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Let's Talk Wrestling: Perspectives on Age, Injury, and Illness in Sports Entertainment

This interview has been edited for length and clarity. It is a conversation between a husband and wife, whose distinct but complementary perspectives on wrestling are influenced by their educational and professional backgrounds, as well as the age at which they were introduced to the sport. Frank is a life-long fan with an encyclopedic knowledge of wrestling and a carefully curated collection of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) and World Wrestling Federation (WWF) memorabilia. He is a former personal trainer and current physical education teacher with an undergraduate degree in Kinesiology. Joey is a psychiatrist specializing in reproductive mental health. She is an avid consumer of literature, theatre, and popular culture. Though always a fan of Andre the Giant in *The Princess Bride*, she only became a wrestling fan fifteen years ago, when she met Frank. Joey's sister, Nevena, is a theatre and performance studies scholar working in the field of age studies, who provided the guiding questions for this conversation, edited the final piece, and provided a reflection on their conversation through the lens of her academic work and lived experience.

This interview was conducted in early December 2022.

Joey: You've been a fan of wrestling for over thirty years. How has that shaped your image of aging?

Frank: Just like in other sports, you get better later in your career, but there are much older people still wrestling than playing professional baseball – [Vince] McMahon was fifty-two when he first entered the ring.¹ When Hulk Hogan hit his second prime in the late nineties with World Championship Wrestling (WCW), he was forty years old and as a small child, that seemed old.

Joey: Do you think about that right now? That you're about the same age that some of these wrestlers were in their prime, when they were winning title belts?

Frank: Well, it makes you appreciate the amount of time it takes to get there, but, at the same time, it's more challenging when you're thirty-five trying to do what you were doing when you were twenty.² Then there's someone like Ric Flair, who I think has wrestled in five different decades.

Joey: What do you think when you see him?

Frank: He has this very glorified image, because he started wrestling at a time when it was popular, but not consistently being recorded.

Joey: Yeah, there's so much more footage of Flair as an older wrestler and less of him at his peak: his physical, young adult male prime.

¹ His first match was at *Monday Night Raw* on April 13, 1998.

² Though he is discussing professional wrestlers, Frank is also speaking personally here, as a thirty-five-year-old man, who had three knee operations in his twenties.

Frank: That's true. He also has the years of experience, which is such a great theatrical thing for storylines. He's the underdog because he's older, but he's also the guy with the most world titles.

Joey: What is the message there with aging?

Frank: I think the message is you can continue to do something into your "twilight years", whether that's your fifties, sixties or seventies, because you're so skilled and established at it by that point in time. And wrestling is somewhat controlled, so Ric doesn't have to be able to do everything. If he wanted to do a match with someone who does a lot of flips, then that guy would take all the bumps³, not Ric. So, he could still do that. That's why wrestling is so cool.

Joey: What do you think counts as old in wrestling?

Frank: Sliding scale, old now can be sixty to seventy and still wrestle.

Joey: What's prime?

Frank: I would say twenty-eight to thirty-five.

Joey: And what's the age when you really need to step out of the ring, because you're done, buddy?

Frank: Any time after you're fifty.

Joey: What do you think your life is going to be like in your fifties and the years beyond that? How is that coloured by being a wrestling fan?

Frank: I think I should be able to work out until my seventies and eighties, and guys like Ric Flair are a big inspiration for that. Flair is still able to, you know, move around and have good cardio and be in the ring. It might not look as pretty as it used to be, but he is still in there! It's doable. It's nice not to be the first person to do it. It's nice to have some people to look up to and have role models that have gone through or done something inspirational to you.

Joey: It also strikes me that wrestling offers a model for getting older and leaving a legacy, bringing the next generation into wrestling in some way.

Frank: Yes, leaving a lasting legacy is an important aspect for sure. Wrestling offers you a lot of great examples of that. And then not only leaving your own legacy, but providing something for the next generation to leave their own legacy, like Charlotte Flair.

Joey: Speaking of Ric Flair—

Frank: Woo!

Joey: —he was also extremely injured outside of the ring. In 1975, he was in that plane crash and he was actually really badly injured. What was coverage about that like at the time?

Frank: You wouldn't know about it unless you were in that town and read that newspaper.

Joey: Really? How does that compare that to now, when you can't escape knowing that he almost died in 2017 and came back?

Frank: That builds sympathy for him, that's a great character trait.

Joey: What did it mean for you as a fan to know everything as it was happening about Ric Flair's health and then to see him come back?

Frank: I was worried that he was going to die and that would just be the end of it. And it would be another wrestler who was great, then just died. But that's not the case. Ric

³Bump is the term used for when a wrestler hits the mat.

was able to thrive and be a good example of the old school pro wrestler, the Roddy Piper kind of wrestling.

Joey: What do you mean by “another wrestler who was great, then just died”?

Frank: In the nineties and even through the 2000s, so many wrestlers were dying young—way before their time—from complications of steroid abuse, drug abuse and cardiovascular disease. Someone you watched every night would all of the sudden just be gone.

Joey: During Ric’s illness, did they did build that in as part of his narrative, that he survived this?

Frank: They commented on it on *Raw* once, that he was in the Intensive Care Unit, and then another comment that he’s getting better, but that’s the extent of it.

Joey: They didn’t build it into the narrative, like nothing can take him down, he’s basically unkillable?

Frank: Some things they don’t.

Joey: How does it feel when someone you watched every night would suddenly be gone?

Frank: It feels like a tremendous loss. When you're watching wrestling every night as a kid, you start to fall in love with these wrestlers, and they become like your friends, and you think of them like people in your life, because you get to see them so regularly. In 1992, you’re able to watch the Texas Tornado every day and then one day in 93, he's just dead. He's gone.

Joey: Did it feel surprising that these people could die when they were so much larger than life?

Frank: Oh, yeah, absolutely for sure. I think wrestling makes you aware of getting injured and how little time you actually have. I think being a kid, watching wrestling, made me think about exercises and working out, being active and loving to do that. Taking schooling in that and focusing a lot of my time and effort into stuff that’s physically active. I would say that’s a good thing. Keeps you aware that when you do live a long time, you should keep doing things.

Joey: So, what do you think is the impact of guys like Bret Hart who talk really openly and critically about how bad it is that some of the wrestlers aren’t thoughtful and careful enough about taking care of other guys physically? Do you think that makes Bret Hart seem not macho enough, not tough enough?⁴

Frank: No, no, no. Not at all. I think Bret would tell you, “You’re a really good wrestler because you don’t hurt anyone. That’s what makes you a really good wrestler. You shouldn’t do something where you’re going to end someone’s life based on one movement.” As a fan, that’s the way I perceive it. That they’re taking care of each other because if they were actually getting injured at every moment, then the match wouldn't continue. I think that wrestling teaches you about taking care of yourself and your own body, and also other people.

Joey: What do you think you've learned from wrestling about getting injured and recovering from injury?

Frank: My mindset is that regardless of the degree of the injury you can always make a comeback. Injuries happen to everyone. There are so many guys that got injured, and

⁴ Starrcast. “Sharpshooter Bret Hart in His Own Words.” *Starrcast*, 25 May. 2019, <https://www.fite.tv/watch/sharpshooter-bret-hart/2otzy/>

then came back and their comeback was better than before they were injured. Part of what I learned from wrestling was that there's always the potential for the comeback and you can come back even stronger. So with my own injuries, I have had to like change the way I do things. I was running all the time, and now with my knee injury, I'm not running anymore. Which feels like a huge loss, but, again, you have to be adaptable.

Joey: And do you think that you have accepted that?

Frank: No, I didn't accept it unconditionally. I understand that if I want my knees to be good 10-20 years from now, it's better that I don't do things that I've been told not to do, but I've also held onto hope that doctors don't know everything, and that people who were told that they couldn't come back have made these huge comebacks. I think when you watch something on TV a lot, you start to treat the world around you kind of in the way that you see in television. You learn that anything you really want, or that you love doing, there is a little bit of struggle. It's not always success; it isn't always a linear path. So wrestling does teach you that it's not how many times you fall down, it's how many times you get back up. It's also about showing up to work every day, and having a purpose. I think, with my own injuries, I would just try to work harder and get it better.

Joey: You didn't watch wrestling matches live until you were older. What was it like to see them live vs on TV or tape?

Frank: Live is more exciting in the moment, but the views are not as good, and the cuts are not as good. Watching it on the TV screen with all the cuts and all the right audio makes things so much better.

Joey: You like the fully staged, crafted experience.

Frank: And the consistency. One of the nice things about growing up watching wrestling is that it's on all the time. If you're having a good week or a bad week, it's not gonna be cancelled, you know, and no other sport is like that. Other major sports have their off season and wrestling never does. And it's comforting that it's always around.

Joey: You describe wrestling as this solid, reliable presence in your childhood that was gonna show up with regularity and predictability, and there's also this wholeheartedness and joy that I see in how you embrace wrestling. I don't know if you think of it that way, but sometimes I think about wrestling as having value in terms of imagination and play, both for kids and adults. You started watching with your dad and you're going to be a dad any day now. Where do you think wrestling will take you as you get older?

Frank: It will be an integral part. January doesn't have to be New Year's, it's Royal Rumble season, and April is Wrestlemania season, and you know, summer is Summerslam, then November is Survivor Series. Those are your staple pay per views. When you have that, you can start building all these traditions.

Joey: When you're watching wrestling, in terms of your own life and aging, do you think about your dad?

Frank: Yeah, I think about my dad a lot more when I see someone that we would talk about – like Shawn Michaels or Hulk Hogan. Those are nice little moments for me. Nostalgia is big.

Joey: And nostalgia is not just wrestling's past but your past.

Frank: Well, wrestling is me.

What interested me about this piece was the contrasting perspectives on wrestling as performance and how that impacted perceptions of injury and age. My introduction to professional wrestling emerged from a background in theatre; I read Roland Barthes' "The World of Wrestling" (1972) *before* I started enjoying the sport recreationally. I'm drawn to the commitment to kayfabe in wrestling and enjoy the violence *because* it is choreographed—the same way that violence in movies and television has the potential for injury and even tragedy but is performed by trained stunt people. Obviously, this is different to how Frank experienced wrestling growing up as an undoubting child viewer and how Joey approaches it as a practicing physician. Yet, Frank's preference for the edited final production over the ephemeral live performance surprised me, as did his commentary on the narrative strength of the comeback. Like Frank, I love a good comeback story, but I have always enjoyed it from a distance. It never occurred to me that *I* could inhabit the comeback narrative; I didn't recognize that as a practical possibility or even a mentality that could have a positive impact on my own injury recovery.

In an excised section of the conversation Frank spoke about his childhood wrestling ambitions and mentioned Bret Hart:

I think everyone who watches wrestling thinks they're going to be a wrestler when they grow up. I think the easiest guy for that is Bret Hart. Bret Hart seems like the type of guy you can be: he seems like an everyday guy, who just happens to be a wrestler. Whereas, with Andre the Giant... you couldn't just be Andre the Giant. You couldn't see yourself in Andre.

Though he didn't become a wrestler, growing up watching wrestling and seeing himself in Hart has impacted how Frank approaches life. Wrestling provided Frank with representations of injury and old age that didn't align with the oft-witnessed narratives of decline. As a result, he understands his knee injuries as temporary obstacles, and he sees himself in the gym at eighty.

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