegal items, such as brass knuckles or salt to rub in his opponent’s eyes, George would scream “‘Take your filthy hands off me!’ At that point the valet would rush forward and spray disinfectant on the referee’s hands” (Albano and Sugar 69). Despite his pretensions of elegance and refinement, Gorgeous George became the ultimate cheat once the bell sounded. He was a “gouging, biting, kidney-punching villain (Albano and Sugar 69), who pulled hair and raked the eyes of his opponent when the referee was not looking (Greenberg 26).

The highly crafted and superbly executed theatrics of Gorgeous George enraged many wrestling fans. George’s “prissy” behavior was antithetical to that of the working class audience. “Real” men did not dress and behave in an effeminate and arrogant

manner. For this precise reason and because the event allowed, even encouraged, agonistic feedback on the part of the audience, they loved to watch George wrestle. His performance signified everything they were not or perceived themselves not to be, and they tuned in and attended live events, time and again, in hopes of catching those matches when George received his comeuppance. Of course, this “love/hate” effect on the audience was George’s aim, and he realized it so well that Morton and O’Brien claim that George was a “trained psychiatrist” (47). Others dispute the claim, although all agree that George developed and refined his performance so as to “work” his audience as he pleased.

Gorgeous George’s fame among wrestling fans spread to other sectors of the population. Many well known comedians of the era included references to George in their acts. Bob Hope, Red Skelton, and Jack Benny all referred to the wrestler in their routines. A few one liners were “George wants to join the Navy and have the world see *him*.” “Gorgeous George always walks into a room voice first.” And, “Gorgeous George would go broke if he had to pay taxes on what he *thinks* he’s worth.” (quoted in Albano and Sugar 68; emphases in original). Further, George “appeared on TV so often that he was called ‘Mr. Television’” (Albano and Sugar 47).

Thanks to television and Gorgeous George, wrestling was revitalized once again and a new “golden age” of wrestling emerged. Television restored wrestling to the attention of mainstream America (Feigenbaum 64), or the middle and working class sectors that accounted for a significant portion of wrestling’s television audience. The spectacle of agonistic sport on the small screen became the order of the day and the most successful wrestlers were those who could both entertain and demonstrate their athletic

abilities. Wrestlers gave on-camera interviews before and after matches, and the interviews “gave wrestlers an opportunity to elaborate their ring personalities with histrionics and costume” (Morton and O’Brien 47). In turn, wrestling promoters developed wrestling characters that they felt would appeal to the broad mainstream market.

Feigenbaum notes that, in large part, the post World War II audience was patriotic and conservative (64). In response, wrestling tended to feature heroes who were white, although other racial types were represented as “good guys” too. Typically, the wrestling hero obeyed the rules, was courteous to fans, and showed great pride in his country, state, and family. Further, as Ball observes,

Heroes are generally muscular, clean cut, unassuming, young men who do not resort to cheap gimmickry. They fight fairly until provoked by the villain who continually uses unfair tactics. Heroes often dress in white (sometimes sporting an American flag or the letters USA on their trunks). Their speech is straightforward and proper, and they bespeak a pride in their family, country and peer-group. (72)

In addition to Anglo heroes of the fifties, Bruno Sammartino was a hero to Italian fans and Antonino Rocca was a favorite of both Latinos and Italians. Several Native American characters were developed, such as Chief Thunderbird and Joseph War Hawk. The Indian stereotypes were “quite popular, and although they were usually positioned as *babyfaces* (good guys), they were forced to don headdresses and buckskins, perform ‘war dances,’ and paint their faces” (Feigenbaum 60; emphasis in original).

Typically, wrestling villains were, and are, stereotyped as some kind of foreign menace. In the fifties, the most common bad guys were “taken from countries that had fought against the United States in World War II, with German and Japanese wrestlers being the most hated” (Feigenbaum 64). The foreign menace usually reflects the political

atmosphere of the time and more recent villains include Chinese, Russians, and an assortment of Arabs and Middle Easterners. The evil-doers usually make “a point of insulting America in vague terms and questioning the motives and ethics of Americans in general and soldiers in particular” (Ball 70). Other villainous stereotypes include “pointy headed intellectuals,” “sonofabitches,” and “nature boys” (Ball 71-74). Although bad guys exist in wrestling today, the line between hero and villain is less distinct often. During the 1990s, anti-heroes were popular with fans. The anti-hero is a tough, no-nonsense, blue-collar character who defies authority and is not above breaking a few rules to gain victory. “Stone Cold” Steve Austin was the most prominent anti-hero during the 1990s.

In addition to crafting characters in a more deliberate manner in the 1950s, promoters took advantage of the episodic nature of wrestling programs. Understanding that the final match of the night was the highlight of the show, promoters contrived ways to make the conclusion of the match and program incomplete or unclear. Thereby, they encouraged viewers to tune in the following week to find out what happened. Cliff hanger strategies included running out of time, questionable disqualifications, and interferences from outside parties that led to surprise endings. The structure of wrestling programs became and continues to be very like serial soap operas.

Television wrestling also integrated wrestling commentators into the program. Unlike hearing matches on the radio, the home television audience could see the matches for themselves. As more people bought televisions and broadcast technology improved, the screen became larger and the image clearer. There seemed no need for commentators.

Nonetheless, they were used to engage the home viewer in the immediacy of the event. By means of their oral commentary, they served as guides for how the home audience might perceive and participate in the show. As Albano and Sugar point out, a commentator's description of maneuvers or "hold-by-hold announcing can do wonders for the believability and the excitement of a TV wrestling match" (298). Commentators also involved home viewers by providing them with "melodramatic descriptions of [the] extravagant characters and their actions" (Feigenbaum 66). In other words, they prompted the viewer to invest in the characters and take a side as to their good and evil doings. Lastly, just as wrestlers in the fifties highlighted their distinct characters and styles, so too did the announcers. Albano and Sugar explain,

Dick Lane was famous for "Whoa, Nellie" – a catch phrase later adopted by football announcer Keith Jackson. Dennis James used sound effects to accompany the action, and Guy LeBow donned an air-raid warden's helmet when the action heated up. . . . And then there was the "Dean of Wrestling Announcers" Gordon Solie, who just recently died. Solie instilled absolute credibility upon the matches he called and was the first to describe a bleeding wrestler as wearing a "crimson mask." (298)

Many of the production choices devised in the fifties are used in the staging of wrestling for television today. In Chapter Four, I describe contemporary television wrestling and imply how elements have remained constant and altered over the years.

Organizers and Promoters

The dominant organizational and promotional agency in wrestling today is the WWE or World Wrestling Entertainment, formally known as the WWF or World Wrestling Federation. Before assuming the WWF title, the agency was known as the WWWF or World Wide Wrestling Federation. Smaller regional and local wrestling

associations also exist, such as United Pro Wrestling, World Extreme Wrestling, Independent Wrestling Council, Southern Pro Wrestling, Southern Championship Wrestling, and the Alabama Wrestling Federation. The major stars of wrestling work for the WWE.

Wrestling promoters have played a significant part in wrestling since the late nineteenth century. The role of the promoter is to find wrestling talent, contract matches, secure suitable venues, advertise or promote the fights, and sell tickets to the public. Albano and Sugar explain that while the wrestlers may be the stars, “the promotions that stage the matches are the basis of wrestling, its very fabric” (27). It is the organization behind the wrestlers that is “responsible for promoting wrestling, publicizing it, and plotting its course” (27). Promoters also are the backstage financiers of wrestling. Their fortunes can rise and fall depending on the popularity of their wrestlers, public trends, and how well they do their job.

As wrestling grew in popularity, the role of the promoters and organizers grew proportionately. Promoters of on-going programs, such as The Gold Dust Trio and the Big Four, emerged in the 1920s. Eventually, the country was divided into “territories” and each territory was controlled by a different promoter. Feuds were common as promoters fought over popular wrestlers and the right to declare their own wrestlers “champions.” To unify their disparate efforts, some promoters decided to organize. Feigenbaum explains,

In 1948, thirty-nine promoters, including some from Mexico and Canada, established the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA) and effectively formed a cartel that would control the business for the next fifteen years. In the NWA, promoters would be guaranteed safe territories. Wrestlers aligned with “outside” promoters could only come in to another promoter’s territory with permission from that promoter. (67)

The alliance also agreed that they would recognize one NWA heavyweight champion. The champion would visit each territory and when he did “he would be billed as the most important man in wrestling” (Greenberg 39). To further legitimize their champion and association, the NWA claimed that their title belt “was directly linked to the title Frank Gotch had won from George Hackenschmidt in 1908” (Greenberg 39).

The first NWA champion, Orville Brown, was injured in a car wreck just before he was to wrestle Lou Thesz, a successful wrestler and promoter in St. Louis. After Brown’s injury, Thesz was named NWA champion. Thesz remained the NWA champion for many years, but soon rival associations rose to the fore to challenge the NWA’s dominance.

The American Wrestling Association (AWA) was formed in 1960. Owner and wrestler Verne Gagne declared himself the AWA champion. In 1963, Vince McMahon Sr. and Toots Mondt, who ran a wrestling territory in the northeast, pulled out of the NWA, declaring Buddy Rogers their champion. Lou Thesz defeated Rogers in a one fall match and once again was declared world champion by the NWA. Citing NWA rules, Mondt and McMahon argued that the championship could only change hands in a “best two-out-of-three falls” match and continued to tout Rogers as world champion (Greenberg 42). Soon after, on “May 17, 1963, Bruno Sammartino defeated Rogers” in forty-eight seconds (Feigenbaum 68). Historians view Sammartino’s defeat of Rogers as the point when the WWWF began to emerge as the dominant wrestling organization. Eventually, it would evolve into the WWF and later the WWE. However, immediately following Sammartino’s win, three associations, the NWA, the AWA, and the WWWF all claimed a world heavyweight champion, Thesz, Gagne, and Sammartino, respectively. The trend of

competing associations feuding over champion titles continued throughout the sixties. As a result, each association began to “write its own history” of champions crowned and defeated through an intricate series of plot twists (Greenberg 43).

By the early 1960s, wrestling experienced another decline in popularity. People lost interest in wrestling programs on TV and ratings faltered. Television had become part of the daily routine. Saunders speculates that television wrestling “suffer[ed] from overexposure” (38), and Feigenbaum agrees that it had become “stale and repetitive, and could no longer hold the interest of a national television audience” (68). Guided by the bottom line, networks dropped wrestling and moved on to other forms of entertainment.

Although it lost its national audience, wrestling continued to attract audiences at the local level and promoters continued to secure television time on local stations. During the sixties and early seventies, wrestling franchises survived by staging weekly television matches for local markets whereby they would advertise live events scheduled to occur in the area. Less symbiotic than parasitic, the relationship nonetheless proved to be “mutually profitable to local stations and wrestling franchise holders” (Morton and O’Brien 48).

The typical arrangement was that a promoter would organize a taping of matches at a television station in a fairly large city or town. The tape then would be sent to smaller stations across the state or region. The promoter would sell tickets to the taping so that fans would be present to provide the much needed crowd reaction. Usually, the taping was scheduled for weekends so that “preteens and families” could attend (Morton and O’Brien 48-49). Morton and O’Brien explain,

[the] local station gains a weekly show – usually an hour in length – to block into a programming slot outside prime hours such as Saturday or Sunday morning, or Saturday afternoon when other sports are slack. . . . The station owner is assured a loyal viewership . . . and good spots for profitable local advertising of products and services such as used cars, hardware products and bars and restaurants that cater to the blue-collar public. (49)

The wrestling promoter also profited from the arrangement in that he received a “blatant hour’s commercial” for his upcoming live event (Morton and O’Brien 49).

In the televised matches, wrestling stars would be pitted against wrestlers of lesser caliber, “jobbers” or journeymen who served as fodder for the celebrities. Rather than fight each other on television, the big name stars would challenge each other verbally – through interviews or direct address to the camera – and thereby hype interest in their upcoming match to be staged live at a local arena. By creating conflict between two prominent wrestlers, promoters generated interest in the upcoming showdown. Since prominent wrestlers worked a “circuit” of several cities or states, it was typical for them to tape a generic version of their verbal fisticuffs, which then could be edited many times so as to include references to the specific locations on their live wrestling schedules.

Wrestling’s Third Golden Age

Although it lacked a national forum, wrestling was embedded in the nation’s cultural consciousness. Morton and O’Brien assert that by the seventies, “the fact that ‘pro rasslin’ [had] become a recognizable American icon suggests that the masses [had] been reached for over a generation” (51). Wrestling was so ingrained in US culture that television shows and film writers could reference it, assured that such references would be recognized by the viewing public. Morton and O’Brien survey some of the films and television shows that integrated wrestling plots or motifs:

Mad Bull starring Alex Karras was a 1977 wrestling imitation of [Sylvester Stallone's] Rocky. Then Stallone produced his own surrealistic image of the mat world in the 1977 film feature Paradise Alley. A vintage Peter Falk film, All the Marbles, soon followed; it featured a women's tag team with Falk as the manager. . . . These and other films as well as episodes of television series such as Starsky and Hutch, Charlie's Angels, The Fall Guy and Magnum P.I. portray the mat world and assume common knowledge of wrestling as a folk icon that the public has gained from televised wrestling shows. (51-52)

Wrestling programs continued to be broadcast by local television stations and live events drew fans to arenas and gymnasiums across the country. In the 1980s, however, wrestling returned to the national stage.

In 1982, Vince McMahon Jr. bought Capital Wrestling Corporation (CWC) from his father, Vince Sr. CWC was "the parent company of the World Wrestling Federation" or WWF (Feigenbaum 72). Vince Jr. would "turn the WWF into a national force" by eliminating competition from other wrestling promotions (Greenberg 47).

"To improve the production quality and enhance the distribution of WWF shows," McMahon took advantage of the new communication technologies and mediums of the late seventies and eighties, such as cable television and pay-per-view (Feigenbaum 73). He also "started paying television stations in different cities to run his programs opposite wrestling programs that had been televised locally for decades" (Greenberg 48), tempting the stations with the top wrestling talent in the country. Prominent wrestlers, such as Andre the Giant, Jimmy "Superfly" Snuka, Rowdy Roddy Piper, and the Junkyard Dog contracted lucrative deals with McMahon and the WWF. As McMahon utilized cable stations and videotape to invade wrestling territories, one promoter after another went out of business until Jim Crockett, owner of Georgia Championship Wrestling, was the only promoter left to carry the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA) banner against the WWF.

Through much of the eighties, Crockett competed with the WWF by staging live and pay-per-view events. He also contracted with Ted Turner to broadcast Georgia Championship Wrestling on Turner's Atlanta based cable station, WTBS. The program proved such a rating's hit that Turner changed the name of the show to World Championship Wrestling to reflect its national appeal (Morton and O'Brien 52). In 1988, Turner purchased the organization from Crockett and changed its name as well to World Championship Wrestling or WCW. Many popular wrestlers who had wrestled for Crockett, such as Ric Flair, Dusty Rhodes, Harley Race, and Kerry Von Erich, continued their contracts with WCW. While other promotions maintained or gained followers during the late eighties and nineties, the two major competitors were McMahon's World Wrestling Federation (WWF) and Turner's World Championship Wrestling (WCW).

In addition to the backstage battle McMahon waged, he also developed front stage strategies that proved appealing to the public. For one, he integrated popular music into the wrestling event, creating the "rock and wrestling connection." Music became such an integral part of the experience that WWF shows became as much rock concerts as wrestling shows" (Feigenbaum 73).

Greenberg observes that the "rock and wrestling connection began when singer Cyndi Lauper appeared on a WWF program with [wrestling] manager Captain Lou Albano, who had been featured in her hit video, Girls Just Want To Have Fun" (54). Lauper, a wrestling fan, took part in developing an angle or feud between herself and Albano. Albano claimed he had discovered Lauper, while Lauper insisted Albano had

nothing to do with her career. She proceeded to boast she was a better wrestling manager than Albano and “challenged him to bring any woman wrestler into the ring that he wanted . . . [to] face a female wrestler of her choice” (Saunders 48). Albano selected the Fabulous Moolah, “the women’s champion since 1956” (Greenberg 54), while Wendi Richter, a rising star, was in Lauper’s corner. Richter won and when “Lauper climbed into the ring to celebrate, photos of the pair ran in newspapers all over the world” (Greenberg 54). The feud took several weeks to develop and attracted a huge following, many of whom were not wrestling fans. As a result,

Wrestling was “in.” Celebrities flocked to Madison Square Garden to watch the WWF. On February 18, 1985, MTV, the music cable television network broadcast a match between [Hulk] Hogan and Rowdy Roddy Piper. Not only did Cyndi Lauper get involved in the action, but Mr. T – the rugged actor who had appeared with Hogan in *Rocky III* and who was currently the star of the popular TV show, The A-Team – stormed the ring. (Greenberg 54)

In each golden age of wrestling, a superstar emerges who captures the attention and imagination of wrestling fans and the public generally. Feigenbaum argues that wrestling’s appeal has “always been based, to a large degree, upon the cult of personality” (73). During the 1980s and well into the 1990s, Terry Bollea, otherwise known as Hulk Hogan, was wrestling’s great superstar.

When Hulk Hogan first entered the WWF, he was cast as a villain or heel. As wrestlers often do, Hogan left one organization, the WWF in 1981, to wrestle in another, the American Wrestling Association (AWA). Again, he was cast as a heel, but he proved so popular with the fans that the AWA “turned Hogan into a babyface” or good guy (Greenberg 52). Hogan returned to the WWF in 1983 and, shortly thereafter, captured the heavyweight championship.

Hulk Hogan was an immediate hit with wrestling fans. As a hero, Hogan embodied American ideals of honesty, strength, courage, and an unfailing sense of right and wrong. In some appearances, Hogan entered the ring with a US flag draped over his body while his theme song, “Real American,” played over the loudspeakers. The lyrics included the lines,

“I feel strong about right and wrong,
I don’t take trouble for very long.
I got something deep inside of me,
Courage is the thing that keeps me free.” (quoted in Feigenbaum 76)

Fans were drawn to the song, emotionally, and impressed by Hogan’s size (i.e., six feet, eight inches tall, and 275 pounds), his musculature, and charisma.

Hogan’s character emerged at a time when the US populace needed a hero. A sluggish economy in the late seventies and early eighties and the Iranian hostage crisis, from 1979 to 1981, had taken a toll on the nation’s morale. When Hogan won the WWF title in 1984, he faced a villainous wrestler known as the Iron Sheik. It was no coincidence that the Iron Sheik was said to be Iranian and fought in the name “of the hated Ayatollah” (Albano and Sugar 250). The Iron Sheik had won the title by defeating Bob Backlund, an “American” wrestler. At the time, the Iron Sheik was the ultimate villain who “scared the living hell out of his opponents” (Albano and Sugar 250). He had invaded “America’s wrestling rings to prove that ‘Americans are weaklings’ and to ‘show what pieces of garbage American wrestlers are’” (Albano and Sugar 250). According to Feigenbaum,

America still had not fully recovered from the [Iranian] hostage crisis, and Hogan’s victory over, and subsequent beatings of the Iron Sheik, provided a measure of retribution that had been missing in the real world. For the next eight years, he would go on to defeat a host of Russians, cheats, snobs, and other villains, while espousing and defending “American values.” (74)

Like Gorgeous George and Frank Gotch before him, Hulk Hogan was well known to both fans and those who never watched wrestling. The term “Hulkamania” was coined to describe his popularity. His fans were known as “Hulkamaniacs,” and Hogan encouraged young boys and girls, little Hulkamaniacs, to exercise and eat right so they would grow up big and strong. Sports Illustrated, a well regarded sports magazine that covers legitimate professional and collegiate athletics, selected Hogan for the cover of one of its issues in April 1985.

Also, in 1985, the WWF began to stage yearly pay-per-view specials called WrestleMania. WrestleMania III was held in 1987 and drew almost one hundred thousand fans to the Silverdome in Pontiac, Michigan. For the first several years, Hulk Hogan was the main attraction. In 1994, however, the WCW was able to lure Hulk Hogan away from the WWF and he wrestled on WCW programs for the next several years. Now in his fifties, Hulk Hogan appears on wrestling shows from time to time and has an acting career outside of wrestling in both television and film.

In 1989, Vince McMahon admitted to the public what many had suspected all along: wrestling was not a “real” sport. Wrestling matches were performance exhibitions with predetermined outcomes as regards the winners and losers. The impetus for McMahon’s admission was money. Greenberg explains,

For years, [McMahon] resented the fact that he had to pay state athletic commissions to regulate his wrestling matches. So, at a 1989 hearing in front of New Jersey politicians, WWF officials revealed the secret that promoters had always feared would kill the business. Athletic commissions weren’t needed, the WWF said, because professional wrestling wasn’t a sport. The winners and loser were determined beforehand, and wrestlers worked hard not to hurt each other. (57)

Henceforth, wrestling would become known as sports entertainment.

By revealing that wrestling was a rehearsed performance, McMahon apparently betrayed “kayfabe.” Saunders explains that kayfabe is a “term that refers to insider information being kept inside, such as never letting the audience know that outcomes of matches might be predetermined, or that wrestling is anything but a legitimate sport. It is what separates the insiders from the outsiders, or those in the business from the ‘marks’” (41). Generally, kayfabe is an insider or private language that people use to discuss things without letting others know what they are talking about. It is similar to pig Latin and is believed to be linked to carnival workers or carneys. Saunders believes the term kayfabe is a derivative of the pig Latin word for fake (223). So, perhaps, kayfabe evolved from “achy fay.”

As a result of McMahon’s admission, televised wrestling became conspicuously theatrical. Programs integrated additional music and video, theatrical lighting, pyrotechnics, and lengthy interview segments. When wrestlers entered the ring, they addressed the live crowd and home viewers for several minutes before they began to fight. Frequently, wrestling programs featured more talk than actual wrestling. Furthermore, the WWF began to market peripheral merchandise, such as t-shirts, action figures, videotapes, records, calendars, and bobble head dolls. The WCW followed suit, marketing its own merchandise and including more audio-visual effects in its television coverage.

Throughout the 1990s, the WWF and WCW battled each other for control of the wrestling business. Each organization tried to persuade popular wrestlers to switch sides and join their outfit. Ted Turner was intent on stopping the WWF from gaining a

monopoly on wrestling. Albano and Sugar contend that “with the ascendancy of Turner’s WCW . . . McMahon was suddenly in a dogfight, with his position as top dog threatened. By the mid 1990s, much of McMahon’s top talent had defected. Hulk Hogan, Randy Savage, Kevin Nash and Scott Hall all switched from the WWF to the WCW” (32).

In the late nineties, the two organizations waged a ratings war against one another and went head to head with their respective television programs. Turner’s WCW produced the wrestling show Monday Night Nitro on the Turner cable channel TNT. McMahon’s WWF aired Monday Night Raw and Raw is War on the cable network USA. To lure home viewers, the size of wrestlers increased and the range of ethnicities they represented broadened. Wrestlers began using a wide range of “accessories” in the ring, such as tables, chairs, ladders, and trash cans. Their maneuvers became more acrobatic and dangerous as they dove and somersaulted off the ropes and often out of the ring. As in the past, blades and blood capsules were used to create the illusion of violence. Often wrestlers were accompanied to the ring by an attractive female manager or “valet” garbed in a tight fitting mini-skirt and high heels. The verbal banter was “frequently full of sexual innuendo and scatological humor” (Saunders 69). And each wrestling star had his own signature move that he used to stun or disable his opponent and win the match. Examples include Kurt Angle’s “the Olympic Slam,” Chris Benoit’s “Crippler Crossface,” The Rock’s “People’s Elbow,” and Stone Cold Steve Austin’s “Stone Cold Stunner.”

To battle the WCW, Vince McMahon entered the ring as the character “Mr. McMahon.” While McMahon had announced his shows in the past, he now parodied his role as owner of the WWF. His character was a swaggering, cocksure, big bucks

businessman who demeaned his wrestlers and displayed contempt for the uneducated, working class fans and their lack of sophistication. In later episodes, Mr. McMahon's family members appeared and they proved "as dysfunctional as they come" (Albano and Sugar 32). In the late 1990s, Mr. McMahon engaged in a feud with a rising star, Stone Cold Steve Austin. Representing the average working man, Austin defied his boss by means of verbal insults and physical assaults. The "Mr. McMahon" strategy proved a success with fans and it "shot the WWF, and its Monday night . . . show, back to the top" (Albano and Sugar 32).

In March 2001, the WCW called it quits. The organization had had a strong following for many years and its telecasts were "among the most popular programming cable television (Marvez, "WCW Down for the Count" 6-D). However, the company's "inability to develop new talent and mismanagement by its front office combined with a WWF resurgence helped lead to a reported \$60 million in losses" in 2000 (Marvez, "WCW Down for the Count" 6-D). Eventually, the WCW was sold to the WWF for a "paltry \$4.5 million" (Marvez, "Merger Adds Spice to Invasion Pay-per-view" 11-D). Vince McMahon had succeeded in conquering his competition. Although regional wrestling promotions exist and are able to buy local television time, only the WWE has access to the national television audience. Current WWE programs include the Monday night program RAW on cable station Spike TV (formerly TNN), Thursday night's Smackdown! on cable's UPN, and Tough Enough on MTV, a reality-based program with contestants vying to become professional wrestlers.

Summary of Wrestling Trends

In this chapter, I have tracked wrestling in the US from the post Civil War era through the end of the twentieth century. Explicating the history of professional wrestling is problematic since deception was part of the wrestling game and, in turn, part of the history that was (not) conserved. Whether performed in a traveling carnival, a downtown saloon, or a major league ball park, wrestling operated as a shell game where the outcome was predetermined or, often, determined by how the audience wagered. To influence odds, promoters embellished the records of their wrestlers and denigrated those of others. To avoid charges of fraud, they lost or failed to keep records or, as was the case with the Gold Dust Trio, they devised a secret code to transmit messages within the organization. When the sporting press and public caught on that wrestling was fixed, the latter lost interest and the former ceased coverage. Thereby, an “objective” source of documentation and investigation, less invested than wrestling insiders in the financial success of the sport, was lost to us. Although, by the 1920s, wagering was banned at many wrestling shows, promoters held fast to their claims that wrestling was “real” in fear that the truth would kill their business. In 1989, Vince McMahon thought otherwise, broke “kayfabe,” and identified professional wrestling as sports entertainment – an admission that compels yet another history of wrestling or a reflexive perspective on those already in play.

Although many details of wrestling history are unclear or lost entirely, enough of a history can be assembled to reveal several trends that characterize wrestling in the US. Below, I track wrestling forms and conventions that have remained constant, altered, or disappeared over time. In my discussion, I highlight those practices that appear to display

rather than veil their operations. In doing so, I do not intend to prove that contemporary wrestling is an operational aesthetic as much as collect traces that may be at work in wrestling today.

A component that recurs in wrestling from the carnival period to the present is the understanding by insiders that a wrestler must be a skilled athlete and a showman. Generally, the expectations of the dual role are that a wrestler demonstrate and be evaluated on wrestling technique while also showcasing the sport as worthy of the spectator's investment. If the match is fixed, the wrestler also needs to veil the worked aspects. In these terms, the presentation and subsequent evaluation of athletic skill by spectators, reporters, and commentators is a constant element in the operational aesthetic of wrestling. Whether a work or shoot, whether scientific or acrobatic, wrestling exposes, rather than veils, the athletic skill of the wrestler. The specific substance and aim of athleticism as well as showmanship vary across time however.

Described as a "master showman," Frank Gotch was so skilled in the ring that few questioned the legitimacy of his bouts (Feigenbaum 47). Although style specifics varied from match to match, Gotch and others of his period were scientific type wrestlers. Athletic skill was a test of strength and endurance over the long haul as wrestlers grappled in close proximity, down on the mat, often for hours at a time before, in moves of striking speed and agility, one wrestler or the other pinned his opponent. Gotch's showmanship appears to be related to his ferocious athleticism and the "fiendish delight" he took in playing a "ruthless brute" (Griffin 12; Feigenbaum 47). If we believe Hackenschmidt's claims, Gotch also was a slippery showman who, behind the scenes, oiled his hair "with a

turpentine pomade,” which he used to blind the Russian Lion and thereby slide to victory in the 1908 match (Morton and O’Brien).

Similar components were in operation in the carnival venue. Scientific wrestling was the norm although, in order to work a scam, inventive holds, hooks, and prop play (e.g., with a two-by-four) were practiced. To attract interest and increase wagers, carnival wrestlers wore colorful costumes and flaunted ferocious nicknames, such as “Crusher” or “Strangler.” Since betting on the match was part of the promotion, it was crucial for wrestlers to make the bouts appear legitimate. Any accidental exposure of the illusion might well raise the ire of the locals who had invested their cash, interest, and pride in what they assumed to be a fair contest.

During the heyday of the Gold Dust Trio, wrestling matches took on a different complexion due to the show business savvy of “Toots” Mondt, a former carnival wrestler and vaudeville performer. To compete with the concentrated form of storytelling used in newspapers, radio, and film, Mondt devised short, suspenseful bouts that maintained the illusion of legitimate competition. Rather than lengthy scientific matches, Mondt’s “Slam Bang Western Style Wrestling” required wrestlers to fuse techniques of wrestling with acrobatic skills, the latter enabling a faster paced match. While the hybrid style tested the wrestlers’ athletic abilities, Mondt’s standardized or packaged matches tested their showmanship. On the one hand, the package match allowed wrestlers to work together to create and, night after night, refine a performance that persuaded spectators that it was spontaneous and unplanned. On the other hand, the constant rehearsal could result in a byrote performance that lacked spontaneity and exposed its rehearsed elements. Like a

realistic stage actor, wrestlers had to find ways to play “in the moment” while they also paid heed to the rehearsed scenario. While the main aim of the package match was to evade spectator scrutiny (i.e., that it was a package match), Mondt’s program matches encouraged fans to observe wrestling operations, specifically, a succession of matches that resulted in a champion. For fans, the play-off program tested their expertise in observing and evaluating the athletic skills of the wrestlers and forming an opinion as to who prove victorious in the end.

During the twenties and thereafter, the characters the wrestlers performed became a highlighted feature of the wrestling game. In the 1920s, “All American” types were introduced in hopes of creating a “much-needed wholesome image” (Feigenbaum 56). During the Depression, promoters made a concerted appeal to urban immigrant populations by having wrestlers perform ethnic heroes, such as Jim Londos, the Golden Greek. By fusing athletic prowess with the performance of an ethnic type, wrestlers proved to “instill . . . a sense of pride” in people who had been hit hard by the Depression (Feigenbaum 60). In so far as fans recognized the ethnic types, it would appear that wrestlers were successful in performing socially-shared gesticulations that exposed certain cultural norms, intended as and received in positive rather than negative terms. Brecht explains that “the social gesticulation is the gesticulation relevant to society . . . that allows conclusions to be drawn about the social circumstances” (104-105). In these terms, too, gesticulation appears to operate in the rash of good and evil characters who, with a “grandiloquence” of gesture, battle each other in the mini-morality plays so common to the wrestling world (Barthes, “The World of Wrestling” 15).

During the thirties and thereafter, diverse gimmicks of increasing excess further tested the showmanship and athleticism of wrestlers. In the past and today, any wrestler cast as a “freak,” “midget,” or “woman” requires athletic skills that can adapt to techniques created for large, male bodies. Understanding that the same group is denigrated typically in wrestling scenarios, I suspect that, as performers, they also need to call on a hearty sense of humor, dissociation, and tolerance in order to perform the parts they are assigned. Over the years, other gimmicks of excess have included filling the ring with food and staging matches with multiple wrestlers or an array of props. While such gimmicks expose wrestling as a constructed performance, the wrestlers’ veiled use of blood capsules and blades operates in the reverse. They sustain the desired illusion of actual combat and violence.

In the 1950s, television wrestlers continued to create realistic seeming bouts although, to transcend the small scale of the screen, they further exaggerated the depiction of their characters. Gorgeous George epitomized this trend in wrestling showmanship and his resulting performance epitomizes the operational aesthetic. By means of blatant theatrics, Gorgeous George presented a character that was the antithesis of the working class audience and their wrestling heroes. He was of the upper crust, arrogant, effeminate, and a cheat. By means of clearly constructed social gesticulations, such as the elaborate removal of his robe and hair net and spraying the ring with disinfectant, Gorgeous George exposed and parodied the perceived norms of the upper class and, by their absence, the norms of the wrestling ring and its class and culture. Thereby, Gorgeous George invited his audience to observe and evaluate rather than emotionally identify with the operations of his wrestling

character. Since the conventions of the rough and tumble, blue-collar wrestler hero were absent from his performance, Gorgeous George provoked the fans to take a stand and form an opinion regarding wrestling, its culture and class politics.

From the 1980s through to the present day, wrestlers faced WCW, WWF, and now WWE expectations that they increase in physical size, musculature, and acrobatic abilities, so as to execute high flying maneuvers off the top ropes and corner posts of the ring. Such risky moves often result in injuries that end or shorten wrestlers' careers. As noted above, wrestlers also must demonstrate athletic and performance savvy in dealing with the various gimmicks of excess. Further, WWE wrestlers must create characters that can compete with the multi-media spectacle that surrounds them in the live and televised event. While the fireworks, video, music, and announcer commentary frame and feature the wrestlers, they also construct a precedent as regards the scale of depiction. By addressing the audience, microphone in hand, wrestlers are able to claim some vocal as well as visual space. However, since current wrestling fans tend to critique wrestlers' vocal banter in addition to their athletic skill, wrestlers must craft and polish their addresses. In sum, in order to realize success as a national wrestling superstar these days, wrestlers must demonstrate amazing feats of athleticism, sustain the illusion of spontaneous combat without harming each other, and create and perform a super sized character that is persuasive in multiple contexts and mediums.

Lastly, McMahon's admission that wrestling is a performance may have increased the pressure on wrestlers to create seamless performances. Today's wrestlers know that fans know to look for the gaps in the illusion. As Mazer points out, smart fans "look to see

the fake” and “they scrutinize performances, examining each punch for its impact or nonimpact” (Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle 6).

A second major trend that is evident in the history of wrestling is the progressive movement from no central wrestling organization to the current WWE monopoly. In the post Civil War era, a wrestler/promoter worked independently of others to schedule his bouts, secure locations, and set the rules, which usually varied from match to match. Since there were not enough skilled wrestlers in any one locale to sustain a career, wrestlers often took to the road to establish their reputations on their own or within a traveling carnival. In either case, individual wrestlers and their promoters retained control of the wrestling product.

When William Muldoon rose to prominence in the Bowery district of New York City, many of his matches were staged at Harry Hill’s saloon. As the proprietor of the establishment, Harry not only provided the arena, but also covered expenses, set the rules, and refereed to ensure a fair match and to keep the betting fans under control (Morton and O’Brien 25). Rather than a wrestler/promoter choosing a location and setting the rules independently, an establishment, Harry Hill’s, assumed control of the proceedings in this case.

Progressively, wrestling became monopolized by organizations. The Gold Dust Trio dominated the wrestling landscape in the 1920s, signing dozens of wrestlers to contracts and requiring that they post thousands of dollars in “guarantee” money to ensure against a double cross. Through their programs and standardized matches, the Trio decided who won or lost and who became eligible to compete for championship titles.

Wrestlers who refused to tow the line for the Trio were dealt with harshly by “Toots,” the policeman.

In the wake of the Gold Dust Trio, multiple wrestling organizations claimed control of wrestling territories across the US. In 1948, thirty-nine promoters sought to secure the legitimacy of their territories by establishing the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA). Although NWA promoters retained their territorial independence, they agreed to recognize one NWA heavyweight champion who would visit each territory and thereby generate profits for each promoter. Until the early sixties, the NWA dominated the wrestling trade when rival organizations, such as the American Wrestling Association, rose to challenge it. Thereafter, various organizations jockeyed for control until, in 2001, Vince McMahon and his WWE eliminated the competition by making strategic use of communication technologies.

As I noted earlier, Levine’s study of the emergence of a class hierarchy in the US vis-à-vis the strengthening of social institutions in the late nineteenth through twentieth centuries can be seen at work in the wrestling trade. Progressively, control of the wrestling product has been wrenched from the hands of those who create or make it (i.e., the wrestlers), and resituated in and standardized by the corporate institution. As product, wrestlers have learned to fall in line with the discipline of wrestling, whether it be taught by “Toots” or Mr. McMahon.

Oddly, the progressive standardization of wrestling has resulted in its acknowledged alignment with performance, which in our culture carries less currency than does sport. In light of its history and aim, wrestling is an illusion based performance,

which has been standardized too into high, middle, and lowbrow categories. Wrestling falls into the latter, of course, due to its history of snake oil scams in carnival like venues and the robust display of the physical/laboring body. Likewise, wrestling fans have been categorized. They are constructed as lowbrow dupes of the lowbrow illusion. However, by means of McMahon's admission – i.e., his corporate standardization of wrestling as sports entertainment – McMahon proves to pull lowbrow performance from the periphery (at least, in relation to sport) to center. His admission also recasts the illusionary aesthetic to one that admits to its operations, which aligns it, historically, with lowbrow comic practices and politics or the intellectual highbrow and their appropriation of the same. Where the fans settle in this topsy-turvy corporate play with highbrow/lowbrow, sport and performance is unclear.

A third trend in wrestling history concerns the importance of the sporting press to the operations of wrestling. Following the Civil War, reporters fueled the growing numbers of sports enthusiasts by covering wrestling alongside other legitimate sports, such as boxing and cycling. The array of wrestling styles, rules, and titles challenged reporters to perceive and articulate accurately the differences between them; to invest themselves in the physical and discursive operations of wrestling. In 1881, when Muldoon defeated Bauer at Harry Hill's saloon, newspaper coverage was so complete that it further legitimized the sport of wrestling.

Of course, the sporting press covered the bad news as well. While reporters speculated that the Gotch-Hackenschmidt bout of 1908 was slimy and the bout of 1911, fixed, they seemed compelled by the controversy or, at least, by the public's interest in it.

After the Stecher-Caddock match in 1917, however, wrestling's image was so tarnished that the public lost interest and so too did the press. As Feigenbaum recounts, following the Gotch-Hackenschmidt blow, the match was "another black eye for the wrestling business" (51).

During the 1920s, the Gold Dust Trio tried to clear the foul air emanating from wrestling by eliminating betting at matches and integrating "All-American" character types into their wrestling programs. The press ignored the bait and likewise snubbed the ethnic heroes of the thirties and forties. Promoters attempted to garner public interest by broadcasting matches over the radio but, due to the visual appeal of wrestling, the results were disappointing.

In the 1950s, wrestling enjoyed a renaissance thanks to television. Ignored for decades by the mainstream media, wrestling now shared a symbiotic relationship with the newest member of the mass media team. In exchange for low budget programming, wrestling received nationwide publicity from a novel media, capable of capturing its extraordinary visual character and appeal. The emergence of cable and satellite technologies in the seventies and eighties gave rise to additional demands for programming. Vince McMahon responded by providing cable stations across the country with tapes of his WWF matches. By means of strategic programming and marketing, McMahon propelled the WWF to wrestling prominence on television and, one by one, rival organizations fell by the wayside. Currently, I am aware of no other wrestling programs that enjoy national exposure than those produced by the WWE. The sports media, which was so integral to wrestling's success in its early years, occasionally grants

column space or air time to wrestling, but not very often. However, due to cable television and the Internet, Vince McMahon and other promoters are able to produce their own publicity and direct it at both specialized and general markets. Thereby, they construct their sport as viable, without relying on the legitimate sporting press so essential to promoters of long ago.

CHAPTER THREE WRESTLING LIVE!

What's happened is the crowd has become a part of the show. (Aldridge)

Ain't nothing fake about hitting that mat. You can't fake gravity.
(Diamond Dallas Page)

Televised wrestling may be dominated by World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), but live wrestling events are staged all over the country by smaller wrestling organizations. In the southeastern US, wrestling promotions such as Turnbuckle Championship Wrestling, Gulf Coast Wrestling, and Southern Championship Wrestling stage matches on a regular basis. Of course, the WWE also stages live events, some of which are videotaped and broadcast as the wrestling programs RAW and Smackdown! In addition to taping live events for broadcast, the WWE also stages house shows across the country, which are wrestling events that are performed only for those spectators who attend the matches. In the spring of 2004, I attended a WWE house show in Dothan, Alabama. I also attended several wrestling matches staged by Turnbuckle Championship Wrestling in Dothan, Alabama and Carrollton, Georgia. In this chapter, I describe and analyze the live events that I attended, drawing on the field notes, sound recordings, and photographs I collected as an audience-participant and observer of the events.

Turnbuckle Championship Wrestling, Dothan, Alabama

On July 7, 2001, I attended my first night of live professional wrestling. The matches were staged by an organization called Turnbuckle Championship Wrestling (TCW), and held at the Houston County Farm Center in Dothan, Alabama. The farm center is a facility that hosts a variety of events during the year, such as farmers' markets, motorcycle rallies, and trade shows. The facility is large and rectangular, like a

warehouse, with a concrete floor and bleacher seats on either side. The space can hold a crowd of two to three thousand people if filled to capacity. According to the Dothan Eagle, “350 wrestling fans came out to Houston County Farm Center” to watch “modern day gladiators slug it out in the ring” (Cook 1B). The “American Dream,” Dusty Rhodes, owner of TCW and a well known wrestler in the southeast, was the main attraction for most of the fans.

The wrestling ring is in the center of the space and elevated about three feet off the floor. Surrounding it on all four sides are five rows of about fifteen folding metal chairs. The first row of “ringside” seats is set back from the ring, six to eight feet, and in front of the row is a metal police barricade. The open area between the barricade and the ring is used by wrestlers for interacting with the spectators and for fighting outside of the ring. It provides a measure of security for both fans and wrestlers in that fans cannot get too close to the wrestlers or get injured when a wrestler is thrown from the ring. I am seated in the second row of ringside seats. About thirty feet behind me is the Farm Center stage. The wrestlers are using the space behind the stage as a dressing area. On the stage is a table with a stereo that is used to play the entrance music for each of the wrestlers. There are no spotlights or other theatrical lighting to illuminate the ring, only the standard fluorescent lights fixed to the ceiling some twenty feet above the floor.

The building does not appear to have air conditioning, although large exhaust fans at either end of the space circulate some air. It is July in southeast Alabama and quite hot and humid outside. The temperature is not much cooler inside and, before long, everyone is perspiring. In addition to the smell of sweaty bodies, the air is heavy with the smell of popcorn, peanuts, and nachos emanating from the concession stand. I estimate that about

seventy percent of the ringside seats are taken and there are dozens more spectators seated in bleacher seats on either side of the center. The crowd is predominately white and a mixture of young and old. There are quite a few people who appear to be over fifty and many children under twelve. There are several dozen teenagers, male and female, in the audience too. The majority of the crowd seems to be men in their twenties and thirties, many of whom are accompanied by women of the same age. Almost everyone is wearing blue jeans or shorts, t-shirts and tennis shoes. Many of the men wear baseball caps.

Because the matches were the first professional matches I ever attended, I did not know what to expect and how to record what I was to see and hear. I planned to use the experience to familiarize myself with the performance and how I might best record and understand the action in the ring and in the house. I took several pictures, as did many others, but only made minimal notes. Frankly, I was tentative in the unfamiliar surroundings. I did not want to stand out as someone who was doing academic research. I felt that if I asked too many questions or scribbled down notes, I might offend the insiders, the “real” fans, as I perceived them. So, I snapped a few pictures and also recorded on an audio cassette the sounds of the event as it took place around me. Afterwards, I realized an audio-recording might not be the best way to document a wrestling performance. The crowd noise renders individual comments unintelligible for the most part. On the other hand, the constant presence of crowd noise and the recurring “wham” – when a wrestler fell or stomped on the mat – reveal aspects of the performance and how it operates. For instance, it seems to me that the mat is designed to amplify the

sounds of falling and stomping. Thereby, it enhances the illusion of violence and intensifies the drama.

The matches start at 7:30 p.m. and last about two and a half hours, including a fifteen minute intermission. One of the matches is between Jorge Estrada, “the high flying Latin sensation,” and Glacier from “parts unknown” (TCW, 7 July 2001). Just before the match starts, Estrada addresses the audience in an effort to generate “heat” and provoke a response from them. Some fans to my left heckle Estrada, teasing him about his appearance and shouting what I later learn is a common refrain at wrestling matches, “You suck!” Estrada grabs the microphone from the ring announcer and yells back, “You keep your mouth shut! You see what I’m going to do is slowly destroy Glacier and then get the hell out of this hot Alabama sun. Wipe your mouth off!” he says, referring to a man in the audience. “This is a perfect example of when cousins mate with cousins” (TCW, 7 July 2001). Much of the crowd boos Estrada. Others laugh and clap at his antics. Those directly insulted point at each other in glee at having been singled out by the wrestler.

Before another match, Lodi, a wrestler from Hollywood, California, walks around the buffer area between the front row of seats and the ring. I notice he is carrying a piece of poster board folded in half. He slaps and shakes hands with the spectators as the crowd cheers for him. Upon entering the ring, Lodi unfolds and holds up the poster board. It reads, “U R a fat inbred redneck.” He displays the sign to all four sides of the ring, provoking the crowd to boo and yell at him, “go back to Hollywood!” (TCW, 7 July 2001). Many laugh and point at the sign in seeming amusement. Prior to another match, a masked wrestler called the American Nightmare enters the ring. A man from the

audience yells, “Hey Nightmare, you must be so ugly you have to wear a mask!” (TCW, 7 July 2001). The audience hoots, as much at the joke as at the American Nightmare.

Another match features the wrestlers Disco Inferno and Sean “Shocker” Adams. Disco Inferno has wrestled with some of the major wrestling organizations, including World Championship Wrestling (WCW). As he enters the ring, the song “Disco Inferno (Burn baby burn)” plays and Disco shows off his disco dance moves. They are reminiscent of those John Travolta used in the film Saturday Night Fever. Disco Inferno is bare from the waist up, except for a headband, and wears multi-colored tights with black wrestling boots. His black hair is coiffed much like Travolta’s in the aforementioned film. The crowd claps, whistles, and hoots as he dances around the ring. One male fan, around twenty years old, yells “Shocker” repeatedly. The voice of the ring announcer surfaces, “and ladies and gentlemen, his [Disco Inferno’s] opponent, from Los Angeles, California, two hundred and twenty seven pounds, Sean ‘Shocker’ Adams!” (TCW, 7 July 2001). The fan shouts out “Shocker” in unison with the announcer. The audience applauds and yells approvingly. Another young male in the audience shouts, “Disco did not play in the South” (TCW, 7 July 2001). The first young fan (Fan 1 below) continues to yell and others chime in.

Fan 1: Shocker, give us a pose Shocker.

Fan 2: Jump up on the ropes Disco.

Fan 3: What’s the matter can’t you talk?

Fan 2: (trying to get his attention) Disco, hey Disco.

Fan 1: Say “whatever.”

Fan 2: (still trying to get his attention) Disco, Disco!

Fan 1: (derisively) Whatever, whatever! (TCW, 7 July 2001)

As the match begins, the audience comments come quickly and overlap: “Let’s go Disco!” “There you go!” “Whatever, whatever, you suck!” “Come on Shocker!” “Watch your head Disco!” (TCW, 7 July 2001). In addition to what seem to be heated responses, there is laughter all around me. People chuckle and giggle, often after having shouted something at the performers. Other times, their laughter is directed at those who seem (overly) enthralled by the action. Suddenly, several people in my section begin to chant, “Disco sucks! Disco sucks! Disco sucks!” (TCW, 7 July 2001). The chant lasts for several seconds and then fades away. It strikes me that although the cultural phenomenon that was disco is well past its prime, it still carries enough signifying force – of difference – to raise playful ire here. “Disco did not (not) play in the south.”

Turnbuckle Championship Wrestling, Carrollton, Georgia

In February 2002, I made three trips to Georgia to attend more wrestling matches staged by TCW. The matches were held at a local VFW facility and drew crowds of between two and three hundred people. The demographics of the audience were similar to those in Dothan. TCW held matches at the VFW on several weekends over several months and, during my visits, I saw many of the same faces in the crowd. The “regulars” usually sat in the same seats and they seemed to be familiar with each other and the wrestlers. They taunted the wrestlers with ease and shared witty remarks with each other. Trash talk was common. Although the wrestlers never “broke” character, their interaction with the crowd was lively. They seemed to enjoy striking back with taunts of their own and stopping the action to glare, point, or shake their fists at their tormentors.

The VFW is a large, aluminum structure with a concrete floor and exposed metal wall supports and cross beams. The dimensions of the space are approximately one hundred feet long by sixty feet wide. The ceiling is fifteen to eighteen feet above the floor. The hall is illuminated by long, fluorescent fixtures hanging by thin chains from the ceiling. The wrestling ring is positioned in the center of the room and it is elevated. There are several rows of aluminum folding chairs on each side of the ring. Once again, a barricade separates the front row of chairs from the ring.

There is a stage on the left side of the hall and many audience members sit along the front edge or apron of it. An open area between the stage and folding chairs allows patrons easy passage to and from the concession stand and tables of wrestling merchandise. On the stage is a table with a stereo system set up for playing the wrestlers' entrance music. On either side of the stage are doors through which the wrestlers enter and exit the ring. Near each door is a T-shaped lighting stand. Later, I notice that the gels on the lights on the left stand cast a yellowish-orange light, while those on the right are multi-colored and swirl. The "bad guy" wrestlers pass through the swirling light and the "good guys" through the steady glow of warm light. They then pass along the sides of the stage, to the ring, where they are separated from the audience by the fencing. Security personnel are present to ensure that the spectators do not get too close to the wrestlers.

At 8:00 p.m., the first match starts. It is a sort of tag team duel that features Lethal Luther against the Palm Beach Boys. Although the Palm Beach Boys are a good deal smaller in weight and stature than Luther, they cannot be in the ring at the same time. They must abide by tag team rules. Lethal Luther dispatches the pair easily,

tossing them around the ring. At one point, however, Luther throws a wild punch and his opponent reacts as though the punch makes contact. As Luther's punch sails by harmlessly, a woman of forty, seated near me with her two children, says to a woman behind her, "He didn't even hit him! You could see ten inches between his arm and that guy's head!" (TCW, 1 February 2002). Both women shake their heads and smile. As it turns out, Lethal Luther wins the match. As he lies on top of one of his opponents, pressing his shoulders to the mat, a fan yells out, "This ain't your girlfriend Luther, get off of him!" (TCW, 1 February 2002).

The next match is a tag team match between two, two-man teams. One is called Southside Trash (SST) and the other, the Dobbins brothers. SST enters the ring accompanied by the song, "Who Let the Dogs Out?" As they make their entrance, a heavy set young man with glasses holds up a sign that reads, "SST is Waffle House Trash." Then, the man and other regulars seated around him put on paper hats that bear the Waffle House logo. They look to be the kind of hats that the short order cooks wear at Waffle House diners. The Dobbins brothers enter to the song "La Grange" by the band ZZ Top. They are greeted with cheers and applause. As the applause subsides, the Waffle House hat gang begins to chant, "Southside sucks!" over and over (TCW, 1 February 2002). The crowd joins in and "Southside sucks!" fills the hall for a good thirty seconds. In response, the SST wrestlers point directly at the Waffle House hat gang and yell, "Shut up" and "Shut your mouth" (TCW, 1 February 2002). I recall thinking, this is getting good.

The last match of the night is called a ladder, tables, and chairs match in which the noted objects are allowed to be used by the wrestlers in the ring. Two teams of three

wrestlers participate in the melee: Scotty Riggs, Jason Sugarman, and Gold Dust compete against Big Ron Stud, Dusty Rhodes, and his son, Dustin Rhodes. For approximately ten minutes, the six wrestlers engage in a free-for-all inside and outside the ring. They throw each other on and off of tables, hit each other with chairs, and use the ladder to strike their opponents or as a launching pad for high flying dives onto each other. Almost everyone in the crowd, including myself, is on their feet. The action is exciting and the acrobatics, impressive – although, given the blood, some of the wrestlers appear to be hurt. I wonder if it is an illusion or not.

The Rhodes and Big Ron Stud win the match. Afterwards, the ring announcer climbs into the ring, thanks the crowd, and reminds us that matches will occur next week too. Most of the crowd exits, although a number of individuals hang around the stage waiting for the wrestlers to emerge and sign autographs. An announcement comes over the public address system, telling the fans, “Ladies and gentlemen, your TCW superstars will be signing autographs, but they will be signing autographs outside the front of the building. If you’re not with TCW please exit the building at this time. The wrestlers will be out front signing autographs. Thank you” (TCW, 1 February 2002). The TCW crew begins to fold up chairs and take down the ring.

As I stand with my notepad, recorder, and camera in hand, a very large man, perhaps six feet four and three hundred fifty pounds, approaches me. He wears a baseball cap and a sweatshirt imprinted with the words, “Big Daddy.” Scott, I find out, is a thirty-two year old Carrollton native and a long time wrestling fan. He asks me if I am a wrestling promoter or talent scout. He saw me take notes and photos and speculated I was one or the other. I tell Scott that I am working on a research project about wrestling.

He informs me that the VFW building used to be bigger and hold larger crowds.

“Twenty years ago,” Scott recalls, “I saw Andre [the Giant], Abdullah the Butcher, Terry Funk, Iron Sheik, [Fabulous] Freebirds, and [Mr.] Wrestling II” (Scott). He also remarks, “It’s just a big hype. I sat there and screamed my lungs out. Now, I can hardly talk, but I love it” (Scott). Scott proceeds to talk about the wrestlers’ use of blood capsules and the amount of scar tissue Dusty Rhodes has developed due to his many injuries. He also tells me that that Dustin Rhodes, Dusty’s son, is the “real” Gold Dust. For this program, TCW brought in a local wrestler to play the part of Gold Dust so that Dusty and Dustin could wrestle together in the ladder, tables, and chairs match. Since Dustin’s Gold Dust character wears a lot of makeup and a wig, the switch was relatively easy to accomplish. On the other hand, Dustin is much larger than the local wrestler who portrayed Gold Dust on this particular night and I imagine many in the audience were aware of the deception. It is all part of the wrestling game and, like Scott, most wrestling fans know how the game is played.

On February 15, I attend my second TCW show in Carrollton and am fortunate to sit behind three very vocal audience members who are regulars at the Carrollton matches. Two red haired men in their mid to late twenties and a brunette woman about the same age sit in ringside seats right next to the security fence. I later learn their names are Jason, Todd, and Ann.

Again, the matches commence at 8:00 p.m. The first match is between Big Ron Stud and Chad Dobbins, one of the Dobbins brothers tag team duo. During the match, Jason favors Big Ron. His running stream of commentary is delivered in a loud,

confident voice and it seems both earnest and tongue-in-cheek. In one “stream,” Jason yells,

Come on Ron! Chad you suck! Come on Ron, there you go. Chad sucks! Whooo! Beat him like the bitch he is Ron! There you go, break his back. How’s that feel Chad? You suck Chad! Whip his ass Ron. Are you in heat or are you just out of breath fat ass? Punch him in the nuts! Wedgie! Get up you fat piece of crap! Get up lard ass! You suck man! You suck Chad! (TCW, 15 February 2002)

In the next match, Cowboy Bobby Hayes tangles with Steve “the Brawler” Lawler. Jason and a good part of the audience ridicule the wrestlers. Jason chants, “You both suck! You both suck! You both suck!” Another fan pipes in, “I’ve seen better wrestling in my backyard.” Jason continues sarcastically, “All right, way to go guys, whooo!” Another fan across the ring yells, “Reject! Reject! Reject!” Jason yells again, “Where’s Dusty [Rhodes] at? Where’s Dusty at, he’d kick some butt. Two losers in the ring. Who[ever] set this match up’s an idiot. Lethal Loser can fight better than you monkeys” (TCW, 15 February 2002). Throughout the night, Jason, Todd, and Ann alternately cheer and taunt the wrestlers. Jason even yells at the ring announcer as she pitches the TCW merchandise that is for sale, “Give me a free t-shirt! Free t-shirt! I want a free t-shirt!” (TCW, 15 February 2002). He also berates the so-called “manager” of the Southside Trash (SST) team, as does the audience generally.

The SST manager, Danny V, is a thin, dark haired young man in his early twenties. He wears a coat and tie, carries a briefcase, and displays effeminate characteristics. Danny V is a constant target of the fans. During a match between one of the SST wrestlers and Gold Dust, Danny V stands at ringside cheering. I notice at least two signs, sported by regulars, that read, “Danny is a bitch” and “Danny did you stiff a waitress today?” During the match, Jason yells, “Danny is the referee’s altar boy. Danny

likes little boys. He likes little boys. My name's Danny and I like little boys." The other SST wrestler is also at ringside and he turns to Jason and says, "Shut your mouth!" to which Jason responds, "Shut your mouth queer!" (TCW, 15 February 2002). As Danny V appears to give instructions to his wrestler, Jason continues to taunt him in a matter of fact tone of voice, "Shut up Danny. Shut up Danny. Way to be there Danny. Way to be there idiot. You're a great manager Danny, you're just so great." He then strikes up a chant and is joined by several others, "Danny's queer! Danny's queer! Danny's queer!" (TCW, 15 February 2002). The commentary is degrading and blatantly homophobic, and Jason and his friends seem to be enjoying themselves immensely. Their insults are interrupted constantly by spells of laughter.

Scott, the large man I spoke with on my prior visit, sits nearby and, during a lull in the action, he points to Jason and says, "Tonight, I'm gonna make you my bitch" (TCW, 15 February 2002). Jason makes an elaborate show of standing up and throwing a bottle of water he holds to the floor. He makes the threatening gesture of breaking something over his knee. Several people laugh and point at Jason. Scott seems highly amused as well, and points and glares menacingly at him. Jason revels in the attention. Just as the audience seems to enjoy the interplay of the "irate fans," so too the performers, Jason and Scott, seem to enjoy playing the role, and also marking it as such, as a performance.

The following week, on February 22, I return to Carrollton and watch another round of TCW matches. Afterwards, I make a point of talking with Jason, Todd, and Ann. I learn that Jason and Todd are brothers, ages twenty-five and twenty-nine, respectively, and Ann, age twenty-two, is their friend. Unlike many of the fans in Dothan

and Carrollton who dress in blue jeans and baseball caps, Jason and Todd are “clean cut” in appearance. Both have short, neatly groomed red hair. Jason wears khaki pants, a buttoned-down, long sleeved shirt, and penny loafers. Todd wears a white, long sleeved shirt with a buttoned-down collar. He has on black pleated pants with cuffs and black loafers. Todd also sports a gold wristwatch and has a pager on his belt. Ann has shoulder length brunette hair. She wears a long sleeved pullover shirt with a collar, dress jeans, and brown boots.

I tell the trio that I am writing a research paper on wrestling, and they tell me they have been making trips to wrestling matches for almost a year. They live in Marietta, Georgia, which is about an hour’s drive from Carrollton, and they have attended TCW matches in Thomaston, Rome, Osborne, Lassiter as well as Carrollton, Georgia. In our talk, Todd and Ann offer forthright answers to my questions, while Jason is less direct. Below is a key portion of the interview:

Bill: What brings you out? Why do you come to something like this? I’ve seen you out here three weeks in a row.

Todd: Yeah, we come every week.

Jason: Dusty Rhodes!

Todd: It’s pretty much the wrestlers. I mean they’re a bunch of great guys. You get to meet them, you get to meet them after the show.

Jason: Whooo!

Todd: It’s great fun.

Ann: It’s just a good time. It’s a good time, that’s the reason we come.

Bill: A lot of people say wrestling is fake. Why would you come to this?

Jason: (sarcastically) TCW is a hundred percent real. Come out, come get some. (Jason laughs).

Ann: Why would you go to a movie? It's fake too. Why not?

Todd: It's just for entertainment. Like I said, you get to hang around afterwards and you get to talk to them. They're just a bunch of good guys.

Jason: TCW is the new WWF! Whooo! (They all laugh.)

Bill: (referencing Jason) I noticed you particularly give these guys a hard time.

Todd: That's our job.

Jason: That's right. The real deal. Nothing fake about it. Come get some.

Todd: Don't listen to my brother. (They all laugh.) (Jason, Todd, and Ann)

During our conversation, Jason also tells me that he will turn twenty-six the following week and he hopes that "they [the wrestlers] will throw me in the ring" (Jason, Todd, and Ann).

The same night, I also interview the ring announcer or "ring mistress" as she refers to herself. Virginia Holbrook worked in radio in Macon, Georgia. There, she met Dusty Rhodes, the owner of TCW. When she moved to Marietta, which is the home of TCW, she found "it was a natural fit for me to come on board as the ring announcer" (Virginia Holbrook). At the time we spoke, Virginia had been working for TCW for eighteen months.

Bill: Were you a wrestling fan before this?

Virginia: Oh, huge wrestling fan, huge wrestling fan. Dusty's one of my idols. I mean he's fantastic.

Bill: What do you think brings people out to events like this?

Virginia: Hmmm. Events like this. Um.

Bill: What's the appeal?

Virginia: What's the appeal? That is a really good question and I wonder if it's not staged violence that brings people out. Almost a catharsis type thing, you

know, kind of like wanting to see the good guy triumph over the bad guy. You know, a lot of people are black hat, white hat type of people and Dusty has always been a true white hat. So, people come out, see him, and go home feeling good about themselves.

Bill: It's understandable to see kids out here cheering, but to see these grown people . . .

Virginia: Suspension of reality, suspension of reality. Absolutely. It's the adult soap opera. You want to see Dustin and Dusty succeed in the end. Sometimes they don't. So, that's kind of what brings people back the next week. So we hope.

Bill: You've been here in Carrollton for how long?

Virginia: We were here, even into last summer. So, it's been about a year off and on. We've just started running every Friday night in February.

Bill: Are you having a good time?

Virginia: We're having a great time here. I mean we want to start filming TV, this is where our TV venue, we want it to be. So we've been doing a little testing on that, doing video cassettes and selling those. So this is where we really want to be able to shoot TV, this is where we want to make our home base. We want to call this TCW arena. (Virginia Holbrook)

We chit-chat casually for a time and then Virginia begins to address specific performers, their characters, and fan responses.

Virginia: Southside Trash is [disliked too]. Here [are] two white booty guys dancing to black rap music. First of all, they've got this annoying manager, skinny, effeminate manager that comes out with them and they tell you to "shut up." I mean that's your gut reaction [to dislike them].

Bill: I noticed this Danny V guy gets a lot of negative . . .

Virginia: Yeah, they don't like him too much.

Bill: Which is great, I guess.

Virginia: You know, I guess that's the point. And then you have a guy like Dusty come out and [he is] just your consummate hero, come to save the day, riding in with the charge. So, it is, I mean I love it. Like I said, it's the adult soap opera.

Bill: A lot of people criticize wrestling as fake, it's low brow. How would you respond to that?

Virginia: (sighs) There is a lot of work that goes into what we do. There is an extraordinary amount of work that goes into what we do. The guys train, of course it's all scripted. That lid's been blown off a long time ago. As far as being low brow, I wouldn't necessarily say it's low brow unless you're talking about the income level of the people attending. You know they don't tend to be of the upper echelon.

Bill: But it's not cheap to come in here.

Virginia: No, it's not. For an hour and a half, you pay ten dollars. I mean you could go see a movie for five dollars or seven-fifty. So, to come to a wrestling match and to see this, you almost have to want to put those kind of preconceived notions aside and just say, "You know what? This is gonna be a lot of fun. They're athletes. They're people I want to see. There's good guys, they fight for what's right or they don't fight for what's right and so I go and I want to boo them." You can't beat up your next door neighbor in real life, so you come see Dustin Rhodes do it for you.

Bill: I talked to some of these regular guys and it seems like they know these wrestlers and they have a thing that they do with them every week. The same taunts . . .

Virginia: Our guys are so accessible. Us being different from the WWF or say other professional sports athletes. Our guys are extraordinarily accessible. Dusty Rhodes, the same guy that you watched and your dad watched twenty-five years ago, is going to be standing out in the parking lot signing autographs. And you're going to be able to say, "Hey Dusty, you're an idol of mine. I'm a big fan of yours." And Dusty's going to look at you and say, "that means a lot, thanks." Or the guys that you hate are gonna say, "Yeah, I'll sign your stuff, now get out of my face." I mean they're accessible and that's one of the big things. . . . I think that people get off really on dressing up and doing the different characters. I love being the ring mistress and orchestrating the whole show. Then, we go back to normal everyday stuff on Monday morning.

Bill: Monday through Friday you work in radio?

Virginia: Monday through Friday I work for Velocity Sports Performance, which is an athletic training and sports agency group out of Marietta. I do marketing. I write newsletters for forty hours a week. And then I put on a low cut top and a short skirt and I come out here and I talk on the mic and I get kissed by Dustin Rhodes. It makes life, you know, we sure as hell don't do it for the money. We do it because we love it. (Virginia Holbrook)

During the matches in Dothan and Carrollton, I focused primarily on the audience and their responses to the action in the ring. In my next foray, I tried to broaden my observation skills, focusing on the ring action and the corresponding crowd reaction.

WWE House Show, Dothan, Alabama

On April 4, 2004, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) came to the civic center in Dothan, Alabama to present a wrestling performance called “Superstars of Smackdown!” The event began at 4:00 p.m. and there were about two thousand people in attendance. Ticket prices ranged from twenty to forty dollars and since the twenty dollar tickets were sold out I purchased one for thirty dollars. I also purchased a WWE Official Souvenir Program, which is less a program about the Dothan matches and more a glossy coffee table book with photographs and biographical information about WWE celebrities.

Book in hand, I enter the arena and find my seat. It is located in the upper level of the civic center overlooking the ring, which is situated in the center of the concrete arena floor. Seated next to me is a rather heavysset man, perhaps thirty years old, and his twelve year old nephew. The man tells me that they won their tickets on the radio, thankfully, since ticket prices are high. According to the man, prices have increased significantly since the WWE last appeared in Dothan in May 2003.

I am about seventy-five feet away from the ring, but it appears I will have a good view of the action. The ring is standard in size, measuring eighteen by eighteen feet, and three lines of rope connect the turnbuckles that stand at each corner. There are two lighting towers in opposite corners to provide additional lighting for the ring. The arena smells of popcorn, bubble gum, and nachos.

Directly across from me, on the other side of the ring, is the arena's proscenium stage. Along the apron of the stage are several people seated in folding chairs. There is a stereo system set up on the stage to play the signature music that introduces each wrestler. Before the show starts, contemporary pop music plays. It is provided by a local radio station. To the left of the stage are two double doors that separate the backstage area and dressing rooms from the arena. For their entrances, the wrestlers emerge through the double doors and walk on a diagonal to the ring past the ringside seats. As in the TCW matches, a metal fencing separates the wrestlers from the crowd and circles the ring, creating a buffer area. Unlike the TCW matches, this area appears to be padded, providing a cushion for the wrestlers should their action spill outside the ring.

The first match of the afternoon is a tag team match featuring the Basham Brothers against the team of Scottie 2 Hottie and Rikishi. Rikishi is an enormous man. The WWE program describes his height as six feet one inch and his weight as four hundred pounds. Grossly overweight, he resembles a Sumo wrestler and wears a Sumo thong that leaves his butt cheeks exposed. His short hair is dyed blonde and slicked back on his head. Scottie and Rikishi are nationally known WWE wrestlers and Rikishi, in particular, is a crowd favorite.

One reason for Rikishi's popularity is his signature move called the "Stink Face." I have seen him enact it several times in televised matches. When Rikishi renders an opponent helpless, he usually ends up in a seated position, braced against a turnbuckle in a corner of the ring. His arms rest on the bottom ropes and his legs are spread out in front of him. Rikishi then backs up into the opponent and presses his rear against his face. The victim of the Stink Face can do nothing but flail his arms and legs in desperation. In

response to this act of utter degradation, the crowd erupts in cheers, hoots, and laughter. Even Vince McMahon, owner of the WWE, has been subjected to the Stink Face when performing his in-ring alter ego, “Mr. McMahon.”

In the early going of the match, Scottie 2 Hottie is thrown to the mat and endures severe punishment at the hands of the Basham Brothers. Often, during tag team matches, the referee is distracted by some peripheral action whereupon both members of one team will gang up on the opposing wrestler. This “illegal” trick occurs several times in the opening minutes of the match. While the referee is upbraiding Rikishi for trying to enter the ring, the in-ring Basham Brother drags Scottie to his corner so that the other brother can assist in kicking and punching him, or the brother outside the ring holds Scottie’s arms behind him while the other slaps and punches him at will. The crowd seems eager for Rikishi’s turn in the ring. He is so much larger than his opponents that the crowd anticipates that he can overwhelm them with his size and strength.

After surviving what appears to be a severe beating, Scottie regains his resolve. Valiantly, he tries to move across the ring and tag Rikishi so that his teammate can enter the match. One of the Basham Brothers holds Scottie by the leg as he hops toward Rikishi. He comes tantalizingly close to making the connection – fingers outstretched toward Rikishi, Rikishi reaching out over the ropes, within inches of making contact – when the Basham Brother hauls him back to the far side of the ring. This sensual, psychological, climactic ploy occurs several times. Finally, with a mighty effort, Scottie struggles free and dives toward Rikishi. The tag is made and the giant Samoan enters the ring to the delight of the crowd.

Immediately, Rikishi gains the upper hand, slamming his opponent down on the mat. He tosses him into the corner where the wrestler lies helpless against the turnbuckle in prime position for the Stink Face. The crowd erupts, anticipating the next move: an odoriferous comeuppance to the smelly cheaters. However, as Rikishi is about to back into his opponent, the other Basham Brother enters the ring and knocks him away. Rikishi tags Scottie and Scottie enters the ring, refreshed and revitalized.

Scottie pummels his opponent and then executes his signature move, the Worm. Scottie swings his arms in a wide arcing pendulum in front of his body. Fans in-the-know pick up on the cue and begin to chant the letters, “W-O-R-M.” Scottie flops on the mat and undulates his body in a worm like motion toward his prostrate opponent. When he reaches him, he lands on and then pins him easily. The ten minute match is over, and the crowd cheers and applauds loudly. Following the match, Scottie and Rikishi perform a dance routine for the audience, encouraging a young boy from the crowd to dance with them. While dancing, the boy mimics Scottie’s “worm” movements. The crowd enjoys watching the wrestlers dance, especially Rikishi who, in spite of his girth, moves with graceful ease.

Before the next match begins, Kurt Angle and Dawn Marie are introduced to the Dothan crowd. Kurt Angle is a well known WWE wrestler, an Olympic wrestling gold medalist, and the “commissioner” of the WWE. Over the years, Angle has incurred the wrath of wrestling audiences by insulting their intelligence and boasting of the dedication required to win an Olympic gold medal. As Angle makes his way to the ring, the crowd chants, “You suck.” Angle takes the familiar insult in stride, as if it is a compliment – which it is. He smiles and waves at the crowd. They cease their clamor and Angle

addresses them graciously. He acknowledges and thanks the wrestling fans in Dothan for their support of the WWE.

After Angle, Dawn Marie is introduced. I am not familiar with her, but the WWE has many female characters. Some wrestle while others serve as “valets” or ringside managers and cheerleaders for male wrestlers. Still others are part of the WWE broadcast team or they hold some vague administrative position with the WWE. The WWE sells posters and calendars of these WWE divas. In the program, Dawn Marie’s “bio” asks, “Who says seductive charms won’t get you places?” The program proceeds to offer,

When Dawn Marie first appeared in WWE, she was a paralegal, charged with delivering some official papers to owner Vince McMahon. Using her powers of persuasion – aided by a blouse that appeared to have a couple of buttons missing – Dawn Marie insinuated herself in Mr. McMahon’s office. . . . Recently, she has been testing her mettle against Torrie Wilson in in-ring bikini bouts. (World Wrestling Entertainment Official Souvenir Program 22)

As Dawn Marie enters the ring, many in the crowd hoot and whistle approvingly. She wears a tight fitting, low cut dress and high heels. Her brunette hair is shoulder length and she is buxom and very tan. She also appears to be physically fit with lean, muscular arms and legs. She takes the microphone from Angle and tells him and the audience that she recently lost her job working for Eric Bischoff. Bischoff was a significant figure in World Championship Wrestling (WCW) before it was bought by the WWE. Bischoff now holds a managerial position in the WWE and, apparently, Dawn Marie had worked for Bischoff until recently. She asks Angle, “I wondered if you might have a position for me?” Angle smirks and many of the men in the audience hoot and whistle. Dawn Marie proceeds, “If you offer me a job, I promise I won’t blow it.” Her sexually charged plea provokes more whistles and “owwws” from the crowd. Angle

takes the microphone and replies, “Did you say you will or you won’t blow the job?” The audience laughs, some loud whistles are heard. Dawn Marie answers, “You’re the boss, I’ll bend over backwards for you” (“Superstars of Smackdown!” 4 April 2004). A final flurry of whistles and laughter, and the in-ring exchange between Angle and Dawn Marie ends.

The pair exits the ring. Angle sits down close to ringside whereupon Dawn Marie approaches him. They talk together, gesturing broadly. Then, Angle rises and has a few words with the ring announcer. The announcer walks to the center of the ring and introduces the next match, which will feature Bob “Hardcore” Holley and Teddy Long. The announcer also tells the crowd that Dawn Marie will be the guest referee for the match. The crowd reacts loudly with cheers and applause as Dawn Marie climbs through the ropes and into the ring.

The match starts and the two wrestlers exchange slaps, punches, and a variety of holds. Periodically, each wrestler comes close to pinning his opponent. Hardcore Holley is the crowd favorite. Apparently, he is a southern boy, from Mobile, Alabama. The program states that “Holley is hardcore to the bone, having held numerous Hardcore Championships to prove his reputation. In addition, he’s one of the most technically sound competitors ever. His dropkick is considered by many to be the best in the business” (World Wrestling Entertainment Official Souvenir Program 34). During hardcore matches, it is legal for wrestlers to use all manner of objects to beat one another, such as belts, tables, chairs, and trash cans. Further, they are not confined to the wrestling ring but may fight wherever they would like, such as outside the ring, in dressing rooms and backstage hallways, and even outside the arena itself (Feigenbaum

90). The Holley-Long match was not a hardcore match and, for me, the most memorable aspects concerned Dawn Marie's performance as referee.

As Holley takes control of the match, he pins his opponent on at least two occasions. However, Dawn Marie's three count is so slow that Long is able to "kick out" or roll his shoulders off the mat before she reaches three. The audience reacts negatively and, after the second slow three count, the man next to me comments, "She can't count." After several more blows and body slams, Hardcore Holley is poised to pin his opponent for victory. He has Long tied up in a hold from which there is no escape. Dawn Marie drops to the mat and begins her count, "One. Two." The crowd counts with her. As Dawn Marie's hand rises to drop for the third time, she pauses and looks up at her fingers. It seems she has a broken nail and she stops to examine it. Holley stares up in disbelief as the crowd reacts loudly. Holley loses his concentration, breaks his hold, and turns to Dawn Marie. Long rises, delivers several punches to Holley's head and upper torso, and pins him to the mat. Dawn Marie drops to the mat, quickly counts three, and the match is over. Long stands, raises his hand in victory, and exits the ring.

The crowd is upset or they perform being upset very well. They boo and jeer at Dawn Marie. Holley is on his feet, storming around the ring and pleading his case to the audience. His arms are outstretched and his eyes and mouth are wide open. He then moves toward Dawn Marie and grabs her by the waist. He drops down on one knee and puts Dawn Marie over the other. The crowd roars approvingly. He lifts her skirt and we see that Dawn Marie is wearing thong underwear so that her butt cheeks are exposed. Holley swats her bottom two or three times, leaving red marks I can see from my seat some seventy-five feet away. The crowd is both delighted and a little shocked at the

display. There is an audible gasp, followed by laughing, clapping, and cheering. Dawn Marie breaks free, pulls down her skirt, and exits the ring, fuming. She goes to Angle to complain. With a smile on his face, he tries to calm her. Dawn Marie storms out of the arena, rubbing her behind and pulling at her skirt. The fans close to the walkway taunt her and she responds with “dismissive” gestures. The audience’s reaction of delight and astonishment continues for a good minute or so. They are pleased to see Dawn Marie receive her comeuppance. I imagine the men also are pleased to have seen her partially naked behind.

The WWE show in Dothan lasted just over two hours and consisted of eight matches and a fifteen minute intermission. Incidences in two other matches are notable. The first features a wrestler known as Booker T., a large, very muscular African-American man. Standing in the ring alone, Booker T. complains that he cannot believe someone of his stature has to wrestle in Dothan, Alabama. The crowd boos the insult. He continues that he is a “five-time, five-time, five-time world champion” as he holds up five fingers. In response, several men sitting in my section chant, “You got traded! You got traded!” (“Superstars of Smackdown!” 4 April 2004). Their chant refers to Booker T. having wrestled and won his championships while performing in the WCW, which went bankrupt. He now performs with the WWE.

Another match features John Cena and Rene Dupree. Cena is introduced as the WWE US Champion. He wears baggy denim pants that extend just below his knees, running shoes, and a baseball cap turned sideways. He enters to hip hop music and raps briefly before the match begins. His character seems to be urban, streetwise, and hip. Dupree wears long red tights and red wrestling boots. His hair is groomed stylishly and

he is evenly tanned. He also speaks with an exaggerated French accent. While Cena moves and talks like someone straight out of a hip hop music video, Dupree speaks and behaves in a formal, elegant manner. He is a “French” cliché or parody. When Dupree attempts a rap of his own he sounds stupid, and both Cena and the audience ridicule him. Cena then performs a brief rhyme that ends with the line, “Rene is gay.” He provokes the crowd to chant, “Rene is gay. Rene is gay,” over and over again. Dupree is so disturbed by the chant that he asks the ring announcer to tell the audience that the match will not begin until they stop chanting. The chant subsides although many in the audience boo Dupree. The chant again rises during the match and also afterwards when Cena pins Dupree for the victory.

I admit I was disturbed by the chant; by the fact that men and women, old and young alike participated in performing it with such apparent ease. There was a woman in her mid to late fifties who sat several rows behind me with a young boy, her grandson perhaps. She cried out, “Rene is gay,” gleefully during and after the match and her grandson joined in. She also yelled out, “we want a table,” several times (“Superstars of Smackdown!” 4 April 2004). It seems she wanted to see a wrestler thrown out of the ring and onto a table set up at ringside. Typically, the table breaks in half when the wrestler lands on it. But, not a single table was broken during the WWE matches in Dothan and the woman’s wish was not fulfilled.

Analysis

My experiences at live wrestling events have been fun, even exhilarating, and also disturbing. Before beginning the study, I had never attended a live wrestling match and did not know what to expect. Through repeated exposure to live wrestling performances,

I became accustomed to many of the forms and conventions that are in operation during the events. As Barthes points out, the components of wrestling “constantly help the reading of the fight” or event generally, because they are heightened expressions of well known or socially shared gestures and attitudes. “Each moment . . . is intelligible” although, in sum, the experience is one of excess (“The World of Wrestling” 18 & 16). In this section, I draw on my experiences as documented above to interpret the generic wrestling event and the tacit rules for enacting the performance by those involved.

The first rule I learned is that wrestling is an event designed to engage the audience. It “caters directly to the fans” and “is structured around their participation *as fans*” (Mazer, Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle 6; emphasis in original). As such, “audiences want to be involved in the unfolding drama” (Feigenbaum 92). In my experience, the drama was plural if not multiple. While the fight between the combatants in the ring, the fictive drama, engaged the fans, the more significant drama, it seemed, was that which occurred in the theatrical reality of the event, between the wrestlers and the audience. The audience’s willing expectation that they be part of the act was evident in the first TCW match I attended in Dothan. When Jorge Estrada entered the ring, several audience members involved themselves immediately, shouting at Estrada, “You suck!” He quickly responded, “You shut your mouth!” and tacked on the insult, “This is a perfect example of when cousins mate with cousins” (TCW, 7 July 2001). The agonistic struggle between performers and spectators continued throughout the night and was evident at every live event I attended. Wrestlers provoked the audience intentionally and the audience responded with catcalls, harangues, or the always popular, “You suck!”

The initial provocation on the part of the wrestler was not verbal, however. It was physical and consisted of his entrance into the arena, heralded by music (at the TCW matches in Dothan) or both music and theatrical lighting. Because the wrestler had to walk through the audience before he reached the ring, he was, in a sense, invading the audience's territory, their performance area, before he reached his own territory, the stage of the ring. His physical invasion of the local turf stimulated the fan's vocal response, their praise or condemnation as the case might be. Although the gist of the gestures (i.e., the invasion and response), were intelligible immediately, the fan's specific speech acts varied given the wrestler and the fan's knowledge of his history. That is to say, as a fledgling spectator, I could sense the general agon when Jorge Estrada entered the arena but had no idea who he was, whereas those around me responded to him specifically, as if they knew him well. In Brecht's terms, they were sporting experts who knew what was going on and what they expected of the performers, which including themselves (Brecht 6). Such sporting experts include Carrollton fans, Todd and Jason. When I asked them why they give wrestlers such a hard time, Todd said, "that's our job." And Jason affirmed, "That's right. The real deal. Nothing fake about it. Come get some" (Jason, Todd, and Ann).

Another tacit rule, embedded in the aforementioned example, is that wrestlers can intensify their agonistic relationship with the audience by localizing their insults. In every match I attended, at least one wrestler made disparaging comments about the town, state, or region and its inhabitants. In wrestling parlance, this tactic is called "cheap heat" (Feigenbaum 304). Wrestlers gauge their success, not by wins or losses, but by the amount of heat or impassioned response they receive from the audience, whether it be

positive or negative. Insulting the audience is considered cheap heat. Audiences perform cheap heat too, such as when they insult a wrestler for his poor performance skills or choice of hairstyle or music.

For instance, when the wrestler Lodi entered the arena at the TCW event in Dothan, he was gracious toward the audience to start. He took time in the buffer area to shake hands and talk with fans. However, once in the ring, he generated cheap heat when he unfolded and displayed a poster that read, “U R a fat inbred red neck.” Just as Estrada warned of cousins mating with cousins, Lodi characterized the audience as “inbred.” While Estrada insulted specific audience members, Lodi extended the insult to deride the entire audience. Although I found the sign humorous, it was not particularly inventive. As a native southerner, I have heard the accusation that all folks in the South are inbred red necks countless times. It is a cheap comment. In the wrestling ring, it is cheap heat and it and its contents demanded a response from the audience. They defended their turf with boos and told Lodi to “go back to Hollywood!” (TCW, 7 July 2001).

Lodi’s cheap heat and the crowd’s reaction remind me of Gorgeous George’s performance. He too generated heat by performing gesticulations that opposed the culture and context in which he performed. In the Lodi case, the audience read, evaluated, and formed an opinion of the southern stereotype that Lodi produced, expressing their opinion by producing a cheap (though, potentially, complex) stereotype of their own. The “Hollywood” evaluator refers to Lodi’s hometown. It also refers to the Hollywood film industry and culture, responsible for the many mass marketed films that perpetuate the mythology of the South as backward, inbred, and red neck. However, due to the upbeat timbre of the crowd’s response, and their laughter and smiles afterwards, they

appeared to have some reflexive distance from the part they played. They did not fuse emotionally with the role of the “irate southerner.” Rather, like Lodi’s quotational sign, they played at the quotational gest of the role. As a result, the agonistic battle between the wrestler and the audience about something as serious as cultural representations was playful – playfully serious, in that the performers produced the stereotypical quotations (the “cheap heat”) in order to identify their relationship to them.

Another example of localizing insults arose during the WWE house show I attended. During the event, Booker T. expressed his disgust that a “five-time” world champion like himself had to wrestle in Dothan. His criticism was met with crowd boos and then jeers that reminded Booker T. that “You got traded!” The rejoinder demonstrates the fans knowledge that Booker T. won his championships when he was under contract with the now defunct WCW, which forced his move to the WWE. In this case, Booker T.’s inference that Dothan is a Podunk place is met with the fan’s inference that Booker T.’s titles are Podunk too. I did not include Booker T.’s match in my description because of its short duration. He was quickly and soundly defeated by a wrestler called The Undertaker. I find it compelling that Booker T. was humiliated in such short order and just after having boasted of his championships and denigrated Dothan. Perhaps, Booker T.’s quick defeat was a gift to the hometown crowd from the show’s producers. Additional research might reveal more about how localizing strategies are used, and to what effect, by the WWE and other organizations.

Another example of fans enacting local pride arose without seeming provocation on the wrestler’s part. In the TCW show in Dothan, Disco Inferno assembled in his performance a number of signifiers that recalled the disco era of the 1970s. His entrance

music, costume, hairdo, and dance moves were reminiscent of those used in the film Saturday Night Fever. While I suspect wrestling fans across the country might find the disco gimmick mildly irritating, nostalgic, or silly, the Dothan crowd specified their displeasure. A fan shouted, “Disco did not play in the South,” and soon after several fans chanted, “Disco sucks! Disco sucks! Disco sucks!” (TCW 7 July 2001). As in the Lodi encounter, the fans identified themselves through a regional quotation that opposed that offered by the wrestler. Unlike the Lodi example, the fans expressed their opinion without an explicit prompt. In my experience, fans are on the look out constantly for ways to participate actively in the production of the wrestling performance. In this light, the live wrestling event appears to be a “writerly text” in so far as it allows, even encourages, the reader or audience in this case to produce it. Further, there appears to be multiple agencies, produced by the performance text or discovered by the audience (despite the text), that stimulate the writerly interaction (Barthes, S/Z 4-5).

Another tacit rule within the localizing component is that fans support their hometown or regional favorite. During the WWE house show, the Dothan crowd was enthusiastic in their support of Hardcore Holley who lives in nearby Mobile, Alabama. The most evident example of hometown support for Holley was when Dawn Marie, the guest referee, was slow in executing the three count that would have given Holley the pin fall and victory. In fact, she was slow three times running and, during the third, she failed to finish because she was distracted by a broken nail. When Holley stared at her in disbelief, his opponent turned the tables and pinned Holley for the victory. The crowd erupted at this point, booing Dawn Marie mercilessly. With arms outstretched and a look of utter disbelief on his face, Holley appealed to the crowd for justice who offered it by

casting more aspersions on Dawn Marie. As if validated by the crowd, Holley took hold of Dawn Marie, turned her over his knee, pulled up her skirt, and spanked her bare bottom. After the initial shock of seeing partial nudity, the crowd cheered in support of Holley's humiliation of Dawn Marie.

In terms of the broad gests of this performance, it appears that Holley was constructed as the rule abiding, scientific wrestler and local hero who should have won the match. Dawn Marie, who in her short skirt and heels had "come on" to Kurt Angle prior to the match, was an inept flirt who was more interested in her nails and getting laid than wrestling. The fair fighting southern boy was undone by the self absorbed tart, and the crowd relished the opportunity to heckle and deride her. The local angle implemented in this match engaged the audience's regional loyalties and, thereby, they participated in the drama that played out in the ring. To start, they were enthusiastic and supportive of Holley, then dismayed and upset at his undoing, and lastly they cheered his moxie and the tart's degradation.

While Holley's hometown appeal was a factor in how the fans responded to the drama, two other tacit rules of the wrestling event are evident. First, wrestling performances operate in terms of a hetero-normative masculine code of behavior. As exemplified by the Carrollton fans' response to Danny V, the effeminate manager of the SST team, and the similar response that WWE wrestler Rene Dupree received at the hands of the Dothan crowd, homosexuality (or signifiers encoded as such) is not tolerated in professional wrestling. Likewise, women are objectified and largely in sexual terms. When in play, this operational code seems to over-ride others; it is a "readerly" given or "*referendum*" that, as a spectator, you either have to accept or reject (Barthes, S/Z 4;

emphasis in original). Whereas the other fan responses I discussed above required sense-making outside the given signs of the text, the fan responses to Dawn Marie, Danny V., and Dupree reiterate the given signs. Dawn Marie looks, behaves, and is treated by Angle and Holley as a tart. And, the audience mimics their treatment of her.

Another tacit rule at work in the Holley and Dawn Marie encounter concerns rules for wrestling. There are few absolute rules in professional wrestling. Most exist to be broken and the performers' transgression of the rules both incenses and delights the audience. The one consistent rule of which I am aware and that is applied in every type of wrestling match is the pin fall. When a wrestler pins his opponent's shoulders to the mat for a three count the match is over (Albano and Sugar 51). The three count is overseen by the referee who slaps the mat for each number in the count. Whereas in the early twentieth century wrestlers had to win two of three falls to claim victory, today one pin fall is all it takes to win a match.

Clearly, in the Holley-Long match, Dawn Marie proved inept in overseeing the one supreme rule of professional wrestling. Her counts were slow, she was more interested in her nails, and the wrong wrestler won. She deserved her comeuppance: men should spank women and spank 'em in public when they don't obey their rules! (A scarlet letter meted out in the ring rather than on the scaffold.) However, if we reverse this (satiric) analysis to the point when Dawn Marie entered the ring as the referee, another reading arises – which I intend as an addition to, not as a replacement for, the ongoing gender critique.

Dressed in a short skirt and heels, Dawn Marie enters the ring as the guest referee for a professional wrestling match between two guys. Since there are very few sports,

including wrestling, where a female is positioned to judge a contest between two or more men, the action announces its breakage of sport and wrestling rules. Dawn Marie's costume also conflicts with the attire expected of both male and female referees in sport generally and in professional wrestling. As such, Dawn Marie's exposes normative gender operations at work in both sport and professional wrestling, defamiliarizing our assumptions regarding who should referee and what they should wear. Furthermore, I caught myself wondering why I should read Dawn Marie's scanty costume as "sexually provocative" and not make like associations in response to Rikishi's costume or the body exposing attire of wrestlers generally. Should Dawn Marie "cover up" her body so as to avoid being objectified by me? An explicit parody of professional wrestling arises when Dawn Marie proves more interested in her broken nail than calling the three count. Her absorption mocks the many times that male referees are distracted by peripheral elements and wrestlers cheat, as was the case in the tag team match staged earlier in the program. To this point, then, Dawn Marie's performance parodies the rules, referees, and gender norms at work in professional wrestling and sports generally. That Dawn Marie is punished for her tricky play and masculine order restored to the ring with such seeming ease and acceptance is disappointing to me . . . and sad. It is as if the upside-down carnivalesque of gender is erased, suddenly and deliberately, by the readerly referendum of the wrestling world.

In my conversation with Virginia Holbrook, she mentioned that "there is a lot of work that goes into what we do" and then, for emphasis, she added, "There is an extraordinary amount of work that goes into what we do" (Virginia Holbrook). Virginia's observation articulates another tacit rule of the live wrestling performance,

which is the broad array of matches, rules, characters, conflicts, and gimmicks that the wrestlers learn, attempt to perfect, and offer their audiences. In the programs I attended, the matches were diverse in style, the number and gender of the participants, and the use of objects in the ring. I witnessed the standard two man match, a three way match, four man and six man tag team matches, a taped fist match, a ladders, tables, and chairs match, an inter-gender match between a man and woman, and the match with Dawn Marie as the “special guest” referee. Match time limits varied from ten to fifteen to twenty minute matches. Often, objects were a legal component of the match and, other times, wrestlers used illegal objects, such as brass knuckles, canes, and belts, which resulted in mock disqualifications. During one of the TCW matches in Carrollton, a wrestler used a saddle to batter his opponent. In another Carrollton bout, a wrestler brought an aerosol spray can into the ring and used a cigarette lighter to ignite the spray and shoot flames into the face of his foe. In a third Carrollton tussle, the action spilled outside the ring and wrestlers used chairs, trash can lids, and pieces of the metal barricade to batter their opponents’ heads, backs, and chests. The range of match styles, rules, and objects, all of which are subject to change, contributes to the spectacle of excess that the wrestlers create and, to a degree, control. The dizzying array left me wondering how fans sort through it all. Yet, in every match, audience members positioned themselves as experts of the fine points and were eager to demonstrate their knowledge to whoever would listen.

A few final rules I learned concern the smart fans. Based on my observations, one job of the smart fans is to test the fans around them. Their test might consist of cheering too enthusiastically in order to irritate other smart fans or they might berate the

crowd favorite to aggravate the marks. As was the case with Scott and Jason's extemporaneous performance, they might upstage the action in the ring by engaging in a (verbal) bout themselves. Feigenbaum observes that smart fans "relish in the opportunity to yell at incompetent referees and jeer lecherous villains," and "some will cheer the villains in order to anger the marks" (162). Smart fans cheer with a double voice.

Jason, one of the regulars at the Carrollton matches, exemplifies this behavior. As I described earlier, he is both earnest and tongue-in-cheek. He cheers with a gusto tinged with a hint of irony. Likewise, when I interviewed the trio, he spoke loudly and clowning around but was aloof and physically removed too. When I mentioned that many people thought wrestling was fake, Jason answered sarcastically, "TCW is a hundred percent real. Come out, come get some" (Jason, Todd, and Ann). Although Jason was the most exuberant of the three, Todd and Ann are smart fans too. As they participate in the wrestling performance, they are, by turns, enthusiastic and wry, emotionally engaged and critically detached, looking for gaps in the performance.

Audiences at live events are better able to see the gaps in a wrestling performance than are television viewers. At the TCW matches, I was able to sit just a few feet from the ring. After a punch missed its mark, a woman close to me remarked, "He didn't even hit him! You could see ten inches between his arm and that guy's head!" (TCW, 1 February 2002). Yet, she stayed in her seat and watched every match. The gap in the performance interrupted the woman's immersion in the performance and provoked a critical response. It is not that fans want to see wrestlers actually get hurt; rather, the fans "condemn artifice" and appreciate "the perfection of an iconography" (Barthes, "The World of Wrestling" 20). Fans also disapprove of lackluster performances, such as those

that lack energy or precision of movement and timing. Jason and others were quick to criticize a lifeless match with fervent cries of “You both suck! You both suck!” and “Reject!” and “I’ve seen better wrestling in my backyard” (TCW 15, February 2002). Fans prefer a high energy match, performed with gusto, even if there are gaps in the illusion.

CHAPTER FOUR RASSLIN' ON TELEVISION

In this contest without real competition, this hagiography of battle, we see the vulgarizing process as it transforms violent action into symbolic gesture – a ritual confrontation complete with freeze frame and instant replay. Television depends on such easy-to-decode rituals, and none is easier than this burlesque of knights-at-joust and giants tossing each other about. (Twitchell 226)

The wrestling industry has provided programming content for television since the late 1940s and, whether broadcast on a national, regional, or local level, wrestling shows have played a substantial role in television history. Today, wrestling programs produced for television by World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) are elaborate spectacles replete with multiple stages, music, video, pyrotechnics, complex camera work, and polished announcers who call the action for the home viewing audience. In this chapter, I describe portions of the WWE programs RAW and Smackdown! broadcast in the winter of 2001-2002 and in spring 2004. The programs are televised and viewed weekly by millions of people in the US. Based on my description, I analyze the performance components that reveal their operations to home viewers and I discuss the ramifications of exposing, or presenting rather than representing, wrestling subjects, forms, and conventions by means of the television media.

The Wrestling Space

Typically, televised matches occur in civic centers, municipal auditoriums, and sports arenas that hold ten thousand or more spectators. The wrestling ring is situated in the center of the arena floor. Whether seated ringside or in the upper decks of the facility, spectators sit on three sides of the ring. The fourth side is occupied by a large, elevated stage and ramp. For the home viewer, the stage usually appears on the left of their screen.

Feigenbaum describes the general arrangement as though “both a rock concert and a boxing match were to take place” (108). The stage is used to highlight, by framing, the entrances of wrestlers and other characters.

On April 29, 2004, the stage for the program Smackdown! includes a large semi-circular opening through which the performers enter and exit the arena. Above the opening is a three-dimensional model of a huge clinched fist crashing through a brick wall. On either side of the fist are two enormous video screens that provide the attending audience with the same or similar footage as that seen by home viewers. The footage includes video montages of the wrestlers before they make their entrances, backstage confrontations between wrestlers, in-ring action, and “pictures of the audience, so that those fans in attendance who crave to be on television will see their dreams come true” (Feigenbaum 110).

Extending downward from the stage is a long, wide ramp. Introduced by his signature music and a video montage, the wrestler enters the stage through the semi-circular opening and walks down the ramp, stopping to pose, flex his muscles, and interact with audience members. At the bottom of the ramp is an open area that leads to the ring. A black, three to four foot high security barricade frames the aisle and extends around the ring, creating a buffer zone or “substage” for the wrestlers (Craven and Moseley 334). Six to eight feet wide and padded, the substage is used by wrestlers for fighting outside the ring and interacting with the ringside spectators who sit or stand behind the barricade. The area also is used by a camera crew to shoot close-up action from various angles unimpeded by spectators.

The wrestling ring is the standard eighteen by eighteen feet square, identical in scale to a boxing ring. The ring is elevated three to four feet off the arena floor and there are four turnbuckles, one in each corner, connected on all sides by three ropes. Modern day ropes are padded and they also stretch, very like a bungee cord. The floor of the ring is covered in a padded canvas material and, typically, it has more “give” or bounce than does a boxing ring floor. As I noted in Chapter Three, it seems to me the floor is designed to amplify the sound of wrestling action, such as when a wrestler falls or is thrown to the mat or when a wrestler stamps his foot when he throws a punch or kick.

Pyrotechnics

Above the ring is a grid with lighting instruments that illuminate and help focus attention on the action in the ring. Often pyrotechnics or fireworks are ignited from the grid. Typically, they are used to signal the beginning of the show for the attending audience and, for the home viewer, the beginning of the live portion of the televised program. In the latter case, the fireworks follow a video montage set to music and a sweeping shot of the arena.

The December 10, 2001 broadcast of RAW demonstrates how pyrotechnics are used to signal the beginning of the wrestling spectacle. After the introductory video, the home viewer sees a low angle shot from a camera positioned ringside up toward the lighting grid. There are what appear to be two lines running from the grid to opposite corners of the ring. The lines are ignited, like fuses, and balls of spark travel down each line until they reach the ring. There, the fireballs set off a series of explosions and a

shower of colorful sparks and smoke fill the air. The crowd cheers heartily as they know the show is about to begin.

Feigenbaum observes that the fireworks function as a “separative device,” signaling a transition for the audience from their mundane, everyday lives to the “special world of the sports entertainment show” (139). Henry Jenkins also attributes a ritual like function to sports entertainment in the US, broadening his purview to sports generally. As compared to the “mundane reality” of the work week, the “weekend only world” of televised sports operates to connect fans with each other (Textual Poachers 282). The detonation of fireworks is a calculated effect that engages and unifies the focus of the live and home viewing audience, implying if not also provoking the collective experience they share as fans.

Video

The television programs RAW and Smackdown! begin with a video montage accompanied by fast paced rock and roll or hip hop music. In film and video, a montage is a “sequence . . . of rapidly edited images” (Gianetti 515). No one image appears on the screen for more than a couple of seconds. Bombarded by an array of shots, cut to the beat of the noted music, the viewer experiences wrestling as he might a music video. Typically, the content of the images features current wrestling stars. In the nineties, the viewer may have seen Hulk Hogan or Stone Cold Steve Austin whereas, in 2004, Kurt Angle, Rob Van Dam, and Booker T. are highlighted.

On the May 3, 2004 broadcast of RAW, the introductory montage begins with an image of an audio VU meter, which is an instrument used to measure the volume of sound.

As on a home stereo system, the measurement is displayed on a panel by vertical bars of green light that move up and down, thereby indicating the variations in volume. The image of the VU meter dissolves to an image of a spinning globe. The globe is transparent, made up of ribbing that connects the North and South poles. Multiple video screens with images of other WWE television shows follow the image of the world. The titles Smackdown!, Velocity, and Tough Enough flash across the screens. The words “attitude” and “entertainment,” and quick shots of a crowd in a sports arena follow. Rock and roll music underscores the imagery, steadily building in volume and intensity. The WWE logo fills the screen, after which there are a series of black and white images. Generally, they show wrestlers in various stages of preparation backstage, in a locker or dressing room. The first shot displays a wrestler’s upper torso and arms. The wrestler is wrapping his wrist with white athletic tape. This image is replaced by a medium shot of a wrestler sitting in his dressing room staring straight ahead as though preparing himself mentally for the fight. The next image shows wrestler Rob Van Dam warming up. He raises his right leg high in the air and then sweeps it to his right as though delivering a kick to an opponent. The next several images are of wrestlers bending and stretching, readying themselves for the ring. Most of the shots are stationary, that is, the wrestlers move within a fixed or unmoving camera frame.

Suddenly, the black and white montage cuts to a color image of wrestler Booker T. staring menacingly into the eye of the camera. The music continues to build and a succession of images of different wrestlers follows. The wrestlers snarl, glare, pump their fists, and swing their arms as they pose and strut for the camera. The locale of the action is

ambiguous and the light and shadow contrast is extreme. Also, the camera is in motion, capturing the wrestlers' poses from different angles. This sequence includes one shot of a female wrestler, Torrie Wilson, I believe. Unlike the male wrestlers, she is not outfitted in wrestling attire. Rather, she wears very tight short shorts and a black, spaghetti strap t-shirt that is cut to expose her belly. The camera moves to the right as she stands and sways her upper body. She poses with her right forearm resting behind her head and in her left hand she holds a red lollipop in front of her mouth. She puts the candy in her mouth just as the cut to the next image occurs. It shows another male wrestler flexing his muscles for the camera.

A few seconds after the Booker T. image, the music changes to hip hop and the viewer hears the following lyrics:

C'mon yeah
It was my life, my time
My rights, my rhymes
My struggle, hustle, sweat and my blood too
A predator smells fear and I smell a lot
My competitors fled scared when they smelled I was hot
I want it all, excess, the sex and much success
Stress sucks, I want it all, don't mess
I want it all. (RAW, 3 May 2004)

As the song and aforementioned sequence end, the viewer sees the inside of the arena where the night's matches will occur. Fireworks explode as the cameras pan across the cheering crowd. The excitement and noise level are intense as the live audience responds to the pyrotechnic display, and cheer and wave at the television cameras.

To summarize, the WWE television programs typically start with a video montage set to music. The video lasts no more than twenty seconds. After the montage, the image

cuts to a live shot of the arena where exploding fireworks and cheering fans are shown. As the live images replace the video montage, announcers welcome the television audience to the program. I describe their commentary later since, in part, their job is to comment on what the wrestlers say and do. Below, I concentrate on the “mic work” of the wrestlers before I turn my attention to that of the announcers.

Mic Work of Wrestlers

No fan of carnival culture, Twitchell argues that wrestling succeeds on television because the action “unfolds in such easy-to-recognize pictures” that are “primitive” enough, apparently, for the masses to understand (227). Among other aspects, Twitchell overlooks the amount of talk on wrestling programs. Wrestlers talk, and sometimes they talk a lot. Rosellini notes that actual wrestling “occupies only 40 to 45 minutes of the two-hour [program] RAW” (142). Otherwise, wrestlers, promoters, and commentators are engaged in various types of talk, or mic work.

When wrestling first appeared on television, mic work was used to promote live events. Announcers highlighted the upcoming events themselves and also through interview segments with various wrestlers. In the interviews, wrestlers talked about their upcoming matches, where they would occur, and who they would face. Additionally, the mic work operated as a means for wrestlers to cultivate and perfect their wrestling characters or personae.

Today, in the merger of wrestling and cable television, mic work is used to promote upcoming pay-per-view events more so than live matches. While live events are promoted on the weekly programs, the shows are used largely to “build feuds that are consummated

on monthly pay-per-view extravaganzas” (Feigenbaum 88). The feuds are fueled by a variety of backstage and in-ring confrontations performed by the wrestlers.

On January 21, 2002, the program RAW was broadcast from Greenville, South Carolina. The episode occurred a day after the airing of the pay-per-view event, Royal Rumble. The Royal Rumble included a thirty man elimination match that a wrestler by the name of Triple H (Hunter Hearst Helmsley), also called The Game, won. During the broadcast of RAW, Chris Jericho, also known as Y2J, appeared in the ring with microphone in hand. He boasted that while he did not participate in the thirty man brawl, he had won a match against The Rock earlier in the same pay-per-view event. Thereby, he had retained his title as WWF champion. As the crowd boos Jericho, he says, “Oh, Oh. Well, well, well, well. It’s twenty-four hours after the Royal Rumble and guess who is still the undisputed champion of the world? ME!” (RAW, 21 January 2002). Jericho continues to mock the crowd, claiming he warned them that he would be victorious:

And even if you don’t like it, you have to appreciate and acknowledge all that I’ve accomplished because everything that I have done is far too gigantic to be ignored! I have done what no other man has ever done. I have beaten every WWF superstar that there is to beat and I have earned the right to be called the undisputed champion damnit! (RAW, 21 January 2002)

The crowd boos loudly as Jericho demands that they give him a standing ovation. The ringside announcers deride Jericho, calling him an “egomaniac” (RAW, 21 January 2002).

Suddenly, the entrance music for Triple H peals forth and the crowd reacts with loud cheers. The announcers act surprised that Triple H has arrived and one quips that maybe Triple H is there to give Chris Jericho a standing ovation. The music ends and Triple H enters the ring, picks up a microphone, and says,

Isn't it funny, Chris Jericho, that after all you've accomplished, after all your great deeds, that I am the only one out here applauding you? [He claps his hands.] I guess you can't blame anybody; I mean, after the load of crap you stand out here and dish out, how can you blame people? [Mocks Jericho.] "I have beaten everybody that there is to beat. I have defeated all the WWF superstars." That's a lie, isn't it Chris Jericho? It is a blatant lie. Because the fact is you have not beaten everyone. The fact is there is one man that you have *never* defeated. And the fact is, Chris Jericho, that one man . . . is me. Now, there's one thing that is for sure; there is one guaranteed thing that will happen. After last night, after I defeated twenty-nine men at the Royal Rumble, there is one thing that is guaranteed, and that is the fact that I will stand in this very ring at the greatest spectacle of them all . . . at WrestleMania and I will compete for the undisputed World Wrestling Federation Championship. But, the big question is, Chris Jericho, the one thing that everybody wants to know is . . . will you be there? Can you make it to WrestleMania the undisputed champion? I say it like this, Chris Jericho: You have two months. Two months to prove to the world that this [indicates Jericho's championship belts] this is not a fluke. That you are not a joke. That you are the man. That you deserve to have everything that you have. You have two months to prove to the world that you are a living legend. Two months to prove to the world that you are larger than life. But, Chris Jericho, you have only got two months, because in two month's time it will be WrestleMania. And, if you make it to WrestleMania as the undisputed World Wrestling Federation champion, unfortunately for you, at WrestleMania, for you, it will be time to play The Game. (RAW, 21 January 2002)

As evidenced by Triple H's and Jericho's monologues, wrestlers use mic work to promote upcoming events, challenge one another, and "engage [their] audiences" (Feignebaum 131). Like any forceful speaker or performer, a wrestler "works" or manipulates content through vocal technique, such as pausing to intensify a point or question and repeating words or phrases in a rhythmic cadence so as to build to a point in a memorable (i.e., mnemonic) way.

In addition to verbal play, wrestlers use nonverbal signs to meet the above aims and communicate their characters. Through his "grandiloquence" of costume, props, posture, gesture, and movement (Barthes, "The World of Wrestling" 16), the wrestler expresses socially shared signs of character types and his inventive re-use of them. For instance, in

the above example, when Jericho first appears in the ring, he wears his two championships belts slung over each shoulder. With his right hand, he holds the microphone and, with his left he holds the belts in place. He also smiles in a self-satisfied, mocking way. He punctuates the word “ME!” by pointing to himself, curling his mouth in a snarl, and furrowing his brows. By means of his nonverbal choices, Jericho interweaves signifiers of a champ, braggart, evil doer, and presentational performer. As a result, our assumptions regarding a sports champion are called into question. Jericho is not a modest “good guy” just being himself. The champ is an egomaniac who covets the limelight or, granting a reflexive function to Jericho’s use of the mic, he is commenting on egomaniacs in sports by presenting signs of the same to us.

During Jericho’s monologue, which I transcribed above, he appears agitated, pacing back and forth and, periodically, halting to emphasize a point. He is shot in close-up. His eyes are closed, his head bobs back and forth, the veins in his neck are bulging, and wisps of hair from his ponytail hang down each side of his face. His voice rises to a high, raspy pitch over the course of the monologue, which in a strained voice he punctuates with the word, “damnit.” After he says, “damnit,” he opens his eyes and looks around at the crowd. The pause allows the audience to respond to him. Since he just behaved like a small child having a tantrum, the crowd responds with boos and catcalls. Rather than embrace the champ, the fans spurn the brat who craves and demands their attention. A contest, then, regarding the character or *ethos* of a sport’s star, a wrestling champ in this case, has been waged and, in the context of the live event, the audience assumes the role of the judge and finds the star lacking.

Wrestlers also develop specific catch phrases that they use repeatedly in their performances. Triple H, for example, is known to punctuate his monologues with the ominous “time to play The Game,” which implies that all the talk is futile unless backed by the real game of wrestling. The phrase also makes a direct association between the real game of wrestling and Triple H, also known as The Game. A similar message is sent by Duane Johnson, or The Rock, when he says, “If you smell what The Rock is cookin’!” Stone Cold Steve Austin often ends his sentences with the word, “what?” Fans are so accustomed to his use that they echo Austin in unison whenever he says, “what?” As I witnessed at the WWE live event in April 2004, Booker T. often emphasizes that he is a five time world champion by holding up all five fingers and repeating that he is a “five time, five time, five time” world champion. The catch phrases operate to specify the wrestlers’ character types while, due to the repetition, they become the socially shared property of the wrestling fans. The repeating speech acts solidify the culture as the fans respond to, repeat, and likely integrate into their own everyday speech acts those of the wrestlers.

Mic Work of Announcers

In addition to the wrestlers’ mic work, home viewers hear the mic work of the ringside announcers. The announcers are present only at televised events and their speech acts are audible only to those watching the match on television. The announcers welcome the home viewing audience to the broadcast by identifying the event, its locale, the network, and themselves. By means of their enthusiastic attitude and vocal tone, they attempt to generate excitement in home viewers regarding the upcoming matches and,

particularly, the main event. Throughout the broadcast, they also hype future events. Like most sportscasters, they offer play- by- play commentary during the matches. However, unlike many announcers of legitimate sporting events, wrestling announcers are explicit as regards their admiration or dislike for particular athletes. We might understand that they do not feign objectivity or, like the wrestlers they comment on, part of their job is to use vocal work to create and perform agonistic characters. For instance, it is not uncommon for announcers to offer opposing perspectives on the same wrestler. The behavior one announcer finds boastful and insulting, the other may find honest and appealing. It also is typical for one announcer to support the babyface or good guy, while the other is partial to the heel or bad guy. By offering different assessments of the same wrestler, the announcers create a debate, which they leave to the home viewer to decide.

On the RAW broadcast of January 21, 2002, the announcers are Jim Ross, called JR by wrestling fans, and Jerry “The King” Lawler, a former wrestler. In the first example I offer below, the announcers welcome the home audience to the program and immediately “tease” or promote the main match that will occur at the end of the show:

Jim Ross: South Carolina is loud and proud tonight because the World Wrestling Federation is in town tonight. WWF RAW on the new TNN. Jim Ross and Jerry the King Lawler here at ringside and we are live as live can be. And King, what a main event here live tonight!

Jerry Lawler: Unbelievable. [Referring to a graphic on the video screen.] There you see it: Triple H and The Rock taking on Chris Jericho and Kurt Angle live tonight! Oh, ho man!

Jim Ross: And what a tag team match up that’s going to be. Triple H the winner of the Royal Rumble in Atlanta; Y2J, still the undisputed champion. More on that in this broadcast. (RAW, 21 January 2002)

In a different broadcast, the same announcers manage to work in an advertisement for the WWF (now WWE) theme restaurant in New York before they generate heat for the night's matches:

Jim Ross: It is a raucous crowd here at the Cajundome as we are live tonight on the new TNN. For WWF RAW, I'm Jim Ross alongside Jerry the King Lawler. We are here at the Cajundome at ringside but we've got great fans as well at WWF New York. As a matter of fact, King, we're going to be talking to Matt Hardy who's at WWF New York. There you see him, as we speak.
[Cut to shot of wrestler, Matt Hardy, and fans at the New York restaurant.]

Jerry Lawler: Somebody's looking for a new girlfriend. Ha, ha. He's trolling.

Jim Ross: But what a night we're going to have here tonight, King. WWF's undisputed title will be decided.

Jerry Lawler: Oh, I can't wait. Rob Van Dam beat Y2J last week in a tag match. Tonight, RVD goes for all the gold.

Jim Ross: RVD and Y2J get it on tonight and we've got four championship matches live tonight here on RAW. We kick it off with our first. (RAW, 17 December 2001)

The final example illustrates how announcers side with the heel or babyface when they narrate a match. The wrestler Triple H has portrayed a bad guy for quite some time, yet Jerry Lawler continues to praise him. Ross and Lawler also spar over the attitude of wrestler, Shelton Benjamin. The example demonstrates, too, how the announcers use a specialized language to describe the action. Because wrestling consists of dozens of maneuvers, the announcers do not describe every move. Rather, they highlight key moves and sequences, and use an insider or intra-cultural language to identify them. Below, when Ross describes a "collar and elbow tie up. Side head lock take over, quickly countered. . . . And both men quickly back to their vertical base," he assumes that the audience is familiar with the technical language of wrestling. The specialized language legitimizes the sport of

wrestling, implies a culture that knows the language, and casts Ross as an expert of the sport and its vernacular:

Jerry Lawler: I smell a title change in the air tonight JR. Whoa look at this!

Jim Ross: Well, you could be right. Lightning, lightning quick arm drag take downs. I smell Shelton Benjamin and the Intercontinental champion, Randy Orton, going one on one to kick this six man off.

Jerry Lawler: You know what's sad about this whole situation is this Shelton Benjamin. He has got an over-inflated idea of his talent and ability, I think. He has got those two fluke wins over Triple H, now he really thinks that he's, that he's somebody.

Jim Ross: I personally found Shelton to be one of the most down to earth individuals I've ever known. Oh, nice reversal there by Tajiri and, oh, nice drop toe hold, Tajiri. Lightning quick, the Japanese buzz saw.

Jerry Lawler: So, you've been hanging out with Shelton Benjamin, huh?

Jim Ross: Well, I've had several conversations with him. I find him to be a very well raised, polite young man.

Jerry Lawler: Boy. A guy beats Triple H and all [of] the sudden he's your new best friend. Watch The Game in action.

Jim Ross: A rousing round of boos as The Game makes his first official appearance in this six man tag team match up.

Jerry Lawler: Don't forget Triple H, Tajiri, he's the one that sprayed that mist in your eyes. What are they saying?

Jim Ross: Crowd chanting, "You tapped out," at The Game. Certainly harkening back to WrestleMania and Chris Benoit, the night that Benoit won the heavyweight championship of the world.¹

Jerry Lawler: Well, all these fans are doing here in Phoenix is – ooh [Lawler reacts to contact in the ring] – making Triple H angry when they remind him of that terrible night.

¹ Tapping out is when a wrestler taps the mat to indicate that he submits. Tapping out usually occurs when a wrestler is in a very painful hold and cannot escape.

Jim Ross: Edge gets the tag and Triple H very wisely moving out of the corner of Edge, Tajiri, and Benjamin. Edge, one half of the world tag team champions.

Jerry Lawler: His hair's way too long. Come on, Triple H, pull some of that scraggly hair out by the roots.

Jim Ross: Collar and elbow tie up. Side head lock take over, quickly countered, but not for long. And both men quickly back up to their vertical base.

Jerry Lawler: I'm amazed at guys like Shelton Benjamin and Edge. For some reason, they don't seem to be intimidated when they're in the ring with the greatest there is . . . Triple H. (RAW, 3 May 2004)

An additional element at work in the mic work of announcers is the constant din of crowd noise that underscores their commentary. Because announcers sit ringside and because wrestling audiences tend to be loud and boisterous, the announcers sound as if they have to shout in order to be heard. The constant noise of the crowd and the energized delivery of the announcers create a sense of immediacy for the home viewer.

The Illusion of Violence

Frank Aldridge, who owns and operates the WWA4 wrestling school in Atlanta, Georgia, observes that professional wrestling is a "real performance, not a real contest" (Aldridge). By so saying, Aldridge acknowledges that wrestling matches have a predetermined outcome, as do many performances. In the parlance of wrestling, they are works, not shoots. He also ascribes a positive value to performance; to the forms and conventions, the athletic skill and artistry required to do the "real performance" of wrestling. While mic work is "a key [performance element] to . . . a superstar's and a show's success" (Feigenbaum 131), it is a useless key if the wrestler is unable to meet the physical and creative requirements of wrestling itself. "Key" here is creating the illusion of violence without causing irreparable harm to one's self or opponent. But, many

wrestlers, even WWE superstars, fail to convincingly create the illusion for television.

Aldridge observes that many popular wrestlers today are “bad wrestlers.”

The Rock is a terrible wrestler . . . when he hits, he’s going like this [makes a half hearted jabbing motion] and that’s bullshit. You know that doesn’t hurt and that’s terrible. And if he wrestles for me I wouldn’t let him do that. He would either have to learn how to punch without hurting or I wouldn’t let him do that. I’d make him do uppercuts, forearms . . . They do way too many things now where you can see that it’s fake. (Aldridge)

In this section, I survey the formal techniques used by wrestlers to compose and enact their matches so as to create the verisimilitude illusion of agonistic battle. The techniques are common to live and televised events, the most discerning judges of a wrestler’s success being the close-up eyes of the ringside spectator and camera.

According to Aldridge, the basic structure of a match is worked out by the wrestlers prior to performing it. He explains,

In a wrestling contest, often what happens is you say, this is the way you’re going to start and this is the ending. . . . It’s going to take six minutes and you’re going to trade blows and you’re each going to have so many minutes of offense and defense. Make sure this guy looks good in doing so and so. And, uh, you’re going to win by such and such a move. And when you’re doing it, the more experienced wrestler will basically call the fight. If you pay attention, you’ll see them talking to each other. And they’re giving each other signals. Like, before they do something, they’ll hit somebody on the shoulder or something like that. One wrestler will just . . . say what moves are going to happen for the next four or five moves. And that’s what they call a spot. See, you have one move, and then you have a series of moves, which make a spot. And then you have a series of spots, which result in a match. (Aldridge)

Aldridge’s explanation clarifies that while the outcome of a match is planned, many of the moves and spots within are improvised. The predetermined structure ensures that the storylines that constitute the WWE serial programming are upheld. As Solomon points out, “no wrestler” under contract with the WWE “would dare take it upon himself to

change a storyline or an outcome in the ring” (51). There is too much money at stake and WWE wrestlers do not want to jeopardize their careers or their physical well being. In addition to the overall structure of the match, a series of reversals also are pre-planned. As Aldridge notes, each wrestler has “so many minutes of offense and defense.” The reversals imply that the opponents are evenly matched, intensify the conflict between them, and help create the illusion that the outcome is not fixed.

The improvised moves and spots also aid the desired illusion in that they are selected and enacted spontaneously, “in the moment” of the event. Mazer asserts that much of wrestling’s appeal comes from the “immediacy of improvisation” (Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle 26). However, years of training and experience are required in order to improvise on cue, according to the plan, and without hurting each other. In this way, professional wrestling is similar to the Italian performance practice, *commedia dell’arte*. *Commedia* performances were based on a scenario that led to a specific outcome. “Improvisation occurred within a rehearsed framework” and “performances created the impression of spontaneity” because the action unfolded differently in each performance (Brockett 119). Further, as in most legitimate team sports, wrestlers must learn to give and receive signals that cue specific moves or a series of moves. Of course, they must learn to execute the moves and spots too. Lastly, they must “sell” the moves, their own and their opponent’s, as authentic, which is “an art unto itself” (Feigenbaum 132).

To create the illusion of violence in a cooperative manner, wrestlers abide by “the first rule” of wrestling, which is to make “flat to flat” contact (Albano and Sugar 38).

Albano and Sugar explain,

Every time a wrestler whacks another with a folded chair, he hits something flat, like the back, with the flat part of the chair. (If the blow is to the head, it’s usually to the front of the skull, where the bone is the thickest.) And guys leaping off the top strand of the ropes always aim at a man either standing up (so that he can be caught) or lying completely prone, so that they can collide chest to chest – flat body part to flat body part. Flat to flat is the first rule. (38)

As a result, while punches, kicks, and slaps do land, they rarely land with full force.

Albano and Sugar continue,

So while the fans may see contact, hear contact, and believe that there was contact, what contact there was actually was incidental – and the effect was illusory. Punches actually land, but they have very little impact and are rarely as forceful or as lethal as they look and sound. They are not delivered with the fist – at least not a closed fist – as much as with the forearm. The fist, after all, is bony and hard, while the forearm softens the blow for both wrestlers while, at the same time, making a loud, slapping sound. (38-39)

The wrestlers’ production of sound as well as visual effects is integral to creating the illusion of violence and, again, the illusion requires the cooperative effort of both wrestlers. To execute the “forearm smash,” for instance, one wrestler stamps his foot as he delivers the punch while, in response, the other hurls his head backward (Twitchell 232). If the stomp of the foot or the hurl of the head is mis-timed, it comes too early or late, the illusion is destroyed and an injury may result.

A wrestler also stamps his foot when he delivers a kick to the head of a prone opponent. Of course, the wrestler aims the kick to land just beside the head. The resulting sound creates the illusion of contact, while the prone wrestler’s reaction veils the lack of contact. Similarly, when a wrestler kicks an opponent in the ribs, he often “pulls” his kick.

That is, it does not land with full force. Just before he delivers the kick, the aggressor jumps slightly in the air so that, when he lands, his non-kicking foot bears his weight and produces a loud sound as he lands on it. The receiver of the kick crumples in pain, thereby covering the “pulled” kick. When a wrestler falls on his back, he slaps the mat as he lands because it “sounds nice” and it “reduces the impact on your back” (Patterson 34). Another sound that wrestlers use to great effect is the open-handed slap. When one wrestler has another backed into a corner, he delivers a series of slaps to his opponent’s chest. The crowd hears the loud “whack” of the blows and often sees hand imprints on the wrestler’s reddening chest. According to Albano and Sugar, the “open-handed slap . . . stings only a little” and “little damage is done, but the echoing sound carries throughout the arena and adds to the illusion of reality – visually as well as audibly” (39).

Of course, throughout the match, wrestlers produce vocal effects to heighten the drama and draw attention away from the visual tricks. Wrestlers also make noise because “people expect it” (Patterson 34). They yell, grunt, huff and puff as they deliver a punishing move and cry out in seeming anguish, gasp and groan, as they receive their co-performer’s efforts.

A final element that impacts the wrestlers’ performance is the reaction of the audience. Solomon claims that wrestlers “improvise most of their moves . . . feeding off the pulse of the crowd” (22). These days, the crowd’s pulse beats with appreciation for action that is lively and acrobatic. They expect “*high impact maneuvers*” that “appear to inflict a tremendous amount of punishment such as body slams, suplexes, pile drivers or any move in which a superstar jumps off the top rope” (Feigenbaum 132; emphasis in

original). The current trend toward acrobatics is viewed with consternation by some long time wrestling fans who prefer the more methodical moves and holds of scientific wrestling, those that test the wrestlers' overall strength and endurance. They also argue that the risky acrobatics have resulted in serious injuries that reflect badly on the sport of professional wrestling.

Fan Participation

The fans that attend televised events interact constantly with the activity that goes on in and around the wrestling ring. As I described above, fans cheer excitedly at the explosion of the fireworks that signal the beginning of the event. They also respond with cheers, yells, jeers, and exhortations when they hear a wrestler's theme music and see the accompanying video montage. When a wrestler performs mic work in the ring, the live audience responds throughout his address. They repeat or mimic certain words or phrases. They boo loud and long at wrestlers who insult, antagonize, or condescend to them. They "cheer, they boo, and they shout words that your mama wouldn't approve of" and, "if they are bored or believe that the participants are not working as hard as they are capable of working, they . . . let the wrestlers know about it – pronto!" (Albano and Sugar 232).

During televised events, fans also participate by means of homemade signs or placards that they hold up "to show their support for their favorite superstars, to make fun of other superstars, or simply in the hope that their sign will get them on television" (Feigenbaum 110-111). When cameras pan the crowd at the beginning of RAW or

Smackdown!, they capture thousands of fans holding their signs aloft. Likewise, when a wrestler addresses the crowd before his match, the edited shots alternate between showing the wrestler and the crowd, again with their placards held high.

During the January 21, 2002 broadcast of RAW, many audience members held signs that read “Triple H” or “HHH” or “The Rock” in support of their favorite wrestlers. As Chris Jericho, also known as Y2J, spoke to the crowd, the televised shots cut quickly between images of Jericho and spectators holding up their signs. Most of the signs mocked Jericho, referring to him as “Whine 2J,” “Y-2 Jackass,” “Y2Joke,” and “Y2 Undisputed Cheater.” Notably, the signs indicated both an opinion of Jericho’s character and knowledge of the backstory that informs the opinion.

Spectators of local, non-televised matches also bring signs to the events. When I attended the Turnbuckle Championship Wrestling matches in Carrollton, several audience members displayed signs. As the wrestler Lethal Luther made his way to the ring, a spectator jeered in poetic print, “Lethal Loser/No Class/No Respect/No Chance.” Another fan carried a sign that read “SST is Waffle House Trash.” His sign operated to associate the South Side Trash (SST) wrestlers with the cheap breakfast eatery, implying that SST spends an inordinate amount of time at Waffle House.

Whether televised nationally or staged in a small town facility, fan signs have become an integral part of the wrestling event over the years. By integrating into their telecast images of fans with their opinions held high, the WWE implies that fans are important to its operation, it values their opinions, and that fans will be rewarded for actively expressing their opinions at WWE events. Fiske observes that the “television

camera plays on the crowd, who performs for it as much as the wrestlers: the categorical distinction between spectacle and spectator is abolished” (245). By showcasing the most enthusiastic audience members, the WWE activates or operationalizes the role that spectators play in shaping the drama. The audience is keenly aware of their role and, when given the opportunity to perform, they do so with gusto.

Camera Work

During a nationally televised wrestling match, multiple cameras are used to capture the action in the ring and in the house from a variety of angles. Stationary cameras are used for wide shots of the arena and audience. Stationary cameras are quite large and can be tilted up and down and panned from side to side. The cameras are similar to those used to shoot in-studio news programs, talk shows, soap operas, and the like. For a wrestling program, a stationary camera provides the establishing or master shot that orients the television viewer as to the placement of the ring in the center of the arena and the seating configuration that surrounds it. Since the camera is placed at a level just above the ring, the master shot appears to be at a slight downward angle. During a match, stationary cameras are used for wide shots, which capture, in frame, all of the performers in and around the ring and much of the audience in the foreground and background of the ring. Such wide shots are comparable to those used in football games to show the entirety of the field, the players, and much of the crowd during a kickoff, for instance.

Hand held cameras also are used in wrestling programs. As the name implies, hand held cameras are small enough for operators to carry “in hand” or on their shoulders. The size allows the operators to move easily and to shoot subjects from different angles. In a

wrestling program, there are several hand held camera operators who shoot from various positions in the buffer zone just outside the ring and, during the wrestlers' mic work, from within the ring. Typically, the cameras are used to provide close-ups of wrestlers as they enter the arena, and descend the ramp, address the audience, and wrestle with each other inside or outside the ring. Due to the close-ups, home viewers witness wrestlers punch, slap, and kick each other from just a few feet or inches away. They see the smiles, sneers, and grimaces on the wrestlers' faces and the strain of bodily effort. Although close-ups help wrestlers communicate the physical and emotional traits of their characters, the close-ups also reveal the punches and kicks that wrestlers mis-time. In other words, "up close and personal" shots are not always conducive to creating the illusion of violence.

Because several cameras are positioned around the arena, the director can cut from one camera to the next and thereby offer a shifting montage of subjects, angles, and depths of field. The ever-changing images and perspectives operate to highlight if not also create the carnival character, conflicts, and activity of the wrestling event. Just as the event is action packed, so too is the composition of the televised imagery. Unlike the attending spectator who can choose where he directs his attention, the home viewer receives and processes the event as it is edited into the fast paced montage. On the one hand, then, the home viewer may become more immersed in the immediacy of the event than those in the arena. On the other hand, due to the mistakes the close-ups are able to capture, the home viewer may disengage more frequently and view the matches more critically than those in attendance at the event.

Below, I describe the basic camera work used to compose an in-ring monologue and one part of a bout. Both examples are drawn from the January 21, 2002 broadcast of RAW. In the first, Triple H has entered the ring to respond to Chris Jericho's egotistical claims. From the perspective of the stationary camera, Chris Jericho stands on the right side of the ring, or screen right, while Triple H moves in the center of the ring, or center screen. Triple H says to Jericho,

I guess you can't blame anybody; I mean, after the load of crap you stand out here and dish out, how can you blame people? [Mocks Jericho.] "I have beaten everybody that there is to beat. I have defeated all the WWF superstars." That's a lie, isn't it Chris Jericho? It is a blatant lie. Because the fact is you have not beaten everyone. The fact is there is one man that you have *never* defeated. And the fact is, Chris Jericho, that one man . . . is me. (RAW, 21 January 2002)

In the forty-five seconds it took for Triple H to deliver the lines, sixteen different shots from three different cameras were used to compose the televised montage. On average, each image ran no longer than two to three seconds. Below, I describe the shots in sequence.

Close-up: A reaction shot of Chris Jericho's face after Triple H asserts that Jericho has been telling the audience a "load of crap." Jericho's lips are slightly parted, his brow furrowed, and he has a worried look on his face. (Cut to)

Medium shot: Triple H moves screen left, his back to the camera. He moves two to three paces as if to circle Jericho. He turns back to screen right to face Jericho. (Cut to)

Close-up: Triple H turns back to face the camera. He mocks Jericho, saying, "I have beaten everybody that there is to beat. I have defeated all the WWF superstars." (Cut to)

Close-up: Chris Jericho reacting to Triple H's line. He mouths the words, "I have . . ." and points to his chest. (Cut to)

Extreme close-up: Triple H's face fills the screen as he holds the microphone close to his mouth and says, "That's a lie, isn't it Chris Jericho?" (Cut to)

Medium shot: Triple H delivers the line, “It is a blatant lie.” He moves screen right, circling below Jericho who remains in the up right corner of the screen and close to the corner of the ring. Triple H is almost in profile as he circles below Jericho, bottom of screen right. He turns to face Jericho and begins the next line, “Because the fact is . . .” (Cut to)

Close-up: Triple H in profile with the microphone close to his mouth. The giant video screen above the stage, screen left, is now partially visible in the background. Triple H turns back to his left and starts to move out of frame. (Cut to)

Medium shot: Triple H paces to upper screen left. His back is to the camera as he delivers the line, “. . . you have not beaten everyone.” (Cut to)

Close-up: Jericho in profile, in center of frame, looks from right to left. He mouths the words, “yes I have,” while nodding his head. (Cut to)

Close-up: Triple H turns three quarters away from the camera. He pauses for the crowd’s cheer. He strokes his goatee and says, “The fact is . . .” (Cut to)

Medium shot: Triple H stands full back to camera. He faces the crowd on the far side of ring. The audience is looking directly at him. Fans hold up signs that read, “Next Champion HHH” and “I will wrestle nude for food.” (Cut to)

Close-up: In profile, Triple H says, “. . . there is one man that you have *never* defeated.” He turns screen right, looking across the frame from left to right. (Cut to)

Medium shot: An over the shoulder shot from behind Triple H zooms to Jericho’s face. (Cut to)

Extreme close-up: Triple H’s face with microphone pressed to his lips. Triple H says, “And the fact is, Chris Jericho . . .” (Cut to)

Medium shot: Triple H moves screen right. He stands toe to toe, face to face, with Jericho, and says, “. . . that one man . . .” (Cut to)

Extreme close-up: Triple H says, “. . . is me.” Triple H’s face fills more than one third of screen left. Entire upper and lower middle of the screen shows the audience in the background slightly out of focus.

Generally, the composition of the montage operates to contrast the two characters. Almost every shot concentrates on Triple H as he moves about the ring or speaks. Most of shots

position him in the foreground, in close-up. His image dominates the screen just as he dominates the physical and vocal space of the ring. An animated if bratty child before Triple H entered the ring, Jericho is relegated to a static position in the background of most of the shots. Any close-ups of Jericho show but a feeble reaction on his part to Triple H. The shots enhance the supreme confidence and control of Triple H, while they substantiate that Jericho is a fearful and weak “champion.” On a broader level, the shots recall the dominance of Triple H in the Royal Rumble the previous night, they anticipate a Triple H-Jericho match on WrestleMania in two months time, and they seem to foreshadow a sound beating of Jericho by Triple H in the main event of the current program, a tag team match in which Triple H and The Rock tangle with Chris Jericho and Kurt Angle.

The second example documents forty seconds of wrestling action as it is described by announcers Jim Ross and Jerry Lawler. The action occurs just after the confrontation described above. Triple H and Chris Jericho are in the ring when Kurt Angle appears on the ramp. He threatens Triple H and then charges toward the ring.

Extreme close-up: Kurt Angle’s eyes are wide with anger and he is perspiring as he bolts past a camera. The operator turns and shoots Angle from the back as he runs down the ramp toward the ring. In the same frame, the operator catches another hand held camera operator as he crosses from screen left to right several feet in front of Angle. As the action occurs, Jerry Lawler says, “What?” Jim Ross adds, “Wait a minute!” Lawler again, “What the heck is this?” (Cut to)

Close-up: The same camera operator captures Angle in right profile as he reaches the ring and dives under the ropes. (Cut to)

Wide shot: As Angle scrambles under the ropes, Jericho attempts to attack Triple H. Ross says, “Wait a minute, Jericho tried to get a cheap shot in . . .” Triple H punches Jericho and sends him sprawling screen right. Angle is on his feet as Ross says, “. . . and there’s Kurt Angle.” Angle charges Triple H who hits him in the neck with his forearm. Angle falls flat on his rear. Triple H’s momentum carries him screen left. (Cut to)

Medium shot: A low angle, mat level shot (from ramp side) depicts Triple H with his back to the camera as he faces Angle who is screen right. Angle struggles to his feet and staggers toward Triple H. (Cut to)

Wide shot: As Angle staggers forward, Jerry Lawler says, “Kurt what’re you doing?” Triple H kicks Angle in the stomach and Angle doubles over but does not fall. (Cut to)

Medium shot: A low angle, mat level shot (ramp side) depicts Triple H with his back to the camera. He puts Angle’s head between his thighs, grabs his arms by the elbows, and pulls them up over his back. Lawler says, “There’s that weird [wrestling hold]. Ross begins, “Angle’s gonna get . . .” but is interrupted by Jericho as he rushes into frame, toward Triple H, from screen right. He holds one of his championship belts in his hands. Ross continues, “. . . but Jericho . . .” (Cut to)

Wide shot: Jericho collides with Triple H, and Ross says, “. . . dims the lights . . .” as Triple H falls flat on his back just left of center screen. Jericho’s momentum carries him into the ropes, screen left. Angle scurries screen right. As Jericho and Angle move to the edges of the screen, the stationary camera pulls back to a wider shot that frames all sides of the ring and all three wrestlers. (Cut to)

Medium shot: Ross continues, “. . . of The Game.” Jericho is against the ropes, facing the mat level camera. He turns screen right and then circles right until his back is to the camera. Jericho is in the foreground and Angle is partially visible in the background, screen right. He stands with his hands on his knees. Triple H is on his hands and knees, crawling toward the ropes at the middle left of the screen. Lawler says, “Well, The Game wanted . . .” (Cut to)

Wide shot: “. . . the undisputed championship and he got it right in his face.” Triple H staggers to his feet, face front and center screen. Angle is screen right and Jericho, screen left as they converge on Triple H. They take turns delivering blows to his head. (Cut to)

Medium shot: A low angle, mat level shot (opposite ramp side) places Angle in the foreground, Triple H above and behind him, and Jericho in the background, on the other side of Triple H. Jericho and Angle pummel Triple H and he falls back into the ropes. As Angle lifts his right foot to kick Triple H, Ross says, “And now Jericho and Angle . . .” (Cut to)

Wide shot: Angle is center screen with Triple H just above him. Angle delivers kicks to Triple H’s midsection, while Jericho, left center screen, punches at his head. Ross continues, “. . . are really doing a number on . . .” (Cut to)

Medium shot: A low angle, mat level shot (ramp side) shows one of Jericho's championship belts lying on the mat in the foreground while the action continues in the background. The camera elevates to frame the action. Jericho is closest to the camera, his back turned. Angle is slightly farther back, and Triple H is between them, slumped against the ropes. The pair punches and kicks Triple H. Ross continues, ". . . on Triple H. A double team." Angle grabs Triple H by the arm and pulls him off the ropes. (Cut to)

Wide shot: Angle puts his head and neck under Triple H's left arm pit and drapes his arm over his shoulder. Angle holds the draped arm in one hand and loops his other arm around Triple H's waist. He bends his knees, as does Triple H. Using his neck as a lever, Angle straightens up and lifts Triple H over his head, his side resting on Angle's shoulders. Angle twists his body, jumps slightly, and pushes Triple H off his shoulders. Lawler exclaims, "Ohhhh!" (Cut to)

Medium shot: A low angle, mat level shot (opposite ramp side) captures Angle and Triple H as they both land on the mat, flat on their backs. Angle is closest to the camera with Triple H lying just behind him. Angle pops up immediately, in frame from the waist on down. Triple H lies stunned on the mat. Ross says, "And the Angle slam!" (Cut to)

Wide shot: Angle hops on one foot, twirls around, and pumps his fist, just right of center screen. Triple H writhes in pain on the mat, just left of center screen. Jericho is center screen between Angle and Triple H. He takes off his shirt and, to Angle, signals a turning gesture with his hand and mouths a few words. (Cut to)

Medium shot: A low angle, mat level shot (ramp side) places the red ropes in the middle foreground of the screen, stretching from left to right. Behind the ropes, Triple H is on his back as Jericho grabs him by his calves. The camera moves to shoot between the ropes. In the center of the screen, Jericho places Triple H's ankles between his armpits, leaving his shoulders flat on the mat and his arms flailing above his head. Angle is screen left. One of the turnbuckles and a large section of the audience are visible in the background. Jericho elevates his right forearm and steps to his right, twisting Triple H's legs behind him and his body up onto one shoulder. The camera drops to shoot from just below the bottom rope, at mat level. The bottom rope is in frame at the top of the screen and slightly out of focus. Ross says, "Kurt Angle and Chris Jericho dismantling The Game. And The Game may be over, King." Lawler replies, "You got that right, because the living legend [Chris Jericho] is taking over." Angle is screen left, bent over, with his hands on his knees. He taunts Triple H. The crowd chants, "Rocky, Rocky, Rocky." "If you smell what The Rock is cooking!" peals forth from the loud speakers. (Cut to)

Extreme wide shot: Facing the ring to start, the camera pans left over the crowd to the stage and ramp area, as the audience erupts in cheers and screams. The Rock explodes through the entrance, onto the stage, and down the ramp. (RAW, 21 January 2002)

By cutting swiftly from one shot to the next, patching one image into another, the director of the program creates an intense, dramatic experience. For the most part, wide and low angle medium shots are used. The wide shots are able to capture the multiple performers executing diverse actions simultaneously. They highlight the interactivity between the wrestlers and enable a full view of the acrobatic moves. The many low angle medium shots make the wrestlers' bodies appear huge and ominous, like giants. At times, the same cameras use the ropes to frame the action. For the viewer, the effect is that of being at ringside, within the buffer zone, peering between the ropes at the melee in the ring. The shot of the championship belt lying on the mat provides subtext to the fight in the ring. Earlier, Triple H disputed Jericho's claim to the belt(s) and, during the brawl, Jericho attempted to answer Triple H's questions by attacking him with it. As symbolized by the belt lying unclaimed on the floor of the ring, the conflict is as yet unresolved and, likely, this particular match will not solve the matter either.

Although physically removed from the arena, the home viewer of televised wrestling experiences much of the sensuous immediacy of the event. The multiple stages, music, video, pyrotechnics, verbal banter, simulated violence, and enthusiastic narration create a spectacle capable of actively engaging the television viewer . . . in the comfort of his easy chair at home.

Analysis

Professional wrestling succeeds as popular entertainment on television because it engages viewers in the illusion of the wrestling drama while it also allows viewers to scrutinize its operations. Key to wrestling's operational aesthetics is the excess with which it presents itself. Barthes refers to wrestling as a "spectacle of excess" that "offers excessive gestures." It is a theatrical performance where a "man who is down is exaggeratedly so, and completely fills the eyes of the spectators with the intolerable spectacle of his powerlessness" (Barthes, "The World of Wrestling" 15-16). Barthes analyzed wrestling in France in the 1950s and, while similar, today's wrestling shows, particularly those on television in the US, include many more components in their presentation. Further, home viewers have their eyes filled with more excess than do spectators at the live event. Due to the concentrated framing of the camera, the home viewer can become totally immersed in the drama and, yet, the excess of the framed spectacle can provoke critical reflection too.

The excess of televised wrestling is evident in the stage, ramp, buffer zone, pyrotechnics, video montage, and music that complement the excessive size and musculature of the wrestlers. The wrestlers train to showcase the spectacular excess of the event through their own excessive use of slaps, punches, foot stomping, howls, grunts, and groans that in turn elicit the corresponding excess of yells, cheers, boos, gesticulation, and the showing of placards by the audience. In this section, I analyze the components in wrestling that, through excess, persuade television viewers that the wrestling illusion is

“real” while they also expose their operations and encourage the audience to critically analyze the event.

The directors of WWE television programs regularly use a rapid juxtaposition of camera shots, which create for the home viewer a particular perspective on the event unlike that experienced by the attending audience. For one, television viewers see the action from multiple positions, angles, and distances. The multiplicity offers viewers and commentators diverse viewpoints from which to see, interpret, and evaluate the action. At times, the rapid cutting from camera to camera exposes its operations and encourages critical assessment. During Triple H’s monologue, for instance, sixteen different shots are used in a mere forty-five seconds. While the multiple cuts from camera to camera, from wide shot to close up, boost the visual appeal of the monologue, they also call attention to themselves. The wide shots offer viewers a sense of the spatial context and physical relationship between the two wrestlers and the close-ups highlight the soap operatic look of worry on Jericho’s face and the determined, resolute expression on the face of Triple H.

Sometimes, however, the director’s use of quick cuts veils the operations at work in the program. As a punch, kick, or body slam occurs, the director cuts quickly to a different camera so that contact, or lack thereof, is obscured. This ploy differs from how cameras are used in televised football games, where the aim is to show the action on the field clearly and from as many angles as possible. Replays are shown from multiple angles and depths so that viewers can assess for themselves if a pass was caught, a penalty occurred, or a player crossed the goal line. In televised wrestling, the opposite is true. Typically, home viewers are prevented from seeing a punch or kick that just grazed a performer,

rather than striking him with full force. Cameras shoot the action from just behind, below, to the side, or from a wide angle, revealing less to television viewers than that which many live viewers see.

The televised fight between Kurt Angle, Triple H, and Chris Jericho reveals this strategy clearly. When Angle dives under the ropes and into the ring, he is shot in close up. As he stands up and rushes Triple H, the director cuts to a wide shot that masks the forearm smash that Triple H delivers to Angle's throat. When Triple H puts Angle's head between his legs, the shot is a mat level medium shot. During this same shot, Jericho enters the frame from the right and charges toward Triple H. Just as he reaches Triple H, the director cuts to a wide shot and, though viewers think they see contact between the belt in Jericho's hands and Triple H's head, the severity of the blow is obscured. The viewer assumes that Triple H got clobbered; the live crowd reacts as though he got clobbered; and the announcers do their job and describe the blow as though he got clobbered. As the action occurs, Jim Ross declares, "But Jericho dims the lights of The Game" (RAW, 21 January 2002).

In a similar manner, when Angle and Jericho began to pummel Triple H, the director alternates between medium and wide shots. The medium shots are at mat level, below and behind the wrestlers. A camera operator could have moved easily to the other side of the ring and shot the image up close, which would have revealed, of course, that the blows never made contact or were pulled so as not to harm Triple H. While Triple H is being beaten by Angle and Jericho, Ross reinforces the action by telling us what we (are suppose to) see. He reports that Angle and Jericho are "really doing a number on" Triple

H; they are “dismantling The Game”; and that “The Game may be over” (RAW, 21 January 2002). This audio-visual trick occurs time and again in televised wrestling matches. The announcers exaggerate the severity of the violence in the ring, while shots are patched together in ways that lead the viewers to assume the worst.

The question arises, then, is television more persuasive in producing a veris-realistic representation of violence? I allege that the answer is yes . . . and no. Television cameras are instrumental in maintaining wrestling’s illusion of violence *and* exposing it. The quick cutting between cameras may fool very young or first time viewers, but smart fans or critical viewers are savvy enough to discern the camera tricks used by program directors, and they notice when mistakes are made. For instance, during a broadcast of RAW, on January 28, 2002, my two friends, Marty and Kennon, observed a glitch in a match between The Undertaker and Maven. When The Undertaker shoved a chair under Maven’s chin and drove Maven and the chair into the floor, Marty remarked, “that move would have been good if there hadn’t been this much room between Maven and the chair.” Marty held his hands several inches apart to indicate the error. In response, Kennon suggested that the director “should’ve changed camera angles,” and Marty agreed. In this case, the smart fans demonstrate their knowledge of how both the wrestling move and its televised transmission operate, or should operate. The glitch in the wrestlers’ and the director’s performances provoke their own critical performance where they show off and share their expert knowledge with each other. Thereby, they imagine another, more perfect performance of wrestling.

So, while the director switches from camera to camera to maintain the illusion of realism, mistakes can and do occur regularly during a program. Frank Aldridge claims that at times, “It is very easy to see that it’s fake on TV because you’ve got the cameras coming in. And so you see a guy do a drop kick and miss the opponent by a lot and he falls back as though he was just knocked on his ass. Those things ruin the sport” (Aldridge). In Aldridge’s example, the question arises, who is at fault? Perhaps, the director cut to the wrong camera. Or maybe the wrestler lacks the necessary skill. Or maybe both the wrestler and the director are at fault. The glitch prompts the viewer to disengage and critically assess the performance.

The mic work of the wrestlers is another excessive element of televised wrestling that operates to engage audiences in the illusion and, just as often, dissociate them from it. Above, I noted that current WWE programs consist of more talking than wrestling. Feigenbaum observes that “superstars often find themselves in front of a microphone as much if not more than in front of opponents in the ring” (129). Wrestlers engage the audience through their use of vocal technique, including pauses, rhythm, and emphasis. Additionally, effective mic work includes “accompanying gestures,” movement, and facial expressions. (Feigenbaum 129).

Wrestlers use catch phrases to communicate their character type and often the live audience can be heard repeating the catch phrase or responding to it with cheers or boos. Fans also integrate the phrases and other wrestling references into their daily speech acts. I have heard people use “smackdown” in everyday conversation and, during a broadcast of RAW, my friend Kennon urged Stone Cold Steve Austin to “just stun him” during a match

with Kurt Angle (28 January 2002). Austin uses a wrestling move called the Stone Cold Stunner.

In-ring monologues or dialogues between performers are intended to engage the audience in the performance. The audience laughed and tittered during the sexually provocative exchange between Kurt Angle and Dawn Marie at the WWE house show I attended. Wrestlers routinely insult audiences in order to generate heat. But, if the wrestler repeatedly emphasizes an upcoming event, his repetition may expose its operations. For instance, during Triple H's monologue, he continually refers to the pay-per-view program, WrestleMania. He describes WrestleMania as the "greatest spectacle of them all" and identifies it five times over the course of his monologue (RAW, 21 January 2002). In the final two sentences, he references it three times saying, "But, Chris Jericho, you have only got two months, because in two month's time it will be WrestleMania. And, if you make it to WrestleMania as the undisputed World Wrestling Federation champion, unfortunately for you, at WrestleMania, for you, it will be time to play The Game" (RAW, 21 January 2002). The mention of WrestleMania implies a shared wrestling culture that has knowledge of the event. No further explanation is required, and the first time Triple H mentions WrestleMania, the live audience responds with enthusiastic cheers. However, the excessive repetition exposes the commercial ploy embedded in the speech act and operates to cast Triple H as a corporate shill for WWE. Triple H has been a popular heel for much of his WWE career and, in this case, the audience prefers him over Jericho. Typically, heels are understood as rule breakers who subvert authority at every turn. However, Triple

H's monologue suggests otherwise and the viewing audience adopts a critical view of Triple H and questions the validity of his constant reminders.

Announcers play an important role in WWE televised matches. Like the wrestlers' excessive talk, the announcers' vocal gymnastics operate to enhance the desired illusion or, alternatively, expose its operational strategies.

Unlike legitimate sports reporters, sports entertainment announcers make no pretense of objectivity when they describe wrestling performers. Jim Ross and Jerry "the King" Lawler are popular announcers that call the matches during RAW. Ross "often pushes angles from the babyface's perspective, while Lawler provides the heel view" (Feigenbaum 114). For example, in a prior excerpt, Jerry Lawler describes Shelton Benjamin as having an "over-inflated idea of his talent and ability," so much so that "he really thinks that he's . . . somebody." Jim Ross responds that Benjamin is "down to earth" and a "very well raised, polite young man" (RAW, 3 May 2004). The announcers offer their different perspectives on wrestlers while, simultaneously, they comment on the action in the ring or hype an upcoming match or pay-per-view event.

Feigenbaum observes that the "banter between [Ross and Lawler] is a drama unto itself" (114), and Morton and O'Brien liken wrestling announcers to a Greek chorus. They note that "in essence the audience experienced the drama through the chorus. The wrestling commentator does just this for the professional wrestling fan" (122). To engage the home viewers in the wrestling drama, contemporary announcers must provide a context for the match, offer expository information about the wrestlers, and describe the action enthusiastically without getting bogged down in technical jargon. The announcers "tell us

all we need to know to comprehend the drama taking place and to react to it” (Morton and O’Brien 122).

On the other hand, for smart fans, the announcers’ excessive commentary and constant “teasing” of upcoming events expose the commercial operations of the discourse. For instance, during a RAW broadcast, the announcers, Ross and Lawler, discuss Vince McMahon’s threat to bring back an outlaw wrestling team called the New World Order (nWo). Ross feels that the “nWo will kill the WWF” (RAW, 28 January 2002). In response, my friend Kennon observes, “That’s bullshit. It won’t kill it. It’ll just build it up.” Marty responds, “You know they have to say that,” to which Kennon replies, “Oh, I know, it’s all hype. They need to bring nWo on tonight, but you know they’re saving it for the pay-per-view. Gotta make you think they’re gonna be on tonight though.”

When they describe the action in the ring, announcers use a specialized language to identify specific holds and maneuvers. The play-by-play commentary is interwoven with other observations and teases, such as the above-noted conversation regarding the nWo. There are far too many wrestling moves and combinations to describe each one, so the announcers highlight certain moves utilizing an insider language. During the tag team match I described earlier in the chapter, Ross identifies an “arm drag take down,” “drop toe hold,” “collar and elbow tie up,” “side head lock take over,” and “vertical base” (RAW, 3 May 2004). Ross and Lawler also use verbal shortcuts to identify wrestlers, again implying an insider culture that shares their knowledge of wrestling performers. The pair refer to “RVD” and “Y2J,” respectively, for wrestlers Rob Van Dam and Chris Jericho (RAW, 17 December 2001). Triple H is referred to as “Triple H” or “The Game,” while

Tajiri is identified as the “Japanese buzz saw” (RAW, 3 May 2004). The shortcuts imply an intimacy and informality that Ross and Lawler share with the wrestling community, and Feigenbaum notes that both announcers are so popular that they “receive loud ovations when they are announced at live shows” (114). Learning the language is an essential step in gaining access to wrestling culture and announcers provide ample material for fans to master. One of the ways wrestling fans demonstrate their knowledge of wrestling is by using the insider language of wrestlers’ names, nicknames, lore and jargon, such as blading, mark, heel, babyface, and heat.

Televised wrestling engages its fans in a number of ways, but initially it attracts fans through high energy, acrobatic performances of simulated violence enacted by charismatic athletes. The plot twists and other surprises that occur keep audiences intrigued as to what will happen next. Furthermore, the abundance of wrestling terminology enables fans to show off their extensive knowledge in critical performances of their own. In Brecht’s terms, the theatre of professional wrestling makes contact with its fans by treating them as expert sports enthusiasts (Brecht 7). Wrestling insiders “know exactly what is going to take place and that is exactly what does take place” once they sit down to watch a wrestling match (Brecht 6). But, as experts who know how the game is played, “they also know that it’s bullshit” (Aldridge). Vince McMahon’s admission that wrestling is more performance than contest has cast wrestling into a presentational light. And, as Aldridge asks, “Is that bad?” (Aldridge). Wrestling’s excessive elements often work to veil its operations and support a representational performance. At times, however, the excess exposes wrestling as a presentational display. The wrestling audience is

afforded opportunities to suspend disbelief and immerse themselves in the fictive illusion. But, when the gaps appear, they can disengage and critically scrutinize the operations of the performance.

CHAPTER FIVE WRESTLING FANS AND THE INTERNET

The Internet has become an invaluable resource for wrestling fans seeking detailed information about professional wrestling and engaging in dialogue with other wrestling enthusiasts. Hard print wrestling magazines and newsletters abound, but the Internet allows wrestling buffs to interact more immediately and exchange their ideas and opinions on everything related to the wrestling trade (Feigenbaum 152; Saunders 185). There are thousands of websites, and smart fans in particular use them to share their knowledge and experiences regarding wrestling history, famous wrestlers and promoters, and the various wrestling organizations across the country. Often, they debate at length about the current state of wrestling, or sports entertainment, as produced by Vince McMahon's World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). Some wrestling sites encourage devotees to collect wrestling results from a particular region in hopes of creating a more complete historical archive of wrestling promotions. While offering a forum for discussion about all things wrestling, many of the sites are profit driven. They sell advertising space on their website to other industries or pitch a range of wrestling products to avid fans. In addition to promoting its wrestling superstars and television programs, the WWE sells an array of merchandise, such as t-shirts, dolls, calendars, coffee mugs, and video tapes.

In this chapter, I describe and analyze a selection of diverse websites devoted to wrestling. I chose the sites because they represent the range of digital gathering places available to the online wrestling community. Each site operates a little differently, seeking to engage fans of a particular ilk and perspective.

WWE

The website owned and operated by World Wrestling Entertainment Incorporated is a marvel of media savvy and corporate self-promotion. It is the digital equivalent of any number of slick, high-gloss print publications, but with the added features of digital video and sound. The pages are designed to catch the eye and invite the consumer to take a close look at the promoted subject or product. The home page of the WWE site uses large, bold fonts and brightly colored graphics. Photographic imagery and streaming video also are included in the design.

When you first arrive at the WWE web page, the center of the computer screen reads, “Welcome to WWE – click on an image to see what’s hot in WWE” (World Wrestling Entertainment). Several small static images with titles, such as “Monday Night Raw,” are offered. When you click on the image, it becomes a streaming video with audio enhancement. Simultaneously, larger images on the page are replaced by a carousel of three or four images. The “moving pictures” are updated weekly to reflect the upcoming action of the selected program. Stretching across the top of the home and other pages are large banner ads. During a recent visit to the site, I noticed ads for the telephone company Bell South, the upcoming video release of the film, The Chronicles of Riddick, and what appeared to be a video game called “Godzilla.” On the home page beneath the banner ad are several hyperlinks or areas of interest the visitor can investigate. The same links with more detailed subcategories also stretch vertically from top to bottom along the left side of the screen. Users can visit “tv shows,” “superstars,” “schedules,” “play & win,” “community,” “inside WWE,” and “shop.” Under “schedules,” the weekly WWE television shows and broadcasting dates and times are

listed. Similar listings are offered for the pay-per-view events and live appearances by WWE wrestlers. The “play & win” link takes the visitor to various games and contests that offer prizes. Those who want to chat with other fans can visit the “community” link. And, of course, “shop” opens the door to a plethora of WWE merchandise available for purchase.

The “community” link begins with a page that advertises a web cast program called “Byte This!” The recent pitch for the show ran as follows:

Byte This! – the official WWE.com Web cast – will air on a new day and time. It all takes place every Wednesday night at 8 pm ET! ECW [Extreme Championship Wrestling] owner Paul Heyman, as well as several former ECW wrestlers will be joining us on this special edition of Byte This! Be sure to get your copy of The Rise and Fall of ECW available now! Scroll down to watch videos from the Byte This! archive! (“Byte This!”)

The program is accessed via the computer and it features a host who talks about upcoming wrestling programs and pay-per-view events. He also interviews various WWE performers. During the show, fans can call in and ask questions.

On the same “community” page are hyperlinks to the WWE chat room where fans talk to one another about wrestling. There also is a chat room “En Espanol.” When I visited the chat room in 2002, I found the discussions to be somewhat banal. Given the discourse, I am prompted to think the participants were adolescents and young teens. Typical entries were “Triple H rules” and “Kurt Angle sucks.” I cannot address current content because access to the chat room now requires software I do not own.

On the WWE web site, fans also can sign up to receive a weekly newsletter or e-letter that is delivered to their e-mail addresses. The e-letter contains much of the same promotional material available on the web site. I registered for and received electronic notices for several weeks. On June 12, 2003, I received information about an upcoming

pay-per-view event called Bad Blood. The notice ran, “This Sunday, don’t miss Bad Blood live and only on pay-per-view, 8PM Eastern/5PM Pacific. Order Bad Blood and see where the blood will boil over” (“Will The Bad Blood Boil Over?”). The information was framed in a large rectangular box with the words “Bad Blood” in bold and the date and time of the event running across the top border. Photographic images of wrestling stars filled in the background and blank areas of the announcement. When I printed out the notice, it resembled a movie poster. Below the eye-catching announcement, additional information about the event was offered. One pitch ran,

IN THE MAIN EVENT: KEVIN NASH TAKES ON TRIPLE H FOR THE WORLD HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPIONSHIP IN THE “HELL IN THE CELL” WITH GUEST REFEREE MICK FOLEY. It is the most brutal match in the history of World Wrestling Entertainment. A twenty foot high enclosed steel structure will contain both men where there is no escape and only one man will exit as the winner. (“Will The Bad Blood Boil Over”; emphasis in original)

The WWE website functions as one gigantic commercial for WWE. Any “news” takes the form of a pitch for the televised events and merchandise. Although the program “Byte This!” claims to provide insider information to fans, it fails to do much more than cast WWE products in a favorable light. The chat room offers fans the opportunity to exchange opinions with each another; however, in my limited experience, it seems the participants are “marks” under the age of eighteen. It is not that they believe in the veracity of professional wrestling, but that they seem enamored with the WWE content and are not interested in how it or wrestling, in general, operates. One possible exception concerns a WWE companion site for parents. WWE Parents offers parents information about WWE programming. Its content veers toward reflexivity when it prompts parents to talk to their kids about their entertainment choices and to distinguish between pretend violence and the real thing. Otherwise, the WWE site and links are a neatly packaged

stream of promotional information, excessive in product content but little else. Typically, smart fans who wish to discuss a wide range of wrestling topics, such as its history, story angles and plot twists, character gimmicks, and the pros and cons of various wrestling organizations, must visit other sites.

Lords of Pain

I came across the Lords of Pain website by accident. I was looking through the various message boards that are available under the Gulf Coast Wrestling Online web page. One was titled “WWE Discussion” and, as I perused the discussion threads, I noticed someone referred continually to the Lords of Pain site, which they felt was superior to “WWE Discussion.” The Lords of Pain site is part of a larger media operation called UGO Media. Their primary market is eighteen to thirty-four year old males.

The home page for Lords of Pain displays the title in bold red letters just beneath an ad banner that extends across the top of the page. The background of each page in the message board is black and the print appears in white. The home page carries news regarding current developments in wrestling. Wrestling enthusiasts can look up archived news articles about diverse performers, events, and promotions, and access a results page that lists the outcomes of matches from different WWE shows and regional live events. The articles report recent developments in professional wrestling and thereby encourage smart fans to supplement their existing knowledge. Also, the home page provides links to discussion forums where fans can debate various wrestling issues. For readers unfamiliar with online discussion boards or forums, people log on and register with the specific site, identifying themselves by means of user names they select. They type in

their message, giving it a heading or applying it to an extant heading. Typically, there are dozens of discussion threads under different subject headings. The wrestling forums in this case were divided into four categories: general, WWE, NWA-TNA, and columns. In the general forum, fans talk about independent and international wrestling. In the NWA-TNA forum, they focus on the National Wrestling Alliance and a recent television program called Total Nonstop Action. The columns forum publishes articles, editorials, and reflections about the wrestling world by wrestling fans. The WWE forum, of course, focuses on that organization and its performers.

I visited the WWE forum and one particular thread caught my attention. A fan had posted his thoughts under the subject heading, “Can Nick Dunsmore Ever Recover From The Eugene Character?” Posted in August 2004, the heading and discussion piqued my interest because, during the summer, I had witnessed the noted wrestler perform “Eugene” on the television program RAW. Dunsmore portrays Eugene as a mentally challenged individual and a very capable wrestler. He is a sweet-natured simpleton who waves at the audience, sometimes carries a doll, and displays a constant wide-eyed smile. Announcers refer to Eugene as the “special” nephew of the WWE’s “general manager,” Eric Bischoff.

Below is an excerpt from the forum discussion on Eugene and the wrestler-performer, Nick Dunsmore, also identified as Nick Dinsmore by Wrestling-Insider.com. The discussants are identified by their user names and, unless otherwise noted, grammar and style “errors” are part of the original postings.

RandyOrton: [Eugene] will always be Classified as a “retard” and he will never be taken Seriously for the rest of his career.

The Standard: Shut the hell up. Recover? He's arguably the most popular person on Raw! Unlike most people that WWE pushes, he's actually a skilled wrestler! His character has been portrayed with a lot of respect (by WWE standards) and hasn't been exploited or made to look like a joke. WHAT MORE could he possibly want? He's wrestled Chris Benoit for the World Heavyweight Championship, for god sakes. Eugene/Nick and his fans should be happy as clams. Recover. Psh. And should all else fail, he can always say he never was retarded in the first place. PS. Triple H seems to be taking him seriously.

RandyOrton: I didn't say he was a bad wrestler it's just he will have to be the same retarded character for his whole career.

The Standard: 1) He's always one five minute speech from being . . . unretarded. 2) Do you really want that? Because after he feuds with William Regal [Eugene's tag team partner], he becomes "Generic Bad Guy" and goes directly to Heat [another WWE program]. If Rick Steiner can have his gimmick for a long time, so can Eugene.

snowman: Look if Kane can get over Isaac Yankum, Hardcore Holly can get over "Sparkplug" . . . Dinsmore can make it past Eugene, all he needs is a haircut, and a little more rip to his body and he's a new guy. His ability to wrestle will be the final factor.

Squirrelzilla: I agree with Standard he is always one step away from being unretarded and becoming one of the greatest heels of all times, remember after [Hulk] Hogan joined NWO [New World Order] all the red and yellow burning and garbage thrown, it's a heel heat goldmine.

Gypsumstack: It would be very simple to get rid of Eugene and still make Nick a new character. This is all that has to be done:

1. HHH and/or Evolution beat the living the living hell out of Eugene.
2. The next week it is said that Eugene may never be able to wrestle again.
3. A few weeks later, it is confirmed that Eugene's wrestling career is done.
4. The following week, a clean cut, clean shaved, fresh out of the gym Nick Dinsmore debuts as Eugene's un-retarded brother to make HHH and/or Evolution pay for what they did to his kid (big? twin?) brother.

Really, if you go to the OVW [Ohio Valley Wrestling] website you will see that it could easily be pulled off. Give Nick a razor and some gym time and the change would be so dramatic that it would be believable that they were just related and not the exact same person. Hell, Nick and Eugene would be more believable than Mankind/Dude Love/Cactus Jack.

Gino: Can Eugene recover in the fans' eyes . . . I think so, but the explanation to the "retard" gimmick needs to be a very good one for the fans to ever believe in him again. They can't just say "he faked it," I won't buy that. If Dinsmore maybe got battered by HHH and came back in a few months as a luchadore [a

masked wrestler] on Smackdown! (a good one at that), he would eventually get unmasked, and then an explanation can arise from that. Dinsmore can recover, but I doubt the WWE would want to scrap this character anytime soon!

DarkMercury: I think it all really boils down to how they do the transition from his Eugene character to his other character. You would have to take into account that time would be a crucial factor, I mean if one week he's Eugene and then next week he's a different persona then it's going to be a hard sell. I would assume over time he would change his character, most wrestlers have done this, so it determines what they do with the Eugene storyline from here to see how the fans follow him. I just think it all depends on the WWE writers, which isn't giving them much faith. Anything is possible. ("Can Nick Dunsmore Ever Recover?")

The discussion continues for several more pages with various wrestling fans weighing in on the pros and cons of the Eugene character. Gino posted again and noted that if Eugene "got rid of his current Albert Einstein hairdo and went with something short" and a "new attire and gimmick of course, then that would just about do the trick. . . . Maybe add a mask for 'smart fans'" ("Can Nick Dunsmore Ever Recover?").

In the initial posting for the discussion, RandyOrton worries that Dunsmore, or Dinsmore, will be trapped in a role from which he cannot escape. Other fans seem less concerned, drawing on past evidence of how the wrestling game works to argue that Dinsmore can change persona easily. Others acknowledge that he can change, but they want the change to be logical in terms of the established story line. For instance, Gypsumstack suggests that Dinsmore might return as Eugene's brother who is seeking revenge for the vicious beating that ended Eugene's career. Like Gypsumstack, other fans offer what they see as reasonable ways Dinsmore might change his character. Eugene might become "unretarded" by announcing to the audience that he was pretending or Dinsmore might wear a mask that prevents the audience from recognizing him.

For many fans, the key to Dinsmore's transformation lies in altering his physical and behavioral traits. As Eugene, Dinsmore appears chubby and has long, frizzy hair and a beard. His facial expressions signal a wide-eyed naiveté. He walks like a toddler and waves to the audience like a child, his hands flapping at the wrist. By cutting his hair, shaving his face, working out in the gym so as to appear more muscular, and abandoning Eugene's movements and gestures, Dinsmore can emerge as a new character. By means of their comments, then, the smart fans show their understanding of how wrestling as performance operates. With seeming delight and critical insight, they analyze plot structure and the manifest signs of character development. They also draw on prior character-wrestler histories to make their claims, implying an understanding of how the WWE constructs and changes characters and scenarios. Lastly, in a number of comments, the fans critique the WWE, finding that "unlike most people that WWE pushes," Dinsmore is "a skilled wrestler," and that they shouldn't have "much faith" in "the WWE writers" ("Can Nick Dinsmore Ever Recover?").

As I discussed in Chapter Two, wrestling characters are often stereotypes that reflect current social and political issues in the US and elsewhere. During and after WW II, for instance, many wrestling villains were portrayed as "Germans" or "Japanese." Currently, the "War on Terror" and the US invasion of Iraq are key concerns in the US, and the wrestling world has responded with Arab-American characters. In turn, wrestling fans have responded to the characters, as evidenced by the following excerpt drawn from a Gulf Coast Wrestling Online forum. Posted November 2, 2004, the subject heading was "New Arab-American characters to make debut on Monday Night RAW." Again, I identify the participants by their posted names.

Shane O'Malley: According to an article on parents.wwe.com posted earlier, WWE is introducing two new Arab-American characters on Monday Night RAW. Muhammad Hassan and Khosrow Daivari are U.S. citizens who have grown up in American. They love their country. However, they now face a new and different kind of relationship with their fellow U.S. citizens as a result of being Arab-American in a United States still struggling with the tragic events of September 11, 2001. RAW will explore the challenges Hassan and Daivari face as Hassan tries to make his mark as a new WWE Superstar under the guidance of Daivari as his manager. Note: This was posted on the main WWE.com website as well so it looks like they are really going to try and push the edge on this one.

Irish: Recently, WWE has unveiled a new character at some of their house shows. The most recent in Burlington, VT. OVW [Ohio Valley Wrestling] developmental wrestler Sean Davari has been cast in the role of a terroristic Arab complete with prayer rug and evil abu d'habi emirate manager. OK, I know WWF did the whole Slaughter/Iron Sheik during the Gulf War. It seems that they feel they need this to generate heat from a guy (and it's not the kind of boo, we hate you bad guy heat). No, this is more like boo we hate you because your people (or at least that's what they are trying to portray) are killing our soldiers. Wrong gimmick, wrong time. Oh, he comes out to Tiger Ali Singh's old music. ("New Arab-American Characters")

In his comments, Irish reveals that he has followed wrestling for several years in so far as he recalls the Slaughter/Iron Sheik gimmick used during the Gulf War and the entrance music of Tiger Ali Singh. The WWE marketed Tiger Ali Singh as a wrestler from the Middle East in the late 1990s.

The same issue was discussed on the Lords of Pain website. In the following transcription, all ellipses are mine.

FearlessVampireKiller: When I first heard WWE wanted an Arab heel, I thought it was a dumb idea. I thought it wouldn't work. . . . On the last episode of RAW we saw a promo featuring Muhammad Hassan and his manager Khosrow Daivari. I have to say, I was horrified. Why? Because these men are not just portraying Muslims, they are portraying Muslim Americans. What's the difference? In his promo, Hassan talks about being persecuted and discriminated against on the basis of his religion and ethnicity. Presumably once he premieres, he will continue to speak out against this persecution, while at the same time being portrayed through his actions as someone who is violent, deceitful, untrustworthy, and, overall, an average WWE heel. This, to me, is irresponsible, because it suggests that Hassad deserves to be discriminated against. . . .

The Nog Spiker: You are overreacting. Characters are created for crowd reaction whether it be positive or negative. Do you know how bad the French are [persecuted] in the US but you aren't complaining about . . . constant attacks of them.

The Franchise: The way I took it, is that they're trying to portray him as a sympathetic character (like Billy Kidman, for instance). However in WWE land, he's a whiner and therefore, it makes him a heel.

R. Jeremy: I'm sure most will disagree, but I think this character is about 3 years over due. Like Franchise said, ethnic heels have been around from the beginning of professional wrestling. . . . The point is, an Arab American heel has the potential to be very entertaining.

Wally: . . . I refuse to have my strings pulled by this angle, if they intend to go with it where I'd imagine. I can't condemn it other than "It says a lot about their lack of ability to get heat more creatively," because they haven't even come close to crossing a line as far as I'm concerned. But hey, give 'em time. The manager's speech and body language are coming off resentful and heel-ish right off the bat, which would transfer heel heat to this guy. ("Muhammad Hassan")

Based on their conversation, the fans demonstrate that they are aware of the historical, political, and cultural implications of the characters portrayed in wrestling. While some believe that negative portrayals of Arab-Americans are offensive, others argue that such a "gimmick" will turn out to be less offensive than originally feared. Almost all the smart fans acknowledge that wrestling characters are created and then tested with audiences to assess their ability to generate "heat" or a strong reaction from the audience whether it be positive or negative. Some characters and story angles thrive while others fizzle.

Feigenbaum asserts that WWE "officials closely monitor the Internet for feedback on their product" (153). As demonstrated in this section, fans use the Internet to discuss and evaluate characters and story lines on different websites and message boards.

Consequently, fans play a significant role in the development of the WWE's product, which is in a constant state of development (Feigenbaum 154). Of course, what becomes popular, and why, is another source of debate among smart fans.

Kayfabe Memories

Many fans wax nostalgic for the “good old days” of wrestling that they watched in the 1960s and 1970s. The website [Kayfabe Memories](#) is dedicated to preserving wrestling history, particularly the histories of regional organizations. The home page for the site announces the title in large red letters. Nearby, a blue banner reads, “Where Wrestling’s Regional History Lives!” ([Kayfabe Memories](#)). As I noted earlier in the study, kayfabe is a private language used to conceal insider or secret information. When Vince McMahon revealed that wrestling was a performance and not a sport, wrestling insiders said McMahon had broken kayfabe. From the website’s home page, I accessed a link called “A Kayfabe History Lesson.” The lesson explains that the purpose of the site is to “examine both the major and minor wrestling promotions that existed between the time frames of 1965 and 1989” ([Kayfabe Memories](#)). Visitors to the site can research information on a variety of wrestling promotions across the country, including the former World Wide Wrestling Federation., the American Wrestling Association, International Championship Wrestling, Smoky Mountain Wrestling, and Southeast Championship Wrestling. The site also profiles wrestlers from previous decades and posts articles that feature the memories of former wrestlers. Visitors can examine photographs of championship belts from years gone by, and even purchase replicas of title belts and masks that were once worn by famous “masked” wrestlers. The site is dedicated to preserving the history of professional wrestling before it became sports entertainment, and paying tribute to past wrestling greats.

For fans that want to talk wrestling with others, the message board is divided into wrestling territories, or those wrestling promotions that once thrived in particular regions.

Visitors can post messages or questions related to almost three dozen wrestling organizations across the US and Canada. As such, the site attracts many smart fans that have been following wrestling for many years. On one of my visits to the message board, I accessed a forum titled, “WWWF/WWF (1963-1983).” A fan had posted a question under the subject heading, “1st to use intro music on WWWF TV?” Below are responses to the question. I use brackets in this excerpt to clarify author’s abbreviation.

davephlegmball: Was this Beautiful Bobby? That’s the 1st one I remember, though I don’t remember the year – 1972 maybe?

brunogod: As far as I can recall that’s the name I come up with.

Steve Gennarelli: I became a fan in ’76 so I missed out on Beautiful Bobby. The first guy to enter the ring with music I recall was the “Eye of the Tiger” as SBG’s ring music for his comeback series vs. Backlund in ’82.

glaz: It was Beautiful Bobby. On the Washington TV show the ring announcer would introduce the enhancement guy, who was already in the ring, then he’d hold a portable tape recorder up to the microphone that hung over the ring and hit the “play” button! The music – by Rimsky-Korsakov, IIRC [if I recall correctly] – would play until Bobby was in the ring, then the ring announcer would hold the tape recorder by his side while he introduced Bobby. The routine was a little smoother on the Philly show, with the music being played off-camera.

SWW72: I think the first I remember was Sgt. Slaughter with the Marine’s Hymn in about 1981 or 82.

KANeRock: What about Battman? AFAIK [as far as I know], he used Batman theme music even in 1960s on “Studio Wrestling.”

LUSCIOUS JOHNNY: Beautiful Bobby and Batman were before my time. My first memory was of Slaughter’s marine theme playing.

davephlegmball: Beautiful Bobby was way before Slaughter.

SCW Count Grog: Battman had the music in the late 1960s. Did Gorgeous George wrestling in Capitol Wrestling? As he used the Pomp and Circumstance intro.

Tom Vu: I remember Slaughter, then Hogan “Eye of the Tiger” and “Another One Bites the Dust” with JYD [Junkyard Dog]. After that ring entrance music became the norm.

MajorGuns: Gorgeous George’s Pomp and Circumstance should be the winner here. I don’t think anyone ever used music intro before GG. I don’t think he was ever officially part of Capitol I think he was AWA material. Won the AWA (Boston) World Title in 1950, and then lost it to Lou Thesz, who “unified” the AWA, NWA and LA title. One could probably consider him as a precursor to the WWWF. (“1st to use intro music on WWWF TV?”)

A different discussion thread in the same forum focused on a particular wrestler named Pedro Morales. The ellipses are mine in this excerpt.

ntrots: Are there any web sites devoted to Pedro Morales?

itsemquasi: If not, there should be. I always thought highly of him, no matter what territory he was working.

RICKIE999: I WENT TO MOST OF PEDRO’S MATCHES AT MSG [Madison Square Garden] IN THE EARLY ‘70’S HE WAS A REAL GOOD CHAMP. I DEVELOPED A 400 PAGE RECORD BOOK/SCRAPBOOK OF HIS TIME AS CHAMP 1971-73. RESULTS, PHOTOS, PROGRAMS, PHOTOS, ARTICLES ALL PHOTO COPIED AND COMB BOUND WITH LAMINTED COVERS. IT SOLD WELL ON EBAY.

pugga: I really liked Pedro. Too bad his name doesn’t get mentioned overly often when talking about the great posts of the past. I don’t think he really gets his due.

itsmequasi: Some of Pedro’s accomplishments that I know, and there might be more. It is hard to say. 4 time WWA Tag Champion; w/ Luis Hernandez 1965; w/Mark Lewin 1966; w/Ricky Romero 1967; w/Victor Rivera 1967; 3 time Hawaii Tag Team champion in 1969 & 1970 w/ Ed Francis twice and once with Bing Ki Lee. WWWF Champion in 1971 beating Ivan Koloff; AWA World Tag-Team Champion w/ Pepper Gomez in 1975; . . . WWF Tag Team Champion w/ Backlund, beat the Samoans in 1980; . . . WWC North American Heavyweight Champion in 1983; . . . He was the WWWF’s First triple crown winner; . . . Wrestled two Shea Stadium cards as the Main event. . . . To me he has quite a career record that is totally outstanding. And his place in wrestling should never be forgotten.

Crimson Mask: Pedro was first in the NE territory back around 1962 as an undercard babyface. Was definitely there at least in late ’62 and on into ’63 and the start of the WWWF time.

itsmequasi: Crimson, do you know who trained him, and has anyone located or tracked down, to what they believe might be his first pro match, and in what territory that it might have been in? (“Pedro Morales”)

In the above forum entries, fans work to piece together wrestling’s convoluted history. Entrance music, so integral to today’s wrestling performance, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Although Gorgeous George used music back in the fifties, it did not become common until much later. Today, even in small town productions, stereo music fills the arena when a wrestler makes his entrance. On the Internet, the neophyte wrestling fan can interact with the old guard, upgrading and revising their knowledge, and sharing their insights. Long time wrestling fans can ponder “whatever happened to?” as in the case of Pedro Morales. Wrestling fans are “always in the process of becoming insiders” continually “wanting to know more than they saw or knew in the past” (Mazer, Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle 6).

Another theme that was common in wrestling forums was that many fans want to know how others were first drawn to wrestling. Many love to share stories about their early experiences. Below is an excerpt of one such discussion titled, “When/How did you get hooked?” All ellipses are mine.

ltjr98: I am a newbie. I want to thank all of you posters for rekindling so many memories. With that in mind: I was hooked on wrestling in the winter of ‘70/71. . . . Boy was I a mark. I would argue with anyone who dared say that it was all a setup I always said that they were trained athletes who knew how to fall. . . . Of course, once I found out the truth, I loved it just the same. I am saddened by the state of today’s product. . . .

paulmmm: “How did you get hooked?” One word, two syllables – Bruno [Sammartino].

heftser: I was “gradually” hooked as a preteen. First, I used to go to the local candystore to read/buy magazines like Famous Monsters of Filmland, Vampirella, etc. The ‘rasslin mags were usually in the same shelf as these mags due to the

blood. At the time (1974) I had no idea wrestling was on TV. Awhile later, I was staying with my aunt and cousins for the summer. One late Saturday afternoon they put on WWWF Championship Wrestling with the Bruno/Arion non-title main event. I was struck with the emotion my cousins had when Bruno lost, and was “hooked” ever since.

godzillajoe2k4: My dad was a lifelong fan, so I probably just watched along with him as a kid. Some of my earliest memories were the Executioners, the Koloff/Bruno chain match from Boston (my dad was a mark and told the story as if a real life and death battle took place that day, it was fantastic. . . . So I guess I started around 1976 at age 6. (“When/How did you get hooked?”)

The discussion continues as several more fans post responses to the original question or respond to the memories of others. Throughout this thread, fans recall fondly how they were first introduced to wrestling and often yearn for the good old days when, as one fan put it, there were “no explosions, no foul language . . . no wrestlers giving the one finger salute to kids, no women valets in bikinis, or less attire. . . . No just plain old wrestling. . . . Maybe boring. But we liked it” (“When/How did you get hooked?”).

The Kayfabe Memories website is a gold mine for the serious wrestling fan and researcher. Smart fans seek out and exchange information, stories, and memories regarding wrestling. Both dilettante and professional, the historians respond to and, by means of their discussion, construct wrestling in terms of its past. Thereby, they enact a practice that expresses their culture through history and memory, more so than through image and product consumption.

Gulf Coast Wrestling Magazine

In addition to message boards and chat rooms, wrestling enthusiasts also publish their own online newsletters and magazines wherein they write about the wrestling trade. In Gulf Coast Wrestling Magazine, Bob Liddil offers at least thirty essays he has written

on wrestling promotions in Pensacola, Florida. He bills the magazine as “Your Source for Pensacola Area Independent Wrestling News” (Gulf Coast Wrestling Magazine).

At the top of the magazine’s home page is the Gulf Coast Wrestling logo in red and blue against a green background. The titles of Liddil’s essays appear in small boxes, printed in black font on a white background. Above the title in each box is a small grey rectangle with the words “click here.” A simple click and the corresponding essay appears on the screen. As of November 2004, all of the essays were posted between September 2001 and October 2003. Upon perusing a number of the articles, I discovered that Liddil is an avid wrestling fan who also sells buttons and trinkets at wrestling shows. His nickname is the Buttonman. Apparently, he also tried his hand at promoting wrestling matches. Although Liddil understands the rehearsed element in wrestling, he is a self-proclaimed “mark.” He appreciates the hard work required to execute a wrestling match that encourages him to engage in the fantasy of wrestling as a real competition.

In an essay titled, “Wrestling and Writing about Wrestling: The Making of a Smark,” Liddil recalls his wrestling education. He writes,

I was captivated, as many fans are, smitten by wrestling folklore. Being a writer, I wanted to write about wrestling. Unfortunately, a little thing called “kayfabe” got in the way. In those days of Vince vs. Ted Turner, the truth about wrestling was shrouded in mystery and nobody who knew a thing said a thing. (Liddil, “Wrestling and Writing about Wrestling”)

Liddil recalls that he “wanted to be a promoter,” and he “wanted to write about life around the squared circle from a position of understanding” (“Wrestling and Writing about Wrestling”). He made the acquaintance of a promoter and several working wrestlers and, one day, found himself in an outdoor ring with a wrestler called “Moose,” who was willing to show Liddil a few wrestling moves. Liddil writes, “One thing I

needed to do was feel what a worker feels in the ring. No, not the heat or the pop. The bump. The impact of a crash landing at the tail end of a suplex [sic]. Everybody said wrestling was fake, but I knew better, because the bump made a bang and you can't fake impact" ("Wrestling and Writing about Wrestling"). After bouncing Liddil off of the ropes, Moose picked him up and dropped him on his back. Liddil, who claims to weigh five hundred pounds, hit the mat with a resounding thud. The noise was so loud it scared a sleeping dog from underneath the ring and it ran yelping from the yard. Liddil was unhurt although the wind was knocked out of him. The experience proved to be an epiphany for Liddil. He writes,

I never looked at wrestling the same after that. Every worker has my respect, because I know his body is on the line. Every promoter gets a handshake and applause from me because he risks his own money. And every fan who ever occupied a chair at ringside is my brother, because he is who validates the existence of the grand sport of wrestling. ("Wrestling and Writing about Wrestling")

Liddil's identification of himself as a "smark" or a smart mark implies that he believes in the competitive aspect of wrestling and he understands how competition operates in this case. While the matches are pre-determined, they require the wrestlers to put their bodies "on the line" like any other sport. Likewise, they require a promoter who "risks his own money" to organize a program where skilled and charismatic athletes perform enthusiastically for a discerning audience.

In his column titled, "We Marks Don't Care," Liddil criticizes the "juvenile" opinions of fans who post on Internet message boards and chat rooms devoted to local wrestling. He offers a top ten list of items about wrestling he does not care to read. For example, his first complaint is "We marks don't care if a promoter has only a couple of shows under his belt as long as the one I go to has lots of action and good characters. We

don't care if a promoter or wrestler has an hour of experience or a decade, if he entertains us we will return to the seat. If he bores us, we stay home" (Liddil, "We Marks Don't Care"). Further down his list, Liddil complains,

We marks don't care about workers' private lives, about their indiscretions, the men or women or girls that they may or may not have had relations with because it isn't WRESTLING. We do care about the CHARACTER a wrestler brings into the ring. The LIGHTNING KID was a man I could cheer for real (shoot cheering) because his CHARACTER was dynamic. When he became Mr. Electricity, it was SHOOT HEAT from me because he played the role. Bobby Fuller, Raine Quappone, Chad, Tony, Al, Marcel, Bullet Bob, Steve, all have one thing in common. THEIR CHARACTERS AREN'T BORING! Their ring technique entertains me and THEY DON'T WHINE about how sad the state of wrestling is because they WORK to make it BETTER. ("We Marks Don't Care"; emphasis in original)

By "shoot cheering" and "shoot heat," Liddil refers to his willingness to suspend disbelief, to engage in the reality of the wrestling characters and their conflict, if the "characters aren't boring." In short, Liddil is a performance critic more so than a critic of the "sad state of wrestling" or the wrestlers' private lives.

In the same article, Liddil further chastises Internet posters who criticize local wrestling in the Pensacola area. He writes, "Don't second guess the doers, get off your lazy butt and DO IT!! Get out to the gym if you're a flabby wrestler, buy a gimmick if you're a shabby wrestler, practice mike skills if you suck at talking or talk too softly. Stop WHINING and DO SOMETHING TO MAKE WRESTLING BETTER" ("We Marks Don't Care"; emphasis in original). Liddil proceeds to tell readers how to make wrestling better – at least for the "marks" in the audience:

We marks want to see wrestling. We want to see physical combat choreographed closely enough so that there's no gap between the slap and the head. We want a wrestler to obey the law of physics and SLING a man into the ropes. We want that man coming OFF the ropes like he has not control. If I want ballet I'll go to the ballet. . . . We marks are easy to get heat from. If you're a bad guy, be bad.

Make a history and tell it. Have a character, be a character, give me a reason not to stay home marking on DRAGNET.

In Conclusion, WE marks are bored with message boards and all the incredible stupidity that comes from them. But more dangerously, we are bored with all aspects of wrestling, bored with dead characters, bored with street clothes costumes, bored with limp ropes and smoky bars and feuds between nobodies and matches that have no story. We are bored with BORING shows that continuously present the same matches over and over again, and the lack of imagination of those putting them on – and the lack of SHOWMANSHIP. (“We Marks Don’t Care”; emphasis in original)

Bob Liddil enjoys playing the role of a mark in his essays so as to make the point that the aim of professional wrestling is to provoke audience members to be marks while engaged in the event. For Liddil, the artifice of wrestling should not be apparent. Rather, like realistic theatre, the wrestling event should create a fictive reality that persuades the audience that it is spontaneous real life. To do so, wrestlers must work hard to create and project believable characters through their character gimmicks, costumes, mic work, and athletic skills, while promoters must be imaginative in their creation and promotion of story lines, match ups, and feuds. Liddil is willing to play the mark, to be the enthusiastic fan that cheers the hero and boos the villain, as long as the hero and villain are persuasive in terms of the created wrestling reality.

Wrestling Observer and Wrestling Perspective

By means of the Internet, wrestling fans can access and subscribe to a variety of newsletters, such as Wrestling Observer and Wrestling Perspective. On both websites, fans can browse interviews and articles about their favorite wrestlers, and purchase books, videos, and other wrestling related merchandise. Wrestling enthusiasts also can exchange information and opinions on each site’s message board. While some of the interviews and articles appear in their entirety on the sites, typically the newsletters

provide synopses. The full length items are available in hard copy newsletters that are delivered by snail mail to subscribers.

Wrestling Observer and Wrestling Perspective appear to provide legitimate “insider” information about the world of wrestling. Unlike the WWE site, both publications avoid “kayfabe” or phony stories about wrestling. Rather, they strive to uncover and report factual information about the wrestling industry, such as the training regimen, injuries, and personal appearances of wrestlers, character and story line developments, salary disputes and negotiations, and other financial matters. Each week, Wrestling Observer also provides readers with synopses of matches that occurred in house shows and on television in the US and, also, in Europe and Japan. Dave Meltzer, who writes for Wrestling Observer, began covering wrestling in the 1980s. Along with other reporters, he exposed the abuse of steroids by WWE wrestlers in the early 1990s. He also has reported on the financial aspects of professional wrestling, including information on television ratings, advertising sales, and pay-per-view revenues. Recent stories in the Wrestling Observer have covered several wrestlers who have been fired by the WWE. A recent pitch for the newsletter runs as follows:

We’ve got one of the biggest business issues of the Wrestling Observer newsletter coming out today. The lead article on TNA’s [Total Nonstop Action] financial situation is already the most talked about topic in wrestling this week. . . . We look at the current business of WWE and TNA. With WWE, we look at the numbers from the latest investors report, and what they really mean, including what it says for the future and some stories behind the numbers. We look at upcoming cost cutting measures, new projects . . . and an update on Vince McMahon’s latest financial windfall. (Wrestling Observer.com)

While Wrestling Observer is a weekly publication that focuses on the current state of professional wrestling, Wrestling Perspective is a bi-monthly newsletter that concentrates on key figures in wrestling’s development over the last thirty years.

Wrestling Perspective calls itself “The Thinking Fan’s Newsletter,” and features lengthy interviews with a variety of wrestling performers and other workers in the industry. In addition to offering a few full length articles, Wrestling Perspective also provides book and video reviews, links to other online wrestling sites, and professional biographies of those who write and publish the newsletter. Editors describe the mission of Wrestling Perspective as:

. . . a newsletter for the discriminating fan. We dedicate our pages to high quality analysis of the wrestling business. Rather than reprint news, rumors and gossip found in other publications, we tackle important issues and put them under a microscope. . . . As for our interviews, we talk with marquee players, be they current stars, behind-the-scenes powerbrokers or legend of the game. . . . When you read a Wrestling Perspective interview, you learn more about the business, the wrestler, and the human being who works as that wrestler. (Wrestling Perspective.com)

If wrestling fans are evaluated on their critical understanding of the sports entertainment business, then the writers and editors of the two newsletters lead the way. They demonstrate a keen understanding of the wrestling profession and offer fans and industry insiders alike a frank view of the harsh realities of the sport/show business. While they appreciate the art of wrestling, they show how the art operates in terms of its historical, financial, and organizational development over the years and in the context of US culture.

Analysis

The Internet boasts thousands of websites devoted to professional wrestling and they are as diverse as the people who attend live matches or watch wrestling on television. The digital sites offer fans the opportunity to interact with others who share similar interests and perspectives regarding professional wrestling. Like cable television networks, the sites seek to attract a niche or narrow audience of a particular demographic

or interest. In this section, I compare and contrast several of the sites I described above, noting how each operates to imply a certain role for the visitor, which they use to interact with the site.

Like so many large corporations, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), Inc. produces a website whose main function is to display and market WWE products. The site uses a number of strategies to attract wrestling enthusiasts and/as consumers. The site displays a dizzying array of WWE television programs, merchandise, and information, which is cast in a fantasy world of muscular men and curvaceous, scantily clad women. A community culture is imagined in so far as fans are encouraged to send e-mails to the company providing them feedback on WWE television programs, pay-per-view specials, live events, or magazines. Fans also can write for information about their favorite superstar, request an autograph, or inquire about employment opportunities. The site is what web page designers call “sticky” (Straubhaar and LaRose 255). It is visually appealing with pictures and streaming video. Fans can play games and win prizes and, of course, purchase merchandise. The site encourages fans to stay as long as they like, consuming the excess of WWE. Although there is a link to “corporate” information, it is tucked away at the bottom of the web page. Visitors who choose to access the link find simple, block paragraphs regarding recent WWE employees who were hired or promoted in various departments, such as marketing, sales, and management. Currently, news items about the WWE entertaining troops in the Middle East are marketed under the “corporate” link too (“WWE Corpbiz”).

Vince McMahon is quite frank about the type of entertainment WWE produces. He describes it as a mix of “action-adventure . . . Comedy Central and . . . soap opera,

with world class athletes” (Solomon 19). But, understanding the WWE in any comprehensive way is very difficult. What passes for “news” on the website appears to be kayfabe hype regarding upcoming matches and pay-per-view events. While conducting research for the study, I e-mailed the WWE on three separate occasions seeking information that would provide additional insight into the company. I did not receive responses. In 2002, the WWE conducted a fan survey via their website and through e-newsletters. At the time, I subscribed to the e-newsletters, but I inadvertently deleted the survey from my computer. I tried to print a copy from the WWE site, but to no avail. Twice, I e-mailed the WWE asking for a copy of the survey, but did not receive a response. In December, 2004, I used the “contact us” link from the WWE home page and filled out a request form inquiring about the number of cameras they used during broadcasts of Smackdown! and RAW. Again, my question was ignored. Apparently, the community culture encouraged on the home page was so much hype.

The WWE has been criticized over the years for promoting violence and crass behavior. The party line or what Feigenbaum refers to as the “canned response” of WWE is that “It’s just entertainment” (159). In 2001, McMahon told Reader’s Digest that his job is to provide entertainment, not parenting advice (Rosellini 143). However, the WWE produces a companion site called WWE Parents, which offers advice to parents about monitoring the programs their children watch. It also warns parents and kids about the dangers of “backyard wrestling.”

The excess evident on the WWE website is not akin to the critical excess that operates in RAW or Smackdown! During the matches, there is “clarity” to the action, which renders it “intelligible” to the audience (Barthes, “The World of Wrestling” 16). It

is incumbent upon the wrestler to “help the [audience’s] reading of the fight by means of gestures, attitudes and mimicry” (Barthes, “The World of Wrestling” 18). The critical excess and gaps of televised wrestling encourage viewers to disengage and scrutinize the text. The website, though excessive in content, operates without the keys of the televised performance and hence the operations are seamless. Seamless commercials. The site works hard to entice visitors to consume its products in excess without questioning the need or reason for the consumption.

The Lords of Pain website offers an excessive amount of information on the wrestling trade. Most of my time on this site was spent in forums where fans could interact and exchange information with each other. I found that many fans wanted to show off their expert knowledge regarding the wrestling industry. The forums attract smart fans by offering them the opportunity to discuss any wrestling related topic. Fans can skim a variety of subject headings, stopping to participate in those they find most appealing. Smart fans engage in performance by asking, answering, embellishing upon, or debating the posted comments of others. They may not think of themselves as performers; however, like those whose actions are transmitted during a news or reality TV show, forum fans produce a self through text that is transmitted (and archived) for public consumption. The forum context frames the fans as public performers (Schechner 261). They also can reflect back on their performances by reviewing and embellishing on what they wrote.

When a fan posed the question, “Can Nick Dunsmore Ever Recover From the Eugene Character?” other fans were quick to interact. Their dialogue included, “Recover? He’s arguably the most popular person on Raw! . . . WHAT MORE could he

possibly want?” “Dinsmore can make it past Eugene, all he needs is a haircut and a little more rip to his body,” “he is always one step away from being unretarded and becoming one of the greatest heels of all times,” and “It would be very simple to get rid of Eugene and still make Nick a new character” (“Can Nick Dunsmore Ever Recover?”). In addition to producing a future for the Dunsmore character through online dialogue, the forum performers invent character names for themselves, under which they post their opinions and recollections. In the discussion noted above, the performers included “The Standard,” “snowman,” “Squirrelzilla,” and “Gypsumstack,” respectively (“Can Nick Dunsmore Ever Recover?”). In Schechner’s terms, the fans’ postings signal “restored behaviors” that are “reflexive and repeatable” and have been observed or enacted “in other contexts” or in other discussion threads (quoted in Stern and Henderson 9).

On the Lords of Pain website, fans are given the opportunity to play a role that they create and construct through their chosen online identity, their comments, and the dialogue they have with others. By means of the site, fans become “writerly” performers and producers of various scenarios, angles, and alternatives to current wrestling developments (Fiske 94). In the thread, “Can Nick Dunsmore Ever Recover From the Eugene Character?” fans speculate on ways that “Eugene” might transform into another character. He could wear a mask, or get injured and return as Eugene’s brother or twin. Others suggest he undergo a physical transformation, such as getting “a haircut” and working out to get “more rip to his body” (“Can Nick Dunsmore Ever Recover?”). The discussion and speculation regarding character or story developments suggest that wrestling fans are already reworking and “poaching” the “commercial narratives” of

wrestling, producing narratives they find more entertaining or socially relevant (Jenkins, Textual Poachers 219-221).

Kayfabe Memories is not as flashy or visually striking as the previous two sites, but the title itself is an operational strategy that invites fans to investigate its content. The words “kayfabe” and “memories” characterize the site as one interested in reliving and analyzing the “good old days” of wrestling before the glitz and hype of sports entertainment. Everything on the site revolves around preserving the past. Discussion posters debate “firsts,” such as which wrestler first used entrance music. Was it Gorgeous George or Beautiful Bobby? Long time fans want to know when others “first got hooked” on wrestling or “whatever happened to” such and so a wrestler. The Kayfabe Memories site allows fans to perform formally or informally, as archivists or historians, preserving wrestling’s largely undocumented history. Many on the site have pieced together their own historical accounts and are eager to share (or sell) their treasures with like minded fans. One fan notes that he developed a “400 PAGE RECORD BOOK/SCRAPBOOK” of Pedro Morales and it “SOLD WELL ON EBAY” (“Pedro Morales”; emphasis in original). Visitors to Kayfabe Memories are preoccupied with wrestling’s past, preferring the “plain old wrestling” of yesteryear to the current WWE product. The site allows them to revel in wrestling nostalgia, glorifying past wrestlers, and reliving their fondest kayfabe memories, while rebuking current wrestling trends and fans. At Kayfabe Memories visitors can restore and conserve a perpetual golden age of wrestling.

Just as Kayfabe Memories implies that “kayfabe” wrestling was better, Bob Liddil states explicitly that he wants to remain a wrestling “mark” who suspends disbelief. On

his site, Gulf Coast Wrestling Magazine, Liddil posts online essays devoted to wrestling in Pensacola, Florida. Liddil appreciates the “worked” aspects of a wrestling match and bemoans the lack of respect shown toward wrestling by local performers and fans. Liddil is critical of Internet posters who complain about the current state of local wrestling. He encourages the “whiners” to get out and “DO SOMETHING TO MAKE WRESTLING BETTER” (Liddil, “We Marks Don’t Care”; emphasis in original). By better, Liddil means more believable, with the illusion intact. He further criticizes local wrestlers and promoters for their lack of imagination and showmanship in creating dynamic characters and interesting match ups.

Unlike those discussed above, Liddil’s site is not interactive. Visitors who access the site are able to read the essays, but there is no forum in which fans can debate or offer feedback to his observations. Liddil attends live events and writes critiques of the wrestling matches and fans. He also observes and interacts with fans at other websites and then, on his own site, opines on what they say about wrestling. Liddil’s posted essays then are subject to analysis and further discussion by other wrestling insiders and researchers.

Bob Liddil understands and appreciates the training and work that go into a wrestling performance. He admires wrestlers who sacrifice their bodies, and promoters who risk their own money staging wrestling events. Liddil is a smart fan, who wants to enjoy wrestling as a mark. He operates as a performance critic and seeks representational realism in the ring. For Liddil, wrestling’s operations should never reveal themselves to the audience, no matter the circumstances. The illusion is all and if wrestlers will do their job, the “marks” in the audience will provide the necessary “heat.”

Each of the above sites operates in unique ways that work to attract various fans to them. The WWE site offers an excess of products and information that conceals critical gaps and works against audience scrutiny. The Lords of Pain and Kayfabe Memories sites encourage visitors to engage in a critical assessment of wrestling aesthetics. One privileges contemporary wrestling and the other wrestling nostalgia. Finally, Bob Liddil's Gulf Coast Wrestling Magazine focuses on wrestling and representational realism. Liddil desires matches that hide their operations and encourage his and other "marks" suspension of disbelief.

CHAPTER SIX CONCLUSION

. . . and when I say hardcore I mean **HARDCORE**. We are the craziest bunch of wrestlers you will ever see. You may think the stuff you see on T.V. is hardcore, but we laugh at their pulled punches and fake moves. (Hardcore Wrestling Union – The Most Insane Wrestling Ever)

I began this study intent on identifying elements in the performance of professional wrestling that expose their operations to wrestling fans in ways that interrupt the real life illusion that wrestling aims to portray. Throughout the study, my concern has been to identify and evaluate the wrestling components that disrupt the audience's total immersion in the wrestling illusion and, instead, enable and even encourage the audience to enjoy "the sheer exhilaration of debate" and "the utter fun of the opportunity to learn [about] and evaluate" the wrestling subject (Harris 75). I have described and analyzed wrestling's aesthetic and organizational development from the post Civil War era through the early twenty-first century, and I have offered detailed descriptions and analyses of wrestling performances in three contexts, contemporary live events, televised matches, and Internet sites dedicated to the wrestling trade.

To conclude, I turn my attention to a relatively recent phenomenon in wrestling culture. Not content to just attend live events or watch wrestling on television, some wrestling fans, particularly teenagers and young adults, have appropriated many of the conventions of wrestling to construct and enact their own performances.

Backyard Wrestling

It is reasonable to assume that many kids, wrestling fans or not, have play-wrestled at some time in their lives with a sibling, friend, or parent. I recall rasslin' when I was quite young in the "ring" defined by a bed or backyard. Sometimes, the play was

simply the “rough housing” that young boys practice in order to discover, test, and compare their masculinity, strength, and athletic abilities. My friends and I were not emulating television wrestling necessarily, but demonstrating how tough we were and our ability to defend ourselves. Other times, however, my friends and I did pretend to be the wrestlers we saw regularly on local TV, such as Mike “the Hippie” Boyett, Cowboy Bob Kelly, Rocket Monroe, or the Big Blue Yankee.

Today, the term “backyard wrestling” or “extreme backyard wrestling” refers to a practice that is quite different from the rough and tumble play I knew as a child, although television wrestling still inspires much of it. I first learned of backyard wrestling several years ago when I saw television commercials for a videotape called Backyard Wrestling. Viewers could buy the tape by going online or calling a 1-800 telephone number. The commercials showed what appeared to be young men in their late teens and early twenties, staging violent stunts in and around makeshift wrestling rings in their backyards. During the ads, guys cracked one another on the back and legs with chairs and trash can lids. They smashed long fluorescent light bulbs over each other’s heads and leapt off of roofs or ladders onto car hoods, tables, and sheets of plywood. I recall one clip showed a young man with a string of firecrackers exploding on his body. Although I have not seen the commercials in some time, videos of backyard wrestling are still available on the Internet. A quick search of Amazon.com, an Internet site that sells books, compact discs, videotapes, and DVD’s, reveals multiple videos that are available for purchase. They include Backyard Wrestling Volumes 1 and 2, The Best of Backyard Wrestling Vol. 1: Future Kings of the Ring, and The Best of Backyard Wrestling Vol. 4:

Random Acts of Violence. Another video called Backyard Wrestling: Unscarred offers the following promotion:

Get prepared to witness this All-NEW never-before-seen Backyard Wrestling Superstar Series showcase of legendary hardcore icon “Sick Nick Mondo” totally exposed! From unbelievable, ultraviolent, blood soaked, death-defying wrestling action that has shocked fans all across the globe to outrageous stunts, behind-the-scenes interviews, never-before-seen footage and side-splitting pranks caught on tape, experience first hand why – despite the road-map of battle wounds he sports on his body – “Sick Nick” has miraculously remained “Unscarred” throughout his years of hardcore fame and glory! (Amazon.com)

A CBS Evening News reporter observed a backyard match and described it as, “violent, but [it] pales in comparison to the violence in ‘backyard wrestling videotapes’ marketed on the Internet” (“Dangerous Backyard Wrestling”). The number of backyard wrestlers “across suburban American” that practice high risk stunts and excessive violence is difficult to determine (“Dangerous Backyard Wrestling”). Some revel in inflicting real pain and injury, while others create an illusion of violence through timing and cooperation. But, CBS reports that kids have been “injured unnecessarily” (“Dangerous Backyard Wrestling”), and Rick Reilly writes in Sports Illustrated that “30-year-old Tony Nash died his first time in a makeshift ring” (98).

In addition to copying the holds and maneuvers used by professional wrestlers, backyard combatants beat one another with all sorts of items including “steel chairs, kendo sticks, trash cans, stop signs, guitars, snow shovels, crutches, [and] ladders” (Reilly 98). One eighteen year old notes that, during a backyard match, “if you can pick it up, you can use it” (“Dangerous Backyard Wrestling”). Backyard wrestlers also develop their own signature moves to stun or finish off an opponent. At a website called Intense Backyard Wrestling (IBW), the IBW “superstars” have profiles with their photos, vital statistics (e.g., height, weight, career accomplishments), and finishing moves. For

example, Jordan “The Titan” Stamy has the “Titan Clutch,” Marty Matthews (“the current IBW Midwest Champion”) uses the “Marty Massacre,” and Philip Flawless employs the “Flawless Finisher” (Intense Backyard Wrestling).

Many backyard wrestling club (BWC) websites describe their organizations as “extreme” or “hard core,” but such language appears to be adolescent bravado for the most part. On the National Public Radio program, All Things Considered, Alex Spiegel reports that a teen wrestler informed him that “the beatings are relatively harmless” (“Profile: Backyard Wrestling Clubs”). Spiegel proceeds to describe,

Like professional wrestling, the winner of every . . . contest is decided beforehand. And most matches are choreographed so that no one gets seriously hurt. . . . Like professional wrestling, the fighting is a strange mix of theater and sport, part violence, part dance, part flat-out comedy. The boys grimace and yell, but most of it doesn’t look very dangerous. Two other boys stand by the video camera in the corner and shout out a rolling play by play. (“Profile: Backyard Wrestling Clubs”)

As regards their organization, the IBW confirms Spiegel’s report. On their home page, the members describe IBW as:

. . . a backyard wrestling organization operating out of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, which has roots dating back to late 1999, early 2000. We are [a] technical federation and by no means hardcore. Think about it, how many backyard wrestling federations have you seen claiming to be hardcore? There are almost too many to count. We here in IBW take pride in displaying our technical wrestling abilities and we don’t feel the need to bash each other over the head with light bulbs, or light tables on fire and powerbomb somebody through them. Not to take anything away from hardcore backyard wrestling federations. They are damn good at what they do and very entertaining. However, that is just not what we are about. (Intense Backyard Wrestling)

Unfortunately, the BWCs that get the most media attention are the ones that “smack one another with a bat wrapped in barbed wire. Or set up a Death Table, which is a piece of plywood stretched between two folding chairs with the plywood wrapped in barbed wire, covered in fluorescent bulbs, littered with tacks, doused with lighter fluid

and set on fire” (Reilly 98). I can only speculate, but I suspect that most BWCs are not nearly so reckless.

No matter how reckless or tame a BWC may be, the WWE takes a dim view of backyard wrestling and warns the public against trying to replicate the practices of professional wrestlers. In the CBS report, WWE representative, Gary Davis, tows the corporate line when he cautions, “When you see some of these teenagers in these makeshift backyard rings saying they’re doing the same type of things, well, they are not, because we aren’t dropping people on their heads. The bottom line is, don’t try this at home, don’t try this at school, just sit back and enjoy the entertainment” (“Dangerous Backyard Wrestling”). In other words, be a WWE consumer mark. The WWE Parents web site extends a similar message:

WWE is adamantly opposed to the concept of “backyard wrestling” because of the risk of injury to untrained amateurs. Our events are conducted in a safe environment and executed by highly trained athletic professionals. Any attempt by our fans to emulate our Superstars physicality is extremely dangerous and irresponsible. Parents should let their loved ones know that practicing “backyard wrestling” is not a path to WWE Superstardom. When we receive videotapes from backyard wrestlers, the tapes are returned, unviewed. We encourage parents to take a proactive role in the activities of their teens and children to ensure their safety. WWE has sponsored a public service announcement during our programming to alert and educate children, teens and parents about the dangers of re-enacting the athletic moves of our professional performers. (WWE Parents)

Despite the warnings, BWCs continue to create and perform wrestling events of their own. Further, just like WWE fans, BWC fans can attend live matches, buy BWC videos, and visit websites devoted to BWCs. Similar to the WWE website, BWC websites list their rosters of superstars, championship title holders, upcoming matches, and post interviews with the wrestlers.

I was particularly impressed by the Intense Backyard Wrestling (IBW) website. Although it appears the producers are high school students, their site is sophisticated and polished in subject matter, layout, and design. It includes links to photos of their matches, an IBW history, wrestler biographies and interviews, an archive of match results, a schedule of upcoming and special events, and a message board where visitors can post comments. They also load their “pay-per-view” special events video onto the site. Below, is an excerpt from an interview with IBW wrestlers, The Staminator and Marty Matthews. It appeared under the headline, “We are the best thing going today . . . it’s as simple as that” (Intense Backyard Wrestling).

INTENSEBW.8M.COM: First off, how are you guys doing after [the wrestling match] “Double Crossed?”

The Staminator: I am The Staminator. I am always doing great.

Marty Matthews: I guess you could say I am doing a lot better than I was before.

INTENSEBW.8M.COM: I must ask the question on everyone’s mind right now. Why, of all people, would you two guys form an alliance at “Double Crossed?”

The Staminator: Well, it’s pretty simple if you think about it. You have two guys, myself, and Marty Matthews. We both hold IBW gold. Let’s face it, if you don’t have gold in the IBW, you are a nobody. One day, Marty came to me about fooling all the IBW fans and forming an alliance. I must say, I wasn’t too keen on the idea at first but it later grew on me and I would have been stupid if I would have said no.

Marty Matthews: The idea itself was pretty crazy when I first thought of it but the more I thought of it, the more it made sense. I mean you got two guys here that hated each other and showed it at the past IBW events. This was a great plan and in addition to forming the alliance, we made sure that we didn’t lose our gold at “Double Crossed.”

INTENSEBW.8M.COM: So Staminator, when did Marty come to you about this idea?

The Staminator: It's actually pretty funny to think about it right now. Right before the return of IBW last year in 2002, when we had the big "Battle Royal," Marty came to me about this idea. We decided to "plant the seed" so to speak at that very event. Marty told me he would job to me right off the bat in order for me to win the IBW Heavyweight Title later in the show. Marty then came back out, attacked me, I attacked him back, it was brilliant. It looked like we hated each others guts. Then at the shows following the "Battle Royal," we kept showing the hatred between each other, screwing each other out of matches and so on and so forth. The IBW fans were so stupid, they thought we really hated each other.

INTENSEBW.8M.COM: So you mean to tell me that Marty lost to you on purpose in the Battle Royal? And it was also a plan for him to win the Midwest Title when you hit Tommy Hill?

The Staminator: *laughs*

Marty Matthews: Looks like you figured it all out.

INTENSE8W.8M.COM: Alright, let's switch gears. What do you say to the critics of IBW? Some say that "Double Crossed" had a horrible ending for such a big build up.

The Staminator: I could care less about what people think. The ending wasn't meant to be fair. That was the whole point. What made it even better is that we got that stupid "Hot Property" Wyatt Blackford guy to think we actually hated each other.

Marty Matthews: "Hot Property" Wyatt Blackford made the ultimate mistake of putting trust in me. I saw that weakness and I went after it as the weeks went by leading up to "Double Crossed." Not only did we fool Wyatt, but we fooled the rest of the IBW fans. It's a great feeling. (Intense Backyard Wrestling)

In the above excerpt, the IBW performers call on the intra-cultural language of wrestling insiders to compose and engage the readers in a writerly producer text. That is, the IBW interview exposes components in (WWE) professional wrestling, IBW events, and also the interview itself as constructed illusions and they invite readers to scrutinize the same; to investigate the operations of "the real" (Fiske 94). Readers are treated as "members of a semiotic democracy" able to bring their own competencies to bear and

motivated by pleasure to participate in the process” of investigation and sense making (Fiske 95).

When The Staminator says, “Marty told me he would job to me right off the bat, in order for me to win the IBW Heavyweight Title” (Intense Backyard Wrestling), he signals to the reader that the match was a work. “To job” is to lose voluntarily, usually to help push or enhance the image of another wrestler (Feigenbaum 306). In other words, Marty and The Staminator contrived an “angle” very like those used throughout the history of professional wrestling. Marty jobbed for The Staminator, meaning he lost to him. Then, front stage for the public, the two wrestlers pretended to hate each other, establishing a vicious rivalry, which apparently the IBW fans believed. Then, Marty and The Staminator teamed up to “double cross” Wyatt Blackford. In response to the “surprising” exposure of a predetermined plan, the incredulous interviewer asks, “So you mean to tell me that Marty lost to you on purpose in the Battle Royal? And it was also a plan for him [Marty] to win the Midwest Title when you [The Staminator] hit Tommy Hill?” (Intense Backyard Wrestling). The Staminator *laughs* in highlighted quotation marks and, with sarcasm, Marty congratulates the interviewer for being able to figure out the scam.

Readers of the text bring their own idiosyncratic knowledge of professional wrestling’s “kayfabe” past to the text, associate it with what they know of IBW, and take pleasure in scrutinizing the subject matter (i.e., the wrestling angle IBW invented and performed), and its discursive agency, the interview itself. After all, the interview is posted on the IBW home page, which frames it as a double voiced, double cross too. It casts the illusion that it is a spontaneous discussion between the two wrestlers and an

“impartial” journalist, who exposes the illusion of impartiality by using the IBW web address as his name. Wink wink. As parodic discourse, the text implies the producers’ investigation of how professional wrestling promotes itself through interview segments (in multiple media), which they pirate and turn to their own use. Simultaneously, they parody the operations of the wrestling angle or scam.

The IBW group and other backyard wrestling clubs take their cue from the operations of professional wrestling. In the past and currently, professional wrestling has worked angles in order to stimulate fan interest: Gotch, the Iowa farm boy, versus Hack, the Russian physical culturist; the All-American hero versus the foreign menace; Highbrow elite versus lowbrow populace; Urban versus rural; Good old boy versus the manipulative tart. The Angle and Jericho “beat down” of Triple H teased the audience – a knowledgeable audience with an abundance of prior knowledge and discursive competencies – so as to increase interest in the featured match that was to occur later in the program and also to anticipate the championship match at WrestleMania! months later. Like the WWE, the IBW plotted and executed an angle over several matches, grounding it in a battle for the coveted IBW championship title. Also, like the WWE, the IBW promoted and marketed the angle by means of various technological and discursive mediums, such as live events, video, the Internet, wrestler profiles, ad campaigns, and interviews.

Another component in the IBW interview that bears scrutiny concerns the performers’ familiarity with the practice of wrestlers generating “heat” and, in this case, “heel heat” for themselves from their fans. After discussing the angle, The Staminator and Marty gloat that their plan worked perfectly. They were able to fool, or double cross,

“that stupid . . . Wyatt Blackford guy” and “the rest of the IBW fans” (Intense Backyard Wrestling). The Staminator declares that he “could care less what people think” about the outcome of the match, as long as they were duped and, thereby, they understood that “the ending wasn’t meant to be fair. That was the whole point” (Intense Backyard Wrestling). According to the pair, they were successful in fooling their audience but, just to make sure their fans understood the “point” of the double cross, they state it here, in their interview. In a sense, the IBW attempts to educate the marks in their audience, so as to explain why they might have found the ending “horrible” after “such a big build up” (Intense Backyard Wrestling). Thereby too, they highlight the same operations in professional wrestling.

On the one hand, then, the IBW producers advance the sport and performance of wrestling as an illusionist practice. They wanted to fool their audience. Furthermore, on their website, they describe themselves as wrestlers who take pride in their “technical wrestling ability” (Intense Backyard Wrestling). They eschew excessive violence and the “cheap heat” of sensationalist gimmicks, such as using light bulbs, folding chairs, shovels, and ladders. Their emphasis on athletic skill and discipline suggests that in their live matches they try to create the kind of realistic wrestling illusion that Bob Liddil would appreciate. Furthermore, they kept their angle under wraps until the “Double Cross” match occurred.

On the other hand, the title of the match and the subject and style of their online interview demonstrate their deliberate exposure of the very illusions they and professional wrestling generally create. They perform both to uphold the illusionist tradition of wrestling and to show they are not dupes concerning it. They understand the

operations in all their complexity, are able to reproduce or restore them through performance, and also form an opinion regarding them, as evidenced by their choice of wrestling style and their parodic play in the interview. So, while they understand that the sport of wrestling is “fake,” they appreciate the performance of it greatly. Like Harris’s mid nineteenth century audience, they find “the encounter with . . . frauds [i.e., with performance as not not real] exciting” and worthy of their investment (Harris 75). And, like Brecht’s ideal spectator, they prove to be experts of both sport and performance.

The IBW is a microcosm of many of the operations at work in professional wrestling and discussed throughout the study. Whether intentional or not, the operational aesthetic of professional wrestling exposes “the work” of sports entertainment and to the extent that the IBW performers can investigate it and, by means of their physical and discursive performances, evaluate, challenge, and make inventive use of it. While the fans who attend live events, who watch televised matches, and who go online to discuss professional wrestling do not perform wrestling operations to the same degree as do the IBW, still their performances exhibit a similar ability to navigate the complexities of a professional wrestling performance. They cheer and boo with a double voice, producing pleasurable meanings for themselves through critical detachment and critical detachment through pleasure.

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