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When was the Last Time that You Heard of Ian McKellen Blowing out His Knee? The Performance and Practice of Risk in British Professional Wrestling

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“When was the last time that you heard of Ian McKellen blowing out his knee?”: the performance and practice of risk in British professional wrestling

As part of the 2019 Bodies of Knowledge project, a wrestler, a gymnast, a wrestling promoter, a dancer, a choreographer and an academic got talking about risk.

“I think there is always a risk,” said the wrestler, “as in a creative risk. I like risky performers, as in people who take chances. Not dangerous chances, but creative chances” (Purseglove 2021: 86).

The dancer responded: “Some of the risks are just around negotiating how you apply your own embodiments, or put them up for sale” (Purseglove 2021: 87).

The conversation continued: “Does there have to be a real threat or a real risk, though?” asked the choreographer of the wrestler (Purseglove 2021: 89). It’s about the relationship between the “real and performed”, said the promoter (Purseglove 2021: 90); is it about “failure”, considered the academic, or about the various ways we “participate”?, asked the gymnast (Purseglove 2021: 91-2).

While trying to uncover a shared language, we realised that risk, though multifaceted and fraught, was recognizable to all participants as embedded within their varied practices.

This article extends the conversation, moving it from the speculative to the substantive. It emerges from the 2020/21 British Academy-funded project Health and Wellbeing in Professional Wrestling which forged a collaboration between academics and artists across the sport-art divide to study that most maligned and overlooked of popular culture performance forms: professional wrestling. With a background of relevant publications and practices,¹ the project aimed to take a supportive health check of British independent professional wrestling, though the investigators imagined the findings as having repercussions for global wrestling and, indeed, for other sports and art forms that share characteristics with wrestling practice.

This project unexpectedly increased in importance and relevance. First, the COVID pandemic halted live sport and performance for months. Professional

¹ Publications include: Broderick Chow, Eero Laine and Claire Warden, *Performance and Professional Wrestling* (Routledge 2016); Dominic Malcolm, *The Concussion Crisis in Sport* (Routledge, 2020); Anthony Papatomas, *The Very Alternative Guide to Spinal Cord Injury* (Easy on the Eye, 2017). As this article identifies, the project’s association with the Wrestling Resurgence collective, set up in 2017, is vital to the success of this project.

wrestling in Britain was held in abeyance and, as we write, is only slowly emerging. This provided an opportunity to stand back and assess current health and wellbeing challenges and commit to returning in safer ways. Second, professional wrestling, like the film industry and US Gymnastics to name but two, had its own reckoning, calling out sexual abuse, bullying and predatory behavior under the hashtag #SpeakingOut. This gave urgency to UK Government ministers, namely Alex Davies-Jones MP and Mark Fletcher MP, and their plans to set up an All-Party Parliamentary Group on Professional Wrestling (APPG) to which this project has provided valuable data. Accessing information and advice from academics, medics and industry workers, the APPG report addressed risk in an expansive way: the absence of risk assessments (2021: 7); the risk of injury was used as the reason to not exclusively read wrestling as similar to ballroom dancing (though the similarities are, of course, apposite) (2021: 28); the lack of regulatory control caused “risks...both to individuals, to the industry as a whole and its reputation” (2021: 34); there is always (as in sport and performance more generally) the “risk of being taken advantage of” (2021: 43). The APPG report “welcome[d] and strongly commend[ed]” the Health and Wellbeing in Professional Wrestling project, anticipating that the data that emerged might substantiate a number of these claims. “Whilst the data [from the project] will be gathered and processed,” the APPG report said, “our considered view is that whilst there is some good practice which we have sought to highlight, there is presently an unacceptable level of risk and provision in relation to the health, safety and general welfare of British independent wrestling talent” (52). Now the data is gathered, this article attempts to bring nuance to the broad idea of risk identified by the APPG report.

The Health and Wellbeing in Professional Wrestling project conducted seventeen long-form interviews with wrestlers, medics, trainers, promoters and referees. This adds up to over 24 hours of conversation. The interviews were semi-structured, free to follow the interests and experiences of the subject. This will be the second article from the study, with the first having focused specifically on concussion.² In November 2021, we organized a symposium event to bring together academics, promoters and trainers to share the findings of the project and to begin to map out the next steps and, in November 2022, the team presented the data at a co-convened conference with the APPG and innovative training school Playfight at the Houses of Parliament, London. This has recently led to co-organised events on concussion and contributions to parliamentary debates on professional wrestling and licensing.

² See Malcolm, Dominic; Anthony Papatomas and Claire Warden, ‘Concussion in professional wrestling: agency, structure and cultural change’, *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* (February 2023): <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/2159676X.2023.2175898>

This article contributes to a genealogy of wrestling scholarship that is embedded in the wrestling industry to a greater or lesser extent. While academics such as Sharon Mazer (Second Edition 2020), Broderick Chow (2014) and R. Tyson Smith (2008a, 2008b) approach their subject matter in different ways, all of them actively position themselves (partly at least) within the industry. Greg Hollin (2018) extends this approach by researching wrestling's health and wellbeing challenges alongside those of other sports. Influenced by these scholars, *Health and Wellbeing in Professional Wrestling* demanded a different sort of relationship between two disconnected institutions – the academy and professional wrestling – a relationship that began in earnest in 2017 when two of the authors of this article co-founded (with John Kirby) Wrestling Resurgence, a collaborative project created by arts professionals and academics, that nurtures a place for wrestling in the arts and cultural sector alongside forms such as contemporary dance and small-scale theatre. Resurgence has changed the demographics of art centre visitors and secured three Arts Council grants to fund various ambitious side projects.³ Resurgence works with some of the UK's best wrestlers and has developed the trusted relationships demanded for this current project.

Accordingly, the interviews were planned combining approaches from a variety of disciplines. Semi-structured interviews are regularly used to gather data in sport and exercise science. However, we developed this further using what Brett Smith and Andrew Sparkes term the “life-story interview”. This format differs from typical semi-structured techniques in that there is a “focus on actively working to invite stories, not just information, a set of accounts, or list of reports” (105). While our interviews did have some structure, based around a series of predetermined questions that, we hoped, would enable the team to discern key themes and trends, we were conscious of the need to give voice to a marginalized group of people, namely British professional wrestlers. This story-based approach seemed particularly important given wrestling's liminal identity. It is never easy to discern between, for want of better words, the real and the fake in professional wrestling; as the PI co-wrote in *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, “what is false, true, and merely playing true (or playing false)” (Chow, Laine and Warden 2016: 3). Indeed, the fuzziness between these two seemingly opposing concepts in this popular culture form is one of its most interesting features. So, the interviews, by necessity, were far less about determining factual accuracy than about hearing the wrestlers' stories and their own perceptions of health and wellbeing. We combined this, at least in part, with Henry Jenkins's notion of the “aca-fan” (2013), that is the acceptance that a fannish approach to the subject (an approach taken by the PI and doctoral researcher here, though not initially by the CIs from sport and exercise sciences) could benefit the

³ The most recent of these is the *Theatre of Wrestling*. The films from this project can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=er94F7QmGQk>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FHZfNdB2v7s>

research rather than hinder it. This project, then, required not only a knowledge of professional wrestling, but connections built up through the Resurgence initiative. In this way, the project was practice-informed by necessity. This approach meant not only that the team (or at least the PI) could ask the most probing questions but, with their in-depth knowledge of the convolutions of professional wrestling, could avoid simply asking the obvious.

Risk on the pitch and on the stage

Risk is synonymous with twenty-first-century experience and consciousness. Precarious work, high levels of debt, climate change, pandemics: human beings have confronted risk from the beginning, but our contemporary world seems particularly risky and, because of modern, global communication methods, inescapable. At the same time, we are also deeply risk averse. We complete risk assessments; car companies aim to produce the safest vehicles possible; we carry personal safety alarms. Paradoxically, we also seek risk. We drive too quickly, take hallucinogenics, have illicit affairs. We also politicize risk. We demand the right to protect ourselves, or not to protect ourselves; the firearms debate in the US, our complaints about red tape and ‘health and safety gone mad’; even, most recently, heated disagreements about facemasks and vaccinations. The world is currently weighing up risk and the costs to our civil liberties.

In Stephen Lyng’s terminology, following Hunter S. Thompson, contemporary society is defined by “edgework”, the taking of risks:

In one perspective, edgework is seen as a means of freeing oneself from social conditions that deaden or deform the human spirit through overwhelming social regulations and control. In the other perspective, edgework valorizes risk-taking propensities and skills in demand throughout the institutional structures of the risk society. Thus, in one view, edgeworkers seek to escape institutional constraints that have become intolerable; in the other, edgeworkers strive to better integrate themselves into the existing institutional environment (2004: 9).

On the one hand, then, edgework can be seen as a rejection of societal norms: jumping off a bridge, running an ultramarathon. In this sense, edgeworkers recognise each other as kindred spirits, resisting the comparative safe mundanity of the contemporary. Yet, paradoxically, risk is also the way we fit into society, the way the banker climbs the corporate ladder or the way the tech billionaires prove their mettle. It was the driving force for the movers and shakers at Enron, for example, or Elizabeth Holmes’s fallacious claims behind Theranos.

Our contention is that edgework, the push and pull of risk, enables a more nuanced way of understanding professional wrestling practice, a claim substantiated

by the data collected through the Health and Wellbeing in Professional Wrestling project. We are not the first to make this connection. In *New Perspectives on Sport and 'Deviance': Consumption, Performativity and Social Control* Tony Blackshaw and Tim Crabbe briefly mention wrestling, through Roland Barthes and John Fiske, as a type of edgework (2004: 53). In his article 'Passion Work: the Joint Production of Emotional Labor in Professional Wrestling' (and also briefly in his 2014 book *Fighting for Recognition: Identity, Masculinity, and the Act of Violence in Professional Wrestling*) R. Tyson Smith uses the notion of edgework to describe the risks of extreme wrestling, that is wrestling that uses weapons and invites physical injury on a regular basis (2008: 160). But, other than these useful precursors, the potential of edgework for professional wrestling is yet to be realized. Nor, conversely, has there been any recognition of the usefulness of professional wrestling, in its hybrid sport-art state, as a transferable model for the push and pull of edgework. Using the data gathered through the Health and Wellbeing in Professional Wrestling project, we will claim both that professional wrestling is a type of edgework *par excellence* and that this oft reviled form of popular performance casts new light on how edgework might be understood in our contemporary society.

Professional wrestling exists in the liminal space between sport and performance arts, while acknowledging that the definitions of these activities are highly contested, of course. Sportspeople are so often edgeworkers and professional wrestling, which is simultaneously sport and not-sport (even while fuzzing the meaning of 'sport'), is performed by "theatrical athletes" (Litherland 2018: vii) embodying this edgeworker persona. The risk of injury and even death is high in certain sports: motor racing (at least in the past), free climbing, base jumping at one end and curling, and (ironically perhaps) archery and shooting at the other. In the middle are combat sports like boxing and Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) and the various football codes (American, association, Australian and rugby) which have come under increasing scrutiny as the risks of concussion and serious brain damage have emerged. There is always the chance that athletes will take extra risks to fulfil certain goals: to swim at the Olympics an athlete might ignore a niggling shoulder injury, for example, or a rugby player might downplay concussion symptoms to participate in a final. The reasons behind these actions are complex and multiple, and we do not have space to do them justice: there are pressures from employers and sponsors alongside worries about letting people down, losing funding, losing one's place in the team, having to face criticism especially in our social media age and having one's identity entirely associated with a high-profile occupation. But risk is not only about physical injury. When one enters the ring, pitch, court, one is always at risk of losing. The risk is higher the more that is at stake or the greater the reputation: if Roger Federer loses to a qualifier at Wimbledon, the risk of reputational damage is far higher than the other way around. Physical injury invariably poses a risk to social identity.

While actors rarely risk death or serious injury in the same way (although more of that in a moment), there are numerous other risks on the stage that chime with those in the sporting arenas. As a live medium, there is always the risk that the artifice will collapse: a forgotten line, a wardrobe malfunction. Live performance, simply because of its liveness, exists on a risk matrix where the danger of the whole spectacle collapsing is very real: it only needs a mobile phone to go off to entirely disrupt a narrative. On the other hand, risk gives live performance its energy, of course: one of the reasons why Cirque du Soleil is so popular is that sweaty, hands-over-eyes sickness you feel as an audience member when the acrobat flies through the air. None but the pathologically sadistic wants the acrobat to fall, but the *risk* of this happening is what adds the frisson of excitement, the imminent danger. Again, as in the sporting world, there is always a reputational risk too: if a famous actor forgets their cue, it is all over Twitter before they are even off the stage.

Risk in both sport and arts practice, then, is something to be avoided and something to be embraced. Lyng recognises this: “The paradox of people being both pushed and pulled to edgework practices by opposing institutional imperatives reflects complexities in the contemporary experience of risk that we are just beginning to appreciate” (Lyng 2004: 10). The idea that athletes and artists are simultaneously pushed and pulled towards risk is a shared characteristic. This push and pull effect, as several high-profile cases have illustrated, has led to yet another risk in terms of mental health. Most recently as we began to draw this article together, Simone Biles, withdrawing from the Olympics, described the mental health challenge of suddenly losing one’s spatial awareness as a gymnast: “I didn’t have a bad performance and quit. I’ve had plenty of bad performances throughout my career and finished the competition. I simply got so lost my safety was at risk as well as a team medal” (Staniforth 2021). Here the dual sporting risks in terms of injury and reputation collide. Mental health remains a challenge for several well-known actors too, battling with the tensions of getting into difficult, sometimes traumatic roles.

Perhaps the form professional wrestling resembles the most is the embodied performance art practices of, say, Ron Athey or Marina Abramovic. In his influential ‘World of Wrestling’ Roland Barthes notes that “the physique of the wrestlers therefore constitutes the basic sign, which like a seed contains the whole fight” (1972: 18). The same could be said of Athey’s *Self-Obliteration* (2008-11) or Abramovic’s *Rhythm 0* (1974) in which the body endures pain and mutilation as a way of exploring ideas of selfhood and expression. As Dominic Johnson says, “In its most pressing formulations, live art redefines our understandings of intimacy and risk. It invites new ways of thinking about how these seemingly opposing logics are tied to each other” (2012: 121). Wrestling does this too, though arguably in a more

collaborative and certainly funnier way. In wrestling, risk and intimacy collide in the closeness of the wrestlers' bodies, of course, but also in the proximity of the crowd, in the way the action spills through the ropes. These two elements are also there in the way wrestlers present themselves. Their bodies are multi-layered; as fans we feel an intimate connection, unsure where the actual person ends and the wrestling persona begins. Risk is allayed by intimate whispers between the wrestlers - 'are you alright?' - or a squeeze of the hand to signify that the opponent lying stricken on the floor is just 'selling', that is pretending to be hurt. There is a sharing of sweat, even sometimes of blood.

In his recent re-imagining of edgework, Jeffrey Kidder cites three types: material practices, embodied experiences and supporting structures. It is the middle one of these that is of particular interest to us. Kidder's description accurately describes the corporeal and affective experience of wrestling. It requires an "intense focus on the unfolding of events" (2021: 6); one cannot lose focus thousands of feet in the air while climbing a mountain. The importance of staying 'in the moment' is vital to the wrestling ring too. There is danger in losing focus. Kidder goes on:

Working the edge allows practitioners to reach inside themselves and find the ability to surmount what might otherwise seem too chaotic or deadly to master. In return, the world as it was momentarily gives way to a new order—one where the edgeworker feels counterintuitively in control of the surrounding chaos. (2021: 7)

In essence, edgework compels a sense of hyperreality, a Baudrillardian concept that has previously been applied to wrestling (see, for example, Warden's 'Might all be a work: professional wrestling at Butlins's holiday camp' or O'Brien's *Donald Trump and the Kayfabe Presidency*). Understanding professional wrestling through this concept of risk, then, enables new connections to be made that resist the traditional isolation of the form from other entertainments and sports. It is risk that enables one to read wrestling as both/and/not sport and performance art, to make sense of the practices of the wrestling ring, and to create new networks of work that cut across disciplines and artistic borders.

The push and pull of risk in professional wrestling

Understanding what constitutes the edge in a particular type of edgework is vital: "in the purest expression of edgework, one negotiates *the edge* by striving to get as close to it as possible without actually crossing it" (Lyng and Mathews in Newmahr, 2011: 706). To understand risk in wrestling, then, we must ask, where is the edge? For Lucy Nevitt, in respect to one specific element of wrestling risk, voluntary bleeding, "blood functions as narrative effect, non-diegetic effect and spectatorial affect in equal measure" (2010: 81). We agree and suggest that these three functions of blood can be applied to all risk in wrestling. In other words,

- risk taking in wrestling is part of the story being performed; the wrestler jumps from the top rope on to their opponent to win the fictional contest.
- Additionally, actual risks happen in service of the story; for example, jumping from the top of rope actually hurts but also carries the risk of injury or pain excessive to the narrative.
- Finally, the risk excites the audience as watching a wrestler performing a high-risk dive from the top rope is spectacular to behold, in part because of the actual risks they are taking in conjunction with the performed narrative of risk.

Nevitt holds that all three are crucial to the appeal of wrestling, what she calls the “actuality of performed action” (2010: 81). It matters that wrestling at least has the *potential* to hurt and if it doesn’t, then it is no longer wrestling.

Understanding edgework through the practice of wrestling has two broader implications for discussions of risk more generally. The first lies in wrestlers’ use of concealment. In the moment of wrestling, the performers make choices, often split moment decisions about how to risk, what to risk, when to risk, and, critically, what risks to show to the audience and what risks to hide. For example, the introduction of a table as weapon looks to the audience member as upping the risk. However often tables help to break a wrestler’s fall; missing the table is in fact far more dangerous. As they do this, they work multiple edges, often concurrently. To understand this risk, we must see through the artifice and understand where actual risk occurs and how it could potentially be mitigated without affecting the overall theatrical presentation of risk that makes the form compelling. The second way that wrestling can add to the concept of edgework is the cooperative and collaborative negotiation of risk. The idea of joint edgework, that is “situations in which edgeworkers require one another not only to transgress the edge more safely, but to actually construct the edge” (Newmahr 2011: 692), is a potentially very useful way of understanding the shared risks of wrestling. Our data showed wrestling as joint edgework embodying Chow’s “ethics of openness” where “wrestlers put their bodies at great risk and trust their partners will have the embodied knowledge to protect them” (2014: 79-80). Wrestling, then, enables a reimagining of edgework more generally through the real-not-real spectrum and as collaborative rather than competitive endeavor.

Risk is wrestling’s “dominant logic of practice” (Bunn, 2017: 1310). The push and pull of risk in and around the wrestling ring is intrinsic; the medium of wrestling is risk. So how do wrestlers themselves, those paid to take the risks, trained to navigate them, compelled to push the edge every time they step through the ropes, how do they understand risk? What is the physical and mental cost? And critically, what, if anything, can be done to limit the effects of this requirement to risk? These

questions drove the data gathering of Health and Wellbeing in Professional Wrestling.

'Flirting with that element of risk': unpacking the data

The history of this phenomenon is littered with repetitive strains, serious injury, and even death. This is the case for the British scene as for the more famous US model. As early as 1933, when wrestling as a commercial, fixed enterprise was briefly gaining traction in Britain, a post-match death (of twenty-eight year old 'Strangler' Johnson) was well-documented in newspapers (Warden 2020: 154). However, the nature, characteristics and implications of these risks have never been assessed in any formal way. This means that an understanding of risk in professional wrestling has relied on, on the one hand, brags emanating from a toxic macho-masculinity (boasts of victorious champions fighting with a broken neck would fit into this category) and, on the other, horrified accusations from parents claiming wrestling as dangerous. Indeed, the perceived dangers of wrestling are substantiated in the public consciousness by high-profile injuries in mainstream wrestling products and by the frighteningly bloody, chaotic optics of backyard or hardcore wrestling. Risk in wrestling has always been deeply emotive and, while the project team was keen to capture the emotion, we were also committed to uncovering the precise ways that risk is navigated, reduced or celebrated by contemporary British wrestlers. In so doing, we hoped to provide data that might make wrestling safer but also to celebrate wrestling as an art form akin to other risky entertainments such as trapeze.

Unlike other popular culture forms to which it is compared – soap operas, comic book films – wrestling's sporting physicality means that there are always real dangers that are exacerbated or alleviated by the actions of the wrestlers. But this does not mean that wrestling precisely resembles other combat sports either. Boxing and MMA are both predicated on the need to accumulate points by injuring the opponent, but referees will intervene if participants are not sufficiently aggressive towards their opponent. While this aggression is contingent on rules, ultimately more points are accrued for more effective moves (read: the moves that more effectively maim one's opponent). Knockout, the ultimate dis-abling of one's opponent, means the winner has an unassailable points lead. This is by no means to belittle the complexities of these practices, complexities so compellingly analyzed by Sarah Crews and Solomon Lennox in their recent *Boxing and Performance* where they understand boxing not as (or not simply as) a brutal battle but as "a performance practice upheld by re-enactment" (2021: 1). However, wrestling's commitment to collaborative work, that is to creating the spectacle together, counters any easy associations with other combat sports. The removal of some of the most extreme sporting risks like knockouts means wrestling can be performed more frequently,

bringing with it new risks from repetition. Whereas a boxer might fight once every three months, a wrestler might 'fight' three-to-six times in a single weekend.

This means that risk becomes an increasingly conjoined venture in wrestling, a fact that is strongly supported by our data. Take for example one of wrestling's most problematic, and well documented risks: head injury. One participant, discussing the problem of concussion (an issue the team has explored in more depth elsewhere), acknowledged that this risk is a shared issue: "if you had one concussion on a Saturday and then went and wrestled again on a Sunday, you're not 100% and your brain's not 100%, and you're not only putting yourself at risk, you're putting your opponent at risk as well". Unlike in the boxing ring, where an injury would place only *oneself* at a greater risk, injury in the wrestling ring shifts the risk on to their antagonist.

Whereas in boxing you train and fight as an individual to be able to beat your adversary, wrestlers have a responsibility to their 'opponent'; as one performer said, they committed to "training so that I was not a risk to anybody". Responsibility for preventing excessive risk seems to lie, ultimately, in the collaborative effort and here is the "ethics of care" described by Chow. As one respondent said, "I think it's part of you and the person you're performing with to calculate the risks and make the right decisions". Collaboration means that risk is approached in a cooperative way. However, this is not straightforward. While risk is navigated corporately by the players, wrestling, like games of truth or dare as children, is always subject to peer pressures. The data bears this out: "I feel that with wrestling, there is that element, you know, you are kind of flirting with that element of risk and that's really hard to kind of say, 'oh that's too much or you've pushed that too far'". Some wrestlers we spoke to seemed confident to push back when their opponent suggested something particularly risky: "I've always really avoided stuff and risk, just like, no I will not do that, and you know I'm not doing it, it's too dangerous". It is encouraging to hear wrestlers take this sort of responsibility, but it is not a universal experience, partly because it demands both confidence and experience to say no (a trait of some individuals but not a universal language taught to all trainees). It was clear from evidence that other wrestlers had found it harder to resist the 'dare you' attitude of wrestling. One wrestler, thinking over his career to date, reflected, "I think I've gotten to this point now where I feel like you know I...I've taken all these risks and I've made all these sacrifices that I don't know if I can reconcile". It is important to note that not all wrestlers take joy in their past in-ring decisions. There is a real risk of regret accruing.

So, while this is a collaborative effort, then, there is also a sense of personal preservation too as this comment from a veteran British wrestler signifies:

A lot of people take the piss out of me for when I wrestle I do barely anything. But there's a reason for that, because I'm trying to preserve my body and I'm not going to take bumps unnecessarily if I don't need to. And I've always wrestled like that, that's not something that I started doing when I came back [from injury]. I did that when I was younger as well. So I think it's funny that I wrestle like that, yet still have these problems. So I look at people that wrestle the fast pace they do and I think 'ooh like if I feel like this, I can't imagine what you feel like'. So I think again it's a measured risk. I think...you have to be...comfortable in what you choose to do.

This reflection suggests that individuals have responsibility for their own risk-taking behaviour but also because there is the sense that whatever style is chosen, a certain level of physical risk remains: it is ultimately impossible to engage with wrestling practice in an entirely risk-free way.

However, our data concludes that the link between risk and style is complicated. It might be supposed that the more impressive maneuvers, the ones that might be said to thrill the audience ('pop the crowd' to use the wrestling vernacular) are inevitably more dangerous. As one younger wrestler said, "I think the perception is that the high flying style is more like dangerous or more risky, but it's all down to the person doing it...and like I've seen people get injured just by doing chain wrestling". The data resists the easy speculation that the more risky the move *looks*, the more risky *it actually is*. The reality is more complex.

Another assumption that might be easily made is that younger wrestlers commit to taking more risks than older wrestlers. There is some evidence to substantiate this claim: as one wrestler noted, "because the kind of moves people are taking these days are different even to fifteen years ago, there's a lot more high risk stuff and a lot of respect". Another, reflecting broader narratives of youth, said "And when you are younger and first starting out, yes, you're more likely to take risks because you don't understand". The association of risk with respect here (e.g. take the risks and your comrades will respect you more) is a toxic connection that has been seen in wars through the ages. Similarly, the second interviewee recognized that young wrestlers perhaps do not fully grasp the long-term implications of the risks. However, others said that the current crop of wrestlers was far more aware of their personal safety and that of those around them. As one promoter said:

And you've got talent now who are a bit like, well hang on, if this is the industry that I'm competing in, I want it to be as safe and secure and as good as it can be. And I think yeah, you know they might be less exciting in some ways, they might be less risk taking, they might be less egotistical and by extension less of a force of nature personality wise, but I think the generation of talent coming through and by extension the talent, the generation that

came after are actually good, decent human beings that aren't just giving the impression of being that.

So, while the general consensus is that there is, to quote from one wrestler, "a trend towards people moving that way...working a little bit more like risky, so it looks more legitimate, which again I don't agree with", the contrary also seems true: that young wrestlers are far more aware of the dangers of the ring and do their best to assuage them. This double, almost oppositional, reading of risk in wrestling in terms of generational experience and behavior, illustrates the real complexities of navigating risk in this sport-art.

One of the central reasons why the risks in wrestling have been overlooked is its liminal characteristics. While wrestlers have navigated risk since the establishment of the form, it has, as the APPG report noted, slipped down the gap between sport and art, meaning that it has never been adequately legislated or regulated. While sports governing bodies publish extensive and periodically updated regulatory frameworks, professional wrestling has no set standards and, as we have written elsewhere, head injuries and subsequent issues are a serious and unmitigated risk. One wrestler reflected on the way that definitions of genre have prevented real consideration of concussions:

There is an incredibly high risk of concussion in professional wrestling but because I think a lot of people see it as entertainment, they don't much like people just thinking they're able to do it because, oh it's not really a sport, I can just turn up and do it and I'll be able to wrestle for sixty minutes! That's not how it works! Because people see it as entertainment, there's a disconnect between injuries that you would perceive to be in a sport because when was the last time that you heard of Ian McKellen blowing out his knee whilst he was doing Hamlet, you know?⁴

This is an issue picked up by Eero Laine in his recent *Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage* in which he says, "Jumping off any structure is physically dangerous, and wrestlers are regularly injured by such moves, but the theatricality of the wrestling logic overlays any actual injuries sustained" (2020: 24). Laine's notion of "overlay" here is a helpful way of understanding the wrestling ring as sedimentary, a palimpsestic arena where theatre and sport nestle on top of one another, muddying the line between the real and the fictional. Everything in wrestling, even serious injury, is a constituent part of the spectacle. In wrestling performance, a key theatrical device is 'the sell'. The sell occurs at the intersection between the physical reality of the sport of wrestling and its theatrical exaggeration. In other words, to sell is take a

⁴ Actually, actors do suffer injury on set fairly regularly, depending on the type of performance. Given that the wrestler in question mentioned Ian McKellen, for example, it is interesting that the cast of the *Lord of the Rings* films experienced a good deal of physical hardship (<https://ew.com/article/2003/12/12/bumps-and-bruises-lord-rings-stars/>). However, the wrestler's point still stands: it is unhelpful to simply claim wrestling as simply a form of theatrical entertainment.

move such as a body slam (incurring actual pain) and then to transform that underlying pain into a performance (the believable presentation of pain to the audience). Being able to interpret this spectrum of pain and understand what that pain might mean for, say, the safety of the performer can be extremely challenging and can have significant implications for how risk is managed.

While the ‘is it theatre? Is it sport?’ debate in professional wrestling may seem niche and even inconsequential, then, actually this liminal identity has put generations of wrestlers at risk in unique ways. As one medical practitioner involved in wrestling said, “the risks...are very much the same as any other sport, but of course the presentation of that product is totally different to anything else you might want to consider sport”. So it is both similar to sport and entirely different at the same time (acknowledging here that sport is by no means a solid concept either). This continues to make complex the ways wrestler health and wellbeing is legislated by government and how it is perceived by audiences, especially those not familiar with the form.

Not only does this issue of genre mean that injury and risk is downplayed, it also enables a greater sense of risk in the ring, a risk determined by the wrestlers themselves, of course, but also by one of the other key players in the performance: the referee. In boxing, a referee makes calls based on the safety of the competitors (e.g. when a boxer is disabled to the extent that they are unable to protect themselves); in wrestling it is tricky to determine whether there is risk or not. There is some irony here, as ultimately the referee has more responsibility for health and wellbeing than a boxing referee because there are no corner teams ready to throw in the towel if the situation looks too dangerous. As one interviewee said, “if you’ve got a referee who’s not up to cop, then you run a very, very high risk of exacerbating people’s injuries, of people getting injured, of all sorts of things like that. So a referee is pretty much your first point of contact for anything like that, or should be”. But this is less straightforward than it sounds because of the performative quality of wrestling: how is the ‘sell’ to be interpreted and how can a referee differentiate between the ‘sell’ and an actual injury? Our data would suggest that most referees take their role seriously – one referee said “obviously you know there is real physical risk, and I’m there to manage that” – but training and knowledge seem to differ considerably and there are no set qualifications for being a wrestling referee. Another referee gave us a sense of how they responded to in ring injury:

I guess sometimes when it’s not something too bad, where you can just be like, ‘OK, quick roll up, just do it now and then get out of there’. But like I had one fairly recently where his was like neck and it was just, no, we’re not taking the risk with that one. But yeah, so I think it’s just talk to the guys, see

what they want to do, it they...if it is something that isn't life threatening, then yeah, just get them to do that quickly and then get home.⁵

In wrestling there is always the sense that 'the show must go on'; in fact a number of interviewees quoted this cliché as they described their practice. There are some similarities here with MMA. In his recent paper, Alex Channon understands the MMA referee to have "two competing priorities, concerning the facilitation of action within a dangerous sport on the one hand, whilst minimising the damaging impacts of that action on the other" (2022: 2). Wrestling referees have a similar issue. They are constantly balancing the need for spectacle with the necessity of protecting the performers. However, wrestling has the added complication in that it is often extremely difficult to determine the reality or otherwise of any injury.

As well as the complications caused by wrestling's liminal, complex status as sport-art, there are two further and connected issues with the referee being the arbiter of risk. Firstly, training differs widely from some referees who have substantial first aid experience, to others who simply pull on a black and white jersey half an hour before the show. There is no grading system and, at the time of writing, no referee school. Secondly, it is notoriously difficult to tell whether an injury is real or part of the storyline. For the audience, this is part of the game but for those managing the health and wellbeing of wrestlers it is profoundly problematic. As the referee above suggests, there are verbal and physical cues (a squeeze of the hand, for instance) to check in on the status of the wrestlers but this is a fraught communication chain, especially since it is reliant on wrestlers self-declaring injury. This is, as our data proved, irregular, with some wrestlers open about their own health and wellbeing but far more being reticent about sharing the truth for fear of losing bookings or being seen as injury-prone and unpredictable. Added to this, the referee is also a performer in their own right, occasionally even 'taking bumps' and getting involved in the action. So, the referee is both an actual protector of in-ring safety and a fictionalised presence.

Conclusion and recommendations

One interviewee shared the following reflection: "I mean I still want to entertain people but I don't think it's worth my health at this point, you know, not worth risking serious injury". Wrestlers remain committed to producing an exciting spectacle but, similarly (by and large), want to protect their own health and the health of their opponent/collaborator. If risk, and the active mitigating or embracing of risk, is a condition of the twenty-first century then it feels even more acute in the wrestling ring. In compiling the data, and sharing it with relevant authorities such as the APPG, the team aimed to make a series of recommendations. In this case, what

⁵ In this context 'home' means the end of the match. To 'go home' means to work through the finale.

conclusions does the data suggest and what, if anything, can or should be done to alleviate risk? Tracking themes through the data, it would be accurate to say that wrestlers have a broad acceptance that their practice is risky and, ultimately, that risk could never be entirely eradicated. Risk is built into wrestling and to remove it would be to turn it into something quite different: stage combat for instance. No wrestlers we spoke to advocated for an entirely risk-free endeavor; like the trapeze artist or racing car driver, the risk is part of the joy and part of the spectacle.

However, from the data the team has two key recommendations to take forward that might enable this risk to be more controlled. Firstly, we advocate a culture change in professional wrestling that gives space for wrestlers to share their concerns more freely. Fighting back against a macho-masculine narrative of toughness and active covering up of weakness, we encourage an atmosphere of openness and transparency. This can be modelled by established wrestlers with whom we work and affirmed by forward-thinking companies and schools, for example, Playfight Wrestling School in London. Secondly, we suggest more training, particularly for referees but also for those with medical responsibilities at the venue. This training needs to clearly address some of the key health challenges wrestlers experience in the ring, namely concussion and how to respond in the face of a serious muscle or skeletal injury. In no sense will this entirely eradicate risk in the same way as it doesn't on the rugby pitch or in the boxing ring. But it will enable these willing edgeworkers to engage with this art in a safer way.

Note

All citations from the British Academy Health and Wellbeing in Professional Wrestling project (SRG20\200575) are protected through Loughborough University's Research Ethics and Integrity procedures. The research team have been careful to redact all identifying information.

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