

A Critical Cultural History and Quasi-Ethnography of British Professional Wrestling



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Abstract

There has been a wide array of contributions to the study of professional wrestling within historical and contemporary academic discourse. Studies have mostly examined the stylistic, spectatorship and aesthetical qualities of American productions, as well as some level of exploration into varied cultural approaches to the sport such as the offerings of Mexican Lucha Libre. However, despite academic writing existing in the exploration of wrestling fandom and the subcultures that exist from a generalised, collective perspective, little academic discussion has been dedicated to the realm of British professional wrestling, its fandom and the rich historical and cultural significance that has and continues to be exhibited.

This study aims to provide such a contribution, providing the reader with an insight into the unique social qualities present within the United Kingdom professional wrestling scene via the critical exploration and discussion of its history of style and presentation as well as its traditional audiences.

This research also seeks to showcase how subcultural identities and practices have evolved over time, including the ways the sport is promoted, fannish factors of enjoyment - both emotionally and linguistically - via use of chants and social rituals at live events within a uniquely British cultural perspective. Furthermore, these processes will be argued as a way of providing collaborative meaning-making and cultural exchange with the international wrestling community as a whole. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of identity factors

such as ideology will be sought via the use of the ethnographic method and its various facets, using personal experience and directly engaging with the national wrestling community. This will uncover where passions lie, what the sport means to contemporary audiences, the issues which exist in terms of those continued from previous eras, and new issues as a result of cultural shifts and industry changes.

Lastly, this study will be supplemented with the use of a combination of historical analysis and quasi-ethnographic methods to explore past eras of the sport and its reception, providing a means of contrast to uncover any potential ties that bind or factors which separate both eras and give a comprehensive overview of the sport from a national, British perspective.

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Introduction

Originating from the days of carnival and travelling entertainment shows and evolving to become a popular form of live and televised entertainment for modern audiences, professional wrestling has long-since created a unique spectacle for audiences combining equal elemental parts of sports-based athletic competition and the performative, entertaining showcase of theatre. The most popular and well-known avenue of this hybrid form of sports and entertainment is understood by most people as produced by World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). The WWE is a long-standing industry leader for producing and broadcasting wrestling content over many decades, consistently creating such widely known and successful characters as Hulk Hogan, Stone Cold Steve Austin and Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson - and integrating itself within global popular culture and widespread domestic acknowledgment by doing so. However, prior to the evident successes achieved by WWE since the inception of *Wrestlemania* in the mid-Eighties and its global growth from a more localised, regional context, the UK was already enjoying a domestically ingrained, widely popular engagement with the sport via its own long-standing scene. This arguably stemmed from as far back as the late nineteenth century, gaining its national, widespread support and enjoyment from its earliest days of televised broadcast in the mid-Fifties. With the domestically popular wrestling program featured as part of ITV's Saturday afternoon sports broadcast *World of Sport*, professional wrestling in Britain proved vastly popular with working-class audiences and saw decades of televised content before its eventual cancellation in the late Eighties. The British industry saw a vast decline with the advent of WWE proving a globally successful phenomenon, becoming a defining identity for professional wrestling in popular culture and displacing most regional forms of the sport.

Eventually the British industry would revive and begin producing new generations of talent, promotions, and fan communities – providing new opportunities for national, cultural efforts of professional wrestling outside of the popular grasp of WWE, but incurring difficulties and controversies along the way. This study aims to provide a critical, cultural examination of what qualities constitute professional wrestling within an exclusively British context, showcasing cultural origins of style and practice, as well as elements of spectatorship, audiences and fandom as they develop and shift over time into modernity, from the televised era of *World of Sport* on ITV throughout the mid to late twentieth century to the current post-digital, post-web 2.0 era of the twenty-first century.

The influence for this particular study stems from personal experience as a professional wrestling fan, being introduced to the sport via popularised American presentations of the WWE and ex-rival promotion World Championship Wrestling, and only being witness to regional, British identities of the sport in later years of fan engagement. For the millennial generation, WWE has mostly dominated popular understanding and knowledge of what professional wrestling is and can be, and has led to a reductive, almost non-existent understanding of British cultural history of the sport for modern fans and audiences. Therefore, it is paramount to contribute to professional wrestling and cultural studies to widen understanding and cultural significance of the sport on the national, regional level and overcome an argued sense of reductive, mythical assertions of what professional wrestling is, where it has come from, the different cultural ways it can be presented and understood – particularly within the context of Britain. As Glenday argues, professional wrestling outputs act as “culturally embedded spectacles” (2013, p1), residing within a unified overall global genre but reflecting individual unique cultural attitudes,

associations of meaning, practice, and even ideologies present within the originating national or regional product consumed. Wrestling is enjoyed almost everywhere across the globe, but each country imbues its own societal influences into offerings of the sport, thereby positing it as an artefact for mediating cultural values.

There has been much discussion of professional wrestling in mythic terms since the original writings of Roland Barthes in 1957, contemplating its predominant diegesis and mode of immersion being centred around the concept of spectacle, and presenting a narrative play through its characters, such as moral versus immoral, righteous versus unrighteous, and lawful versus unlawful. With such works produced on wrestling spectacle, including that of Henry Jenkins III (2005) and Sharon Mazer (2005), notions of masculinity and vicarious relationships between an assumed mostly-male demographic in wrestling audiences have been exhaustively researched in modern wrestling studies. Unique cultural identities and practices with the sport have been explored in a limited sense, mostly materialised from the works of Heather Levi (1997, 2005) which uncovered a historical and cultural framework to provide detailed understanding of the Mexican 'Lucha Libre' style of professional wrestling as a unique form of cultural output, informed by class struggle, quasi-religious ritual, and regional understanding of morality. There has been little in the way of consistent efforts to identify these cultural values and significance of wrestling within the context of uniquely British outputs. A few key theorists do exist, including Ben Litherland, who produced the first close study of wrestling in Britain detailing how it evolved from a purely sporting context of actual competition towards the modern iteration of simulated, preconceived theatrical and spectacular entertainment. There is also Claire Warden, who has produced key works on developing understanding of modern identities and cultural

practices exhibited in British wrestling, as well as considering it within analytical frameworks of art and theatre studies. Although these scholars have contributed greatly to a stimulus of academic inquiry into the British cultural aspects of professional wrestling, further study into its historical development and evolution is required to fully realise and appreciate the value it can bring to the wider arena of professional wrestling studies overall.

It was the aim of this study to answer various questions in order to better understand what British wrestling is from both a historical and contemporary context and why it is important to include in academic discussion. These questions included:

- 1) What is professional wrestling in a British context?

- 2) What cultural aspects does it contain in relation to style, spectatorship, and fandom which makes British professional wrestling unique to other global iterations?

- 3) Why is it important to those engaged in its practice or engaged with it as a fan or spectator?

This study explores the answers to these questions through a variety of research methods including historical and textual analysis to inform a timeline of how the industry has developed, the intrinsic elements it is comprised of in terms of style, promotion, and ideological attitudes, engaging with a quasi-level of ethnography via capturing the testimonies and experiences of various practitioners and fans by conducting semi-structured

interviews, as well as providing my own biographical and auto-ethnographic experiences from being involved with professional wrestling fandom for many years, attending live events inside and outside the timeline of research. This serves to provide a substantial contribution to the field of professional wrestling studies by creating knowledge in multiple ways. Firstly, to reinforce concepts of professional wrestling performance, presentation, and spectatorship being understood as unique artefacts of cultural production.

The framework of analysis can be linked to the work of Cynthia Erb and her works in *Tracking King Kong*. Erb primarily focuses on the tracking and tracing of the cultural evolution of the King Kong character, its general idea of examining the cultural shifts and symbolic meanings within a specific context can be applied to the study of British professional wrestling. In the realm of British wrestling, a similar approach can be employed to trace the evolution of cultural symbols, identities, and meanings over different eras. Within this framework, one can investigate how iconic figures, wrestling styles, and narratives have transformed over time, reflecting shifts in societal values, audience expectations, and the broader cultural landscape. The study may delve into the cultural nuances embedded in wrestling promotions, exploring how they contribute to the construction and reconstruction of British wrestling's identity. This approach tracks the evolution of key elements, understand the cultural contexts shaping these changes, and ultimately contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the cultural history and identity of British professional wrestling.

Despite ethnographic methodology being utilised to good effect in giving frameworks of meaning for these discussions, there is a distinct lack of studies throughout wrestling-based academia focusing on the specific, cultural outputs of professional wrestling on a national basis. By examining unique aspects in the ways the sport is presented, engaged with by its practitioners and fans, as well as stylistic concerns, a better comprehension can be achieved for how British wrestling acts as a culturally embedded form of spectacle unique to other global examples, such as American, Mexican and Japanese iterations.

Secondly, this study makes effort to expose common assumptions of professional wrestling as purely theatrical form of entertainment over understandings of its simulation of sports-based conflict, and will seek to challenge popular, mythic interpretations informed by popularised forms of wrestling whereby transgressive qualities such as racism, misogyny and 'camp' levels of production are commonly assumed. Thirdly, it acknowledges and explores periods of wrestling in Britain previously disregarded by contemporary and historical discourse in professional wrestling studies, exposing the core identities and meanings formed in such times on a national, cultural level and leading to better understanding of transitional factors influencing contemporary attitudes and approaches to the sport on both levels of being a practitioner and fan. Lastly, by acknowledging key factors for both success and potential setbacks encountered by internal and external issues, an idea for potential futures for professional wrestling as an industry in Britain may be established – as well as hopefully influencing further continued studies on both the sport being a culturally embedded form of spectacle and entertainment in the UK as well as other nations.

With the academic focus on the historical and cultural value of British professional wrestling being fairly limited in contemporary discourse - aside from the works by theorists such as Ben Litherland, Tom Phillips, and Claire Warden - this research aims to further contribute to the ongoing effort to define unique aspects of British identity in the sport, including factors associated with the styles and presentations produced, ways of engaging as a fan and spectator, as well as the influential historical components inherited and sometimes reformed. These include the surviving aspects of catch-as-catch-can wrestling performance styles and move-sets used, rule sets, such as rounds-based competitions, being redeployed in fresh ways, traditional and new forms of characterisation, and audience participation and enjoyment factors at live events on both collective and regional or localised contexts.

This thesis is structured and presented as five sections, following the development and evolution of British professional wrestling throughout history – particularly from the period leading up to what can be defined as the ‘televised era’ of the mid-to-late twentieth century, and towards the later stages of a post-television ‘dark’ era of wrestling recession. This includes the transitional phases leading into the current century and leading on to more contemporary efforts of professional wrestling in Britain, alongside its dedicated and engaged fan communities.

The first chapter provides a framework for understanding the multiple facets of British professional wrestling, challenging the notions of reading ‘classic’ British wrestling as ‘camp’ performance and questioning reductive, popular assertions of what the form can be understood as on a cultural level. It will establish a line of historical development of the

sport transitioning from a fully amateur, regional pastime of legitimate grappling in a real, unworked context to a simulated and performed professional one observed from the early 1900s and onwards – all while inheriting and sustaining certain past characteristics to subsist a sense of suspension of disbelief with its audiences. Furthermore, a brief historical look at the nationally-broadcasted, popular era of professional wrestling of the 1980s in the United Kingdom will be debated – both in its inherent popularity with working-class communities of the time, style and presentation elements, as well as argued reasonings for its controversial downfall via cancellation and relegation to narrowcasted, satellite viewing in post-Thatcher Britain.

Chapter two will document a little-discussed period of British wrestling of the Nineties, whereby the national industry saw much decline and relegation to niche interest, both due to international syndication of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) televised products undermining global, regional efforts, as well as the majority of the top UK talent seeking employment opportunities elsewhere due to a largely diminished, post-television scene. Aspects of authenticity will be discussed in conjunction with the blurred identity of British wrestling during this period of largely stylistic tributes and pandering to developing tastes towards the largely generalised, homogenous style offered by American market leaders. This era of exploitation and inauthentic presentations of wrestling in Britain will then lead to a documentation of a transitional phase between this 'dark', untelevised period to a new frontier of fan-based productions. This refers to the industry moving forward to new generations via societal and technological developments in a democratised arena of media production and distribution, and it becoming an open business in term of less gatekeeping than prior eras and availability of training schools. Lastly, notions of

authenticity and 'craft' production will be explored in relation to British wrestling transitioning into modernity by way of fresh, independent promotions catering to ever-shifting identities and progressive values of contemporary audiences – particularly with the ability to narrowcast to a dedicated following.

Chapter three utilises a sports fan studies and ethnographic framework to explore the audiences and fan communities in modern British professional wrestling, discussing notions of identity and meaning-making when consuming wrestling on a national, cultural level, as well as highlighting aspects of subcultural practice and interaction at live events. Alongside experienced industry voices and fan perspective, the evident correlation to football audiences, pantomime and theatre culture, as well as tendencies of heckling and activity associated with 'blaison populaire' – a term from folkloristics referring to cultural, linguistic forms of applying stereotypes – an analysis will be presented of unique cultural identity factors of what it is to be a modern British wrestling fan. By examining these regional forms of unique engagement and fan practice, a better understanding will be achieved in how cultural factors can determine exclusive identities and formation of meaning within audiences of British wrestling and challenge any preconceived notions of wrestling fan engagement as homogenous across all global facets. To finish this chapter, problematic notions of controlled participation will be debated in regard to the contrast between contemporary, fan-engaged promotions allowing for and encouraging autonomy in audience participation and the controlled, fixed nature of 'family-friendly', holiday camp-style promotions utilising various strategies to guide audience participation and reaction to manufacture positive reactions. By exploring this behaviour, the intrinsic value autonomous audiences bring to British wrestling within a cultural mode of engagement will be

highlighted, arguing that collaborative practice between producer and audience is a vital process in effectively creating collective identities and meaning – as opposed to the opposite behaviour of manipulating or attempting to redirect such participation as a means to gain desired results from producers and reaffirm corporate, hegemonic values over the audience with the intention to drive sales and economic opportunities. This manipulation is argued to manifest through the process of misleading audio-visual editing and redacted footage, misinformation and taking advantage of less media-literate audiences, as well as engineered narratives in both broadcast and live contexts where audiences are encouraged to act as “spectators” (Di Benedetto, 2016, pp29-30) to reduce unwanted, autonomous reactions to content.

Chapter four investigates contemporary efforts with making exclusive, national outputs of professional wrestling successful and sustainable in a contemporary, digital and converged world. This includes the rise of independent British promotions taking full advantage of a modern, democratised media culture to promote their events, create brands, and gain loyal followings, as well as self-distributing produced content via on-demand services. The act of WWE directly establishing a new foothold in the UK as a response to ITV’s (Independent Television) attempted rebrand of *World of Sport* wrestling programming will be defined, alongside utilising first-hand accounts of industry personnel involved, as well as fellow fans, to give ethnographic grounding to explored concerns. These include spectatorship factors and questionable authenticity, all leading to the failure to gain traction with modern British audiences when attempting reintroduction of the sport as a viable staple for contemporary British national broadcasting.

Furthermore, this chapter will discuss aspects of neo-liberal, expansionist business practices associated with the establishment of NXT UK as a localised British brand by WWE, as well as both the potential positive and negative effects the argued hegemonic relations of power the company holds over the industry has in the context of future identities and practices on the British scene. This exploration will be informed by discussions surrounding the historical expansion of the WWE from a regional promotion based in New York up until the early 1980s, to a worldwide corporation acquiring dominant industry positioning via competitive, expansionist business practices, to the current period – eventually creating international products to extend its reach and cultural influence.

This analysis employs a framework that incorporates concepts such as creative destruction, capitalist expansionism, and the displacement of identities. It delves into the intrinsic reshaping of national regionality, with a specific focus on exploring NXT UK's impact on the independent wrestling industry in the UK. Additionally, this examination draws parallels with historical instances of analogous corporate behaviour in earlier eras, shedding light on patterns and trends in the evolution of the industry. Alongside this, the potential effect of estranging future generations from the British cultural heritage of wrestling origins and contributing to reductive, generalised and mythic understanding of the sport as a whole will be argued.

Lastly, chapter five offers an examination of British wrestling during the global COVID-19 pandemic in respect of spectatorship qualities present in the time of limited live attendance possibilities, chronicling the stages of national lockdown and the effects on professional wrestling broadcasts to continue creative pursuits of production despite the

inability to provide a live audience. The various intricate issues will be considered, firstly continuing the line of analysis from the previous chapter involving potential problematic notions of WWE supplanting traditional understandings of wrestling in British contexts, and applying its dominant hegemonic industry status to further displace other national or regional efforts seen as a potential threat to their positioning . On a positive side to this consideration of cultural displacement, this chapter also explores parasocial connections and relationships between wrestler and audience in a global pandemic and national lockdown, allowing for a continued engagement in a remote sense with a creative context usually heavily reliant on live, human participation to create emotional response and inform further creative direction. This leads to a connection being made to mental health aspects of consuming professional wrestling during a pandemic lockdown in terms of fan and practitioner experiences alongside their placement of value on engagement. In other words, the most important aspects fans consider for their engagement will be reified by discussing them from a position of forced separation. The last part of this chapter will offer a glimpse into recent efforts to influence legislative intervention to innovate and improve professional standards in the industry going forward, mostly influenced by recent allegations of abuse and malpractice being uncovered during the ‘Speaking Out’ movement (wrestling’s equivalent of ‘Me Too’). Issues to be discussed in relation to these potential legislative changes include the introduction workers’ rights, unions, health and safety standards, and safety concerns.

Before establishing the methodological approach to researching the subject of modern British professional wrestling and its intrinsic cultural value, an examination of historical and contemporary academic discourse must be presented and explored to

establish an overview of professional wrestling studies and relevant associated discourse, as well as the positioning and potential value of this research and thesis.

Literature Review

Historically, there have been efforts to discuss professional wrestling from both contexts of being an individual entity for analysis on its own terms, as well as applying other conceptual frameworks for hybrid understandings of the sport. This literature review aims to first explore the many facets of historical and contemporary studies focused on the realm of professional wrestling, including early discussions of defining features of wrestling narratives and storytelling, moving forward to later studies applying assertions of class, gender, sexuality, and spectatorship values as well as subcultural meaning-making and practice on micro and macro levels of international cultural context. Furthermore, this literature review includes exploration of parallel discourse aligned with the concepts of fandom, audiences, and the hybridisation within sporting contexts – frameworks all applied later within this research of British professional wrestling.

Professional Wrestling Discourse, Spectatorship and Global Contexts

Professional wrestling has been part of world culture since the early twentieth century and possibly even earlier - switching off between a localised, exclusive 'cult' state to a widely-consumed mainstream scale depending on cultural shifts. Considering this, there has been very little in the way of academic research exploring the phenomena in terms of its fandom and identity cultures on an international scale. However, there has been a varied array of writing on wrestling which has analysed its stylistic approach, production, and business traditions as well as a multitude of works examining the form's spectatorship

qualities. An early attempt at critically analysing the pseudo-sport is an essay by Roland Barthes originally written in 1957 which explores the sense of characterisation and spectacle, consisting of many symbolic and semiotic traits emotionally connecting the audience to the action. Barthes comments that although wrestling exists as a “performance of suffering” (1993, p15) and “is the only sport which gives such an externalised image of torture”, viewers do not wish this punishment on contenders but enjoy “perfection of an iconography” (1993, p20). Barthes provided a stimulus to explain the contrasting dynamic of good versus evil in wrestling and the various stylistic traits utilised by each variant to educate the audience of the commencing fight narrative, who to cheer and boo for, as well as giving a sense of spectacle for the watcher to enjoy with a plethora of aesthetic and stylistic qualities unique to each moral side. Wrestling draws on semiotic values in order to effectively communicate narrative and creative direction to the audience. For example, heroes give an image of strength, honour, and sportsmanship, whereas Barthes notes how “treacheries, cruelties and acts of cowardice” are consistent within the actions, rhetoric, and implied values of the villain, exhibiting “gestures of [...] amorphous baseness, and thus fill to the brim the image of the most repugnant bastard there is” (1993, p17). Although Barthes’ essay serves as a staple for professional wrestling theory, particularly regarding stylistic and narratological concerns, it was written in a time before televised wrestling was established, back when the sport could only be observed on a small, localised level rather than the later stages when wrestling would reach a much wider sphere. It is unsurprising that a fandom or social community perspective is entirely absent in Barthes’ writing. However, despite residing mostly within a particular context of time and place within professional wrestling history, Barthes’ work serves as an important stimulus to navigate understanding of the varying meaning-making components of the form – establishing the notion of the sport as a

mythology, utilising simplified, symbolic representations of good versus evil to reflect, and sometimes reinforce, cultural and societal values. Barthes' essay on wrestling is a notable example of his semiotic analysis, which delves into how signs, symbols, and myths shape culture and society. Through wrestling, he explores the way cultural meanings are constructed, conveyed, and internalised by the audience. It is a reflection on how seemingly mundane aspects of popular culture can reveal deeper insights into the human experience and the power of myth.

When looking back at past academic research of professional wrestling, it is clear that it was mostly conducted in response to the booming period of American professional wrestling during the late Nineties to early Noughties; a time when World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) would be in the latter stages of its competitive ratings war with rival company World Championship Wrestling (WCW), the former eventually triumphing over and buying out the latter to seize the dominant stake in the world's professional wrestling market. In content, this period of wrestling academia predominantly focuses on spectatorship and stylistic qualities and the ties which bind them to surrounding cultural concerns. For example, Henry Jenkins III argued professional wrestling as a form of masculine melodrama (2005), going against prior scholarship defining serialised drama as feminine (Feuer, 1984, pp4-16). He continues to state how "gender identities are most rigidly policed in working-class male culture, since unable to act *as* men, they are forced to act *like* men," linking to the idea that, within this reading, melodramatic wrestling in the form of WWE offers a cathartic solution focused for male viewers, allowing for a confrontation of vulnerability in a vastly patriarchal world where a failure to assume or conform to traditionally-enforced masculine ideals and roles leads to a source of "added

humiliation” (p43). This reading made from Jenkins seems to make assumptions on the construction of male identity and particularly fails to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of masculinity across boundaries such as class, as well as seemingly limits the scope of wrestling audiences to that of a male, working class demographic.

Although this theory was certainly applicable to previous eras of wrestling, the problem lies with the fact that the externalised characterisation, storylines and content focus are certainly not timeless in wrestling and tend to evolve alongside cultural shifts, despite the core principles of professional wrestling being ageless and mythical as observed by Barthes. In the late 1980s a focus on hypermasculinisation was evident in-line with the Reagan-era’s reinforcement of masculine and patriarchal values in the media, somewhat as a post-Vietnam War coping mechanism in creating an “American made image” (Wilson, 2015, p9) in cinematic and televised portrayals of the country and creative characters. Examples of such qualities in presentation are through characters such as the tough, muscular physique of Sylvester Stallone’s *Rocky IV* (Stallone, 1985) and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (Cosmatos, 1985) being shown in a fetishistic display of violence and showing willingness to overcome adversity while taking inhuman amounts of damage. Naturally, professional wrestling would be concurrent with these themes in its presentation of American “hard bodies” (Jeffords, 1994) , with the likes of Hulk Hogan and Ultimate Warrior being presented as hypermasculine, hyperbolised human forms to be read as super-heroic and emblematic of wider, nationalist assertions of American power. This is a slight contrast and development from traditional British understandings of masculinity which are arguably rooted within the framework of hard-work and ‘graft’. For example, miners were often perceived to be the pinnacle of strength and endurance within working-class men (Ward,

2021, p443), and their bodies were muscular but more functionally rather than the performative, enhanced sense of American professional wrestlers. Miners were seen as a national symbol of strength and courage considered important in a post-war context (Ward, 2021, p449). The Americanised, hyper-masculine physique potentially trumped this argued functional form of strength and masculinity traditionally understood in Britain and thus charmed the British audience towards its more hyperbolised spectacle in comparison to its traditional broadcasts. Furthermore, the 1990s continued the reification of patriarchal values in wrestling via misogynistic portrayals and objectification of women aimed at satisfying an assumed mostly male audience, including athletes such as Luna Vachon and Lisa 'Ivory' Moretti being booked to perform in a 'Miss Royal Rumble Swimsuit Contest' at the 2000 event *Royal Rumble*, despite both women having extensive prior experience and fan support as wrestling performers. However, in today's professional wrestling world there is arguably the highest level of opportunities for female competitors, a general acceptance and celebration of gender non-specific or transgender stars in mainstream wrestling culture, as well as gimmicks which challenge traditionally masculine stereotypes. Although Jenkins III aimed his research specifically towards WWE wrestling of previous eras, it is a theory which is too rigid to be applied wholesale to the wrestling products of today, as well as those residing outside of the USA.

Heather Levi also observes professional wrestling as melodrama but does so by exploring the sport from the national, cultural context of Mexican wrestling, known as *Lucha Libre*, showcasing the way it conveys a unique sense of national identity with its aesthetic, narratology, and fan culture. As Levi observes, masks are an integral part of the Mexican wrestling aesthetic as well as narratology, serving as a "crucial dramatic element" culturally

significant and connecting historically to indigenous Mexican religious and quasi-religious culture and ritual (1997, p64). They are also “associated with pre-Columbian, indigenous past but also born in the modernizing era of 1930s” representing the more urban, working class society (2005, p125). This significance of masks in Lucha Libre essentially represents the “Mexicanization of the genre” (Levi, 2005, p102) and goes some way towards explaining why masked wrestlers traditionally have not been anywhere near as successful or widely accepted as their unmasked counterparts in American or European wrestling . This could be due to the established cultural significance to masks not being present, with masked wrestlers frequently only serving as enhancement talent (wrestlers booked specifically to lose to another more successful, ‘over’ wrestler, or an up-and-coming talent that requires a victory to ‘enhance’ their visibility and believability with fans), or as a simple temporary narrative ploy to conceal a known wrestler’s identity until the appropriate time in a narrative angle arrives to reveal their identity to fans to garner interest in a new story arc. However, the cultural significance in Lucha Libre for masks leads to their treatment as a “fetishised object that represents the wrestler’s honour” (Levi, 2005, p107) and a metonymy for the form as a whole as well as serving as “the motor for a range of narrative tropes” (2005, p125). A common trope observed in Mexican wrestling is the simple tension between a masked and unmasked wrestler whereby the mask is always under threat of being damaged or torn off to reveal their identity, and as a result of Lucha tradition would be forced to relinquish that character entirely and continue their career unmasked.

Lucha Libre links to Barthes’ original writings of professional wrestling as mythological storytelling but does so via its own unique cultural approach to characterisation and general narratology. Rather than the typical bad-good dichotomy of

'heel versus babyface' in America or 'villain versus blue-eyes' in British Wrestling, Mexican wrestling defines its competitors as either "ethically upright técnicos" or "nefarious rudos", who traditionally have exhibited a style much faster and acrobatic than their worldwide counterparts, using fewer "power moves" and the wrestler's size being less critical to the spectacle than agility (Levi, 2005, p98). Levi also notes how Mexican wrestling found its true stride from the 1930s and tends to play down the xenophobic and conservative themes commonly found in traditional presentations of American wrestling. New elements of drama and a unique set of "movement vocabulary" would be utilised to define it as a uniquely Mexican form of entertainment, depending on hyperbole of movement and physical gestures for its melodramatic effect (1997, p62). In the same vein as the origins of British professional wrestling, Lucha Libre had come to stand as a synecdoche for the working classes due to the tendency for those communities to be the majority of the products' audience demographic . Lucha Libre would be further established in popular culture by making appearances in cinema and television, such as masked stars of Mexican wrestling becoming popularised in the nation's cinema works. Levi notes this process allowed the featured wrestlers to become transcendent, mythical figures within Mexican culture, empowering the working social classes via the vicarious experience of witnessing their success and giving wider representation of their beloved cultural pastime (Levi, 2005, p126).

Most notable is how Levi utilises a combined ethnographical approach alongside her stylistic analysis – observing how masks from Mexican wrestling are circulated and revered, bought as souvenirs for children, exhibited as hero worship, and even appropriated in working practice, such as theatrical performers using them as liners for other make-up effects, a process Levi defines as "indigenous cultural performance norms" (2005, p117-

118). Levi proves professional wrestling as a cultural staple unique to Mexican culture and its history, cementing the notion that the critical discussion of the sport offers a way of providing insight into national identity in analysing its stylistic and aesthetic origins, as well as how fans assign meaning, participate and enjoy wrestling. In a similar vein to Levi's approach, a combined ethnographic and historical look at British wrestling style and fandom would serve as a counterpoint to my own findings from the contemporary British wrestling scene. This would allow for a contrast in analysis and to uncover any unique similarities or differences between both periods, informing better understanding of how professional wrestling, and its fandom, can express a sense of British cultural identity as well as potential for cultural exchange across different communities. Importantly to note, this study of wrestling on a national and regional level does not aim to belittle or antagonise that of popular, American efforts – but more to showcase how mythic, popular understandings of cultural products can be informed on varying macro and microcosmic levels (global versus national, national versus regional), as well as any subcultural distinctions that may arise – whether deviant, resistive, or otherwise differentiated from mainstream understandings of cultural output. (Hebdige, 2002)

Professional Wrestling and Ethnography

Considering that the research involved with this thesis exists within a quasi-ethnographic approach, it is worth examining some dedicated ethnographical studies of professional wrestling fandom existing in past professional wrestling discourse. One early study conducted by Sharon Mazer (1998) investigated the spectatorship of professional wrestling in a North American context and conducted observations in training camps and

wrestling clubs. Mazer explores notions commonly observed in this era of wrestling discourse such as the notion of masculinity in the relationship between male performers and spectators, but also looking at the nature of female wrestler expression mostly seen in a pornographic sense throughout wrestling's popularity. At a time in wrestling history where the industry was still in a transitional phase from being closed to the public in terms of its inner workings and intended practice, Mazer notes these potential difficulties and tensions faced when entering such a community as an overt, foreign observer by noting "I realise once more I don't belong in a steamy gym watching a bunch of men practice hitting each other or pretending to hit each other. [...] There are tensions, created by the mere fact of my presence in the gym, that could explode at me if I am not careful" (1998, p1-2). This speculation of tense reaction could well be influenced by famous incidents of professional wrestling being criticised by and being met with direct violent reaction. Examples of this include *20/20* interviewer John Stossel being assaulted with open-hand strikes to the face multiple times by wrestler David 'Dr D' Schultz, *Hot Properties* host Richard Belzer being choked unconscious by Terry 'Hulk Hogan' Bollea, and Leon 'Vader' White attempting to assault a presenter on Kuwaiti television – all incidents occurring after accusations of the sport being 'fake' or predetermined. The ability to gain access to such a closed community, especially to observe as a female fan, was a considerably controversial act to achieve and served as a pivotal moment in professional wrestling academic research as an ongoing establishment, with Mazer noting the tensions raised from her presence in a non-spectatorial form by feeling as a "voyeur", and equating the taboo and such a privileged position as a wrestling fan seeing behind the proverbial curtain to that of being at a striptease of "peep show" – witnessing elements of the business of professional wrestling she, as a fan and spectator, would otherwise not be privy or have access to. (1998, p11)

Mazer refers to the hostile environment created by her attendance as differing in the typical performer-spectator relationship, whereby a voyeuristic mode of viewership is perceived as a result of entering a previously forbidden and inaccessible realm to non-practitioners and piercing the barrier of performed identities to that of real ones. Despite the difficulties encountered as one of the earlier ethnographic observers of wrestling, gaining hostilities due to being othered and perceived by the observed community as encroaching voyeur, Mazer still maintains important and consistent observations on the intended practical assertions and spectatorial qualities professional wrestling presents. From exploring research efforts and findings from ethnographic approaches in an era of wrestling circles being mostly closed to public visibility and inquiry, contrasts can be potentially observed by communicating with practitioners in a contemporary environment. This relates to how fans and wrestlers engage in a collaborative sense of mutual understanding unseen in prior decades, as well as further concepts of fans-as-wrestlers, the journeys made into engaging with their fandom on the more personal, physical level, and indulging in dual layers of experience in both fan and performer contexts.

Mazer makes further observations of professional wrestling practice and presentation by defining the sport as a form of transgressive art, particularly in the vivid use of homosexual clichés in its performance and violating “protocols of the masculine.” (1998, p95) Examples used are the likes of mid-twentieth century wrestler Ricky Starr performing as a fighting ballerina, using dance routines to gain competitive advantage in the ring but inducing comedic reaction from fans due to the culturally-perceived incongruity and stereotypical feminine association, as well as fellow mid-century period wrestler Gorgeous George and the aesthetic of androgyny presented, both gaining traction with audiences as a

force of both narcissistic self-interest and instigating potential homophobic audience reaction. Mazer supplements this observation by discussing how these characters would often gain positive fan reaction, even garnering engagement as 'babyfaces', opposing the cultural assumption of homophobic tendencies posited towards such stereotypes. However, this discussion is balanced by Mazer stating the appreciation of their homosexual aesthetic "may be no less rooted in hetero-sexism if not homophobia. It is possible that at best their laughter is only transiently transgressive, perhaps celebrating a kind of carnivalesque outing, a trip to the homosexual freak show" (1998, p96). Regardless, masculinity being the central crux of meaning and identity within American professional wrestling is the main source of Mazer's theoretical drive, showcasing the carnivalesque function of the sport in the way it "affirms and mocks, celebrates and critiques prevailing definitions of what it is to be a "real" man in contemporary American culture" (1998, p100). Here, the performance underlines more normatively masculine roles.

This exploration of masculine representation and appeal in professional wrestling, as well as their potential toxic spectatorial functions, continues on to other early forms of ethnographic observation of wrestling, such as a study conducted by Barbara Ruth Burke (2000). In her research, Burke explores the nature of televised wrestling fans within what is now referred to as 'Attitude Era' WWE, a period in the late 1990s where the company's brand of 'sports entertainment' was booming, most particularly within teen and young adult demographics. A cultural shift in media products led to the showcasing of risqué and explicit content, meaning that WWE would adopt a similar approach to narrative and characterisation in their televised products - allowing for a wider use of anti-hero character types, as well as displays of anti-establishment and rebellious behaviour. In this study, a

single group of young adult wrestling fans were observed during their viewing of WWE televised wrestling within this era, whereby various viewing and social cultures were noted. Rather than adopting the reactionary approach that assumes “media audiences are ill-equipped to handle the powerful onslaught of [...] vile, domineering messages” – an approach argued by Burke as commonly used by the media academics of the time period, her study aimed to show a different perspective that would acknowledge that “mass communication audiences regularly select, consume, and interpret widely disseminated, corporately produced messages”, that they simply aren’t victims of programming, but rather “audiences choose what they do because the shows provide pleasures” (2001, p6). What Burke seemingly refers to here is the beginnings of narrowcasting culture in modern digital entertainment, whereby the technological development of mediated products would lead to a vast amount of available content, and therefore providers would narrow focus to particular audience cross-sections to capture that demand. For example, fans of science fiction and fantasy genres would watch the SyFy channel to cater to their very specific content needs, just as fans of culinary viewing could seek that type of content on channels like the Food Network. Although this also refers to simple supply and demand tactics by providers, the notion still stands that fans know what they wish to see, have autonomy of choice and taste, so will seek out avenues to access that content as opposed to the passive consumption of audiences in the pre-satellite, purely terrestrial eras of television.

Burke notes the group experience when watching wrestling, observing how the fans observed were more enthused in group situations and that “the essential part of the experience was watching with others” (2001, p9). Her writing implies a socially-shared experience, how emotional affection can create connections between fans and products,

particularly as wrestling relies heavily on reaction within a live setting. Burke writes “many participants agreed that the crowd was an element in their enjoyment of the programs and noted the construction of a community that existed because of the hype” (2001, p9). Unfortunately, this observation remains only a quantitative one and requires a wider sense of qualitative exploration. Questions can be asked when reading Burke’s research, such as whether audiences enjoy mutual recognition of heroes and villains and form a sense of identity based on that, or if participating in the social aspect of the fan-producer relationship is something that adds to the favourability of wrestling. Furthermore, the appeal of live spectatorship of wrestling is something which is not acknowledged within Burke’s writing, only the concept of shared experiences within group viewership of televised products. This influences this study in attempting to fill the gaps in Burke’s surface-examination of wrestling fandom by examining identities, subcultures, and enjoyment paradigms of live audiences within British wrestling, alongside an attempt to contribute to her notions of mutual enjoyment of televised wrestling in group situations, through the investigation of how British audiences enjoy and associate with televised viewings of international products such as New Japan Pro Wrestling (NJPW), Impact Wrestling, and the major industry stakeholder, WWE.

Burke’s research aptly acknowledges various problematic social cultures within fan communities of the Attitude Era time, namely a reinforcement of patriarchal structures and an exclusion of truly empowered female representation, as well as showcasing an interesting dichotomous argument as to whether fan reactions are purely autonomous or are mostly affected by a product’s framing and communication. However, the main weakness of this study is that it is not reflective of all aspects of fandom and has a very rigid

critical value stemming from a very superficial sample of fans, as well as the ways in which wrestling can be consumed and fan identity can be expressed. In fact, Burke writes with a complete focus on the social dynamic of people watching wrestling as opposed to acknowledging and exploring the wide array of cultures and classes within wrestling fandom. However, it would still be prudent to use Burke's study to compare fan communities now to previous eras, determining how progressive they may or may not have become in a more culturally and technologically-converged world, and look more closely at live audiences within professional wrestling, analysing the ways in which cultural identities are formed within those communities and how they are expressed. If, according to Jenkins and Levi, professional wrestling has traditionally been enjoyed and engaged by a working-class male audience, a look at contemporary productions may highlight the results of societal progression, as well as show how identities may have been either reformed, reasserted or shifted entirely. Considering British professional wrestling has had racist, sexist, and homophobic readings as highlighted in chapter one, these observations may prove insightful in terms of utilising contemporary British wrestling audiences to inform a fresh understanding of wrestling fandom and help disprove potential reductive readings of the form and its audiences. Furthermore, Burke's study provides a stimulus to explore the cross-section of identities of wrestling fandom, opening the possibilities to explore it from not only the perspective of gender but also taking sexuality and race into consideration. Wrestling has typically utilised problematic racial, gender, and sexuality stereotypes throughout its history to inform a sense of character and narrative to its audiences, so this has undoubtedly had some form of effect on audiences leading up to contemporary times. This area may prove to be a critical point within my exploration and analysis of the modern British wrestling scene in its current state, as well as in comparison to historical ones, with

regards to whether characterisations have progressed with societal and cultural shifts and attitudes, if problematic structures still exist within the scene and how they relate to and affect fandom, its varying subcultures and demographics.

Lastly, Burke acknowledges the notion that wrestling can enact an exaggerated spectacle which not only serves as pure entertainment but may be read as representing real-world socio-cultural and political issues as a natural result of trying to connect with the audience and fans on an emotional level. She states:

“the gruesome, extreme costumes and exaggerated displays of pain and suffering are seen by some fans as a reinforcement of what they already understand—that evil and ugliness can win and prosper, and that "life is unfair." When members of the "front office" are ridiculed and attacked in skits and at ringside, viewers tell me they like the notion of "sticking it to the man." (2001, pp11-12).

The idea of wrestling creating an exaggerated representation of true societal thoughts and fears were a huge part of the success of WWE's 'Attitude Era' of the late Nineties, utilising characters such as 'Stone Cold' Steve Austin and 'The Rock' (Dwayne Johnson) to connect to fans with a sense of gritty realism, blurring the lines between hero and villain and show the shades of grey between good and evil to drive a sense of anti-establishment within characters. This diverges from previous eras of wrestling which represented the narrative of good versus evil in a much more contrasting and straight-

forward presentation, such as the huge, towering evil Andre the Giant against the “say your prayers and take your vitamins” family-favourite Hulk Hogan.

Burke’s noted fan connections with characters and wrestling generating an understanding of the world via characterisation and representation can be applied to the current state of professional wrestling. Questions to be asked are whether the paradigm for the appreciation of wrestling from fans has changed in a post-digital world where the inner-workings of the industry are now completely exposed with the instantaneous access to information. Furthermore, insight can be gained by exploring how fan communities identify with wrestling outside of a live audience context, particularly in a Web 2.0 world where participatory fan communities are well established and can create their own understanding and micro-cultures. Insight may also be gleaned from fans that demand and specifically seek out culture-specific products relative to their interests, rather than simply existing as the traditional, casual television fans in previous eras when wrestling was entirely mainstream and more widely available on terrestrial platforms. In a time where fans are entirely exposed to the ‘unreality’ of wrestling, and how almost everything – from the storylines to the events within a match – are pre-planned, it would also be insightful to explore how fans become immersed in the product and continue to enjoy it passionately as a sport as opposed to a simple entertainment show.

Catherine Salmon and Susan Clerc provide a deeper insight into the female demographic of wrestling fans during the period of writing than that of Burke, noting the lack of female representation and a base assumption of the sport being predominantly enjoyed by and targeted to a male audience. Referring to the commonly used phrase “a

soap opera for men”, they note how it represents the grossly patriarchal nature of the business that “denies space for female fans while co-opting a traditionally female-centered genre” (2005, p167). Despite this notion being expected to deflect female viewers, Salmon and Clerc uncover a more truthful and in-depth coverage of female fandom of the period, showcasing not only the ways in which such a relegated audience interacts and identifies with professional wrestling but in how the negotiation of spectatorship uniquely differs from that of the male demographic. From their investigation, they observed that online female fans expressed their connection with the sport via material posted and shared online, including candid photos of wrestlers outside of their characterisation, or simply pictures taken within characterisation but images which could represent a wrestler differently than intended – such as a ‘heel’ wrestler smiling or laughing out of context and interpreted as playfulness as opposed to sarcasm or joy in dispensing punishment as the villainous characterisation usually implies. Rather than enjoying wrestling in the Jenkins sense of a deeply masculine melodrama, female fans of the time are argued by Salmon and Clerc as to only derive joy from wrestling as “the result of their unintended interpretations and pleasure at watching big men in small trunks” due to the industry’s assumption of a mostly young adult male audience and supplying their assumed pleasures being paramount (2005, p169). Although the authors do acknowledge this as a very normative approach to take when analysing wrestling fandom, it cannot account for female fans who enjoy wrestling simply for its simulated portrayal of conflict and presentation of heightened athletic ability, as opposed to just satisfying fetishist desires, as Salmon and Clerc’s research implies.

Nonetheless, Salmon and Clerc make further observations of female wrestling fandom as it relates to and affects the overall product and general fandom. They mention how attempts to cater towards a female demographic have backfired in terms of affecting the overall perception of a character. The popular wrestler Shawn Michaels is used as an example of this notion, previously being understood as a character associated with anti-establishment and rebellious values, then becoming hyper-sexualised in an attempt to satisfy the potential of a straight, cis female, fetishist demographic. This shift in narrative and aesthetic led to a confusion amongst the straight, cis male fanbase, questioning their own masculinity and breeding a hostile, homophobic fan environment which was even supplemented by WWE creative decisions to allow for opponents of Michaels to capitalise on the situation by directing insults in a homophobic manner – such as Bret Hart drawing attention to Michael’s work with Playgirl magazine and calling him a ‘homo’ live on air and in front of an arena of fans (2005, p169). Salmon and Clerc supplement the notion of problematic gender and sexuality-related identity issues affecting the perceived genre of professional wrestling, stating how “too much emphasis on male bodies and too many women in the audience also make it more difficult to suppress the fact that wrestling is sports entertainment, not pure sport”, further noting such fetishistic lingering on male bodies disrupts the traditionally masculine and patriarchal nature of wrestling presentation, and as such “would please straight female viewers” (2005, p170)

These unique differences in fan expression between genders, as well as problematic cultures that evolve from them, Salmon and Clerc argue, “further underscore the impact of wrestling as a conservative narrative with very clear, essentialist, gender lines” (2005, p175), contributing to the notion of vast underrepresentation of women in wrestling in and out of

the ring. However, despite these issues being prevalent in the time of writing, professional wrestling is an entertainment form that, despite core elements of athleticism and simulated conflict being timeless, tends to evolve and redefine its presentation and intended narratology with cultural shifts over time. Therefore, placing analytical primacy on wrestling as a form which only serves to pleasure fetishist desire, as well as assuming those desires from a purely normative vantage point, serves only to reduce the potential impact and variety of academic research into professional wrestling – especially considering the current worldwide environment of wrestling presentation and fandom is arguably at the most progressive and widely-representative point it has ever been.

An ethnographical approach to studying British wrestling fandom will gain insight into not only cultural identity, methods, and reasons for expression but to better understand how gender may or may not inform these notions, rather than focusing on fandom through an analytical lens predominantly associating with notions of fetishism and scopophilia. It is understandably easy to fall into this analytical ‘trap’ due to the physical nature of professional wrestling and the constant visible display of human physique, but an equally important aspect of the sport is its narratology, assigned meaning, and how fandom may or may not become formed from that as opposed to physical fascination. With Salmon and Clerc’s work, although apt to a degree in uncovering some aspects of female fan identity, it can be argued as uncovering an element of sub-culture within an overall structure, simply exploring female fans who happen to enjoy wrestling on fetishist terms and express such fandom online with image sharing, not in the same light as the misogynist portrayal of male online fandom and image sharing but similar in the intention of personal aesthetic desire rather than associating in terms of narrative, personal character, and ability.

Lawrence McBride and Elizabeth Bird provide a short ethnography of the 'backyard wrestling' phenomena – a term defining a fan-created wrestling sub-culture originating throughout the Nineties and leading to contemporary times, whereby fans employed a do-it-yourself approach to forming their own independent, home-grown wrestling organisations to both physically become what they aspired to be as fans and being able to perform in front of a crowd, but to enact their fandom to the most personal and physical, personal way possible. Put simply, in similar ways to how fans textually poach from their favoured fandoms to create new stories (Jenkins 1992), wrestling fans would re-enact the action seen on television, eventually developing that behaviour into ongoing, low-budget professional ventures to indulge with fellow fans. McBride and Bird state “the development of backyard wrestling depended as much on the availability of cheap, portable technology, such as camcorders, as it did on the spectacle of professional wrestling” (p166), linking to the notion that the business became much less protected and closed as it once was before the emergence of the internet and the digital era. Wrestling fans have long grasped the scripted nature of professional wrestling, embracing it through a willing suspension of disbelief. However, the internet's rise and the swift exchange of information have exposed many insider aspects of the industry. Wrestlers' actions, such as breaking character both in matches and in public, have further eroded the business's secrecy. An iconic moment illustrating this shift was the 'Curtain-Call' incident in the mid-1990s at Madison Square Garden, where Diesel, Razor Ramon, Hunter Hearst Helmsley, and Shawn Michaels abandoned their roles to acknowledge their impending departure for WCW. This event, captured on a camcorder by an audience member, symbolised the decline of 'Kayfabe,' the longstanding code of secrecy in professional wrestling that once maintained the illusion for

fans. Although the etymology of the term is not entirely known for certain, it is argued this term is a “Pig-Latin-esque” word evolving from the slang-based language used by carnival workers – an industry which has historically included professional wrestling (Moon, 2020, p52). The term both refers to the traditions of professional wrestlers to maintain the illusion for spectators of “the performance of staged and ‘faked’ events as actual and spontaneous” (Chow and Laine, 2014, p46), as well as known as a safe word between performers serving as a reminder to maintain such illusions when viewers are present. Ex-wrestler and long-term employee of WWE Pat Patterson confirms this use of the term in his autobiography, stating “It was common practice each time an outsider entered the sanctuary that was our dressing room to yell that code word. It simply meant we should not be talking about business” (Patterson and Hebert, 2016, p156).

The digital era and certain actions within the wrestling industry have given rise to a group known as 'Smart Fans.' These fans possess a deep understanding of the behind-the-scenes aspects of professional wrestling through their research and awareness of the inner workings. McBride and Bird aptly delve into the concept of 'Smart' and 'Mark' fandom, distinguishing between them. 'Smarts' comprehend the wrestling business, approaching it like insiders, while 'Marks' still believe in the competition's authenticity and react as intended by the storyline creators (2007, p169). Smart fans engage extensively with paratextual content outside the actual wrestling, including biographies, documentaries, and 'shoot' interviews where wrestlers break character to share their insights and experiences. Not all fans delve into this extra material, leading to the existence of 'Marks' who remain uninformed about the industry's inner workings. Smart fans are more critical of their wrestling experience, akin to fans interested in movie studio politics rather than just movies

or TV shows (2007, pp169-170). 'Smarts' often predict wrestling outcomes but appreciate the decisions made by wrestlers and companies on a meta-level. In contrast, 'Marks' lack this awareness, responding at face value. The term 'Mark' traces back to the early days of wrestling when carnival visitors marked for being fooled were targeted for performances. This term endures, representing viewers with limited meta-awareness in today's wrestling landscape.

McBride and Bird illustrate the emergence of Smart fandom and its connection to backyard wrestling culture using Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW) as an example. Smart fans played a pivotal role in the success of ECW, appreciating it as a renegade company striving to revolutionise the wrestling scene. They valued high-risk moves as acts of generosity (2007, pp171-172). Smart fans can discern when a wrestler falters and when they go the extra mile to entertain the audience, responding accordingly. They also appreciate when a wrestler enhances their opponent's credibility by convincingly 'selling' their moves, preserving the illusion and suspension of disbelief for the audience.

Applying the 'Smart' and 'Mark' to contemporary British wrestling audiences might not be suitable for modern academic analysis. Social media and real-time information access may have evolved fandom to a more sophisticated state, or 'Marks' might exist within isolated bubbles separate from the 'Smart' community's discourse. This suggests a need to re-evaluate wrestling fandom in the present, offering a more nuanced approach for defining contemporary fans and their diverse perspectives on meaning, identity, and social practices in wrestling.

Contemporary Wrestling Discourse

There has been a new wave of professional wrestling discourse in the last decade, continuing on from the vital, earlier discourse set by key professional wrestling scholars earlier discussed but refreshing the study of the sport within various disciplinary frameworks. One such collection of works is within a collection of essays edited by Carrie-Lynn Reinhard and Christopher Olson (2019) which focus on the study of wrestling within the framework of convergence culture. They explain their contrast in terms of the blurring between sports and entertainment, the consistent borrowing from popular culture, as well as presenting dynamic relationships which allow professional wrestling to sustain itself and remain relevant in shifting times and attitudes. Not only do they mention how the sports and entertainment form contains many aspects of identity within its production and labour, but can also present many possibilities to blend different strands of academia for critical analysis. Ultimately, Reinhard and Olson have two main perspectives on professional wrestling - as either “a site of convergence or [...] how the era of convergence has changed the overall perception of professional wrestling” (2019, p21), meaning that the form itself may present factors of convergence within its iteration, or surrounding convergence factors may effect it externally.

Some essays within this collection include the works of both Annette Hill (2019), looking at the power dynamics between audience and performer at live wrestling events, as well as Matthew Wysocki and Joshua Call, who explore the notion of fan participation within the specific example of independent wrestling promotion CHIKARA, as well as how that company builds a sense of convergence culture through the use of transmedia storytelling

(2019). Both of these works contribute knowledge to the relationships between fans and producers of wrestling – with Hill further establishing the dynamics of ‘Smart’ and ‘Mark’ wrestling fandom set by that of McBride and Bird (2007), but detailing the nature of fans “converging and comingling” at live wrestling shows due to the joint emotional labour required between audience and performer for professional wrestling. Hill states how “wrestlers and audiences co-produce controlled chaos” (p49), where the “wrestlers perform characters, follow storylines, and enact moral narratives” and the fans at live shows “perform their part as passionate and vocal crowds, with fans and anti-fans also adopting characters themselves.” (p56) From the audience engaging in the “co-emotional” work of the wrestlers and their physical actions, Hill observes that these are “cues” for fans to react collectively to the spectacle of wrestling, and this relationship between viewer and producer “highlights the audience work in the shaping of an emotional structure for these kinds of live events.” (pp51-52)

Wysocki and Call concur with this emotional, productive, and participatory connection between fans and producers of wrestling, but focus attention more specifically on the relationship fans show towards their favoured promotion. They express “to be a fan of the promotion is not to simply be audience, but to be an essential element of the story, experience, and identity” of that promotion (2019, p189), creating a parallel between Hill and her observations of fan power in co-creating the emotional flow (and sometimes content) of a live wrestling show. They also note how the tendency for “audience expectations for content – whether fan-produced or otherwise – remain a constant” (2019, p187). Wysocki and Call showcase the unique way in which the independent wrestling promotion CHIKARA make use of transmedia storytelling via social media, YouTube videos

and embracing fan-produced content to develop its identity as a brand, as well as encourage a community of fans to engage and shape its product. Although CHIKARA tends to embrace a “world upside down” in terms of its characters and storytelling – such as a “wrestling ant colony”, fans accept this and are able to suspend disbelief through their close connection with and ability to interact, create for, and enjoy the promotion (Wysocki, Call, 2019, p189). Although these works focus their research on American promotions, which is a typical trait of professional wrestling discourse as a whole, they raise a question and interest in whether there are particular communal and co-operative aspects unique to that of British professional wrestling – whether reflective of the particular regional iteration of the form or how they may be informed by the wider, national social, cultural and political influences.

Laine studies wrestling from within the framework of theatre studies, observing wrestling as a theatrical event based within a live context with justification being due to expanding and shifting audiences warranting different approaches and reception of the sport (2020, p32). Theatrical aspects of wrestling, such as the use of bleeding, are explored, noting how blood in a wrestling match is used as a way of signifying pain and a core dynamic of the way a performance is read and legitimised by the audience. Blood can have both possibilities to either draw a sympathetic reaction from the audience or satisfy their urge for the villain to have violent consequences for their immoral actions. (2020, p75) Laine links this to Barthes’ notion of the sport existing as a spectacle of human suffering, but rather than Barthes’ intention of this theory to connote the sense of audiences only wishing for the athletic performance of such pain to be entertained, modern audiences seem to wish to see more authentic forms of such content due to complaints witnessed by fans if punches are pulled or the presented combat is seen to be too ‘weak’. Laine further argues this is as a

result of the deregulation of professional wrestling and its transition from a perceivable sport to more of an entertainment product. (2020, pp64-65)

Laine uses her discussion of professional wrestling and theatrics to further analyse the sport in terms of its labour practices and transgressive aspects such as sexism, homophobia, and racism – observing the contrast of how systemic politics of wrestling promoters and writers cause problematic nationalistic presentations, but wrestling also can be seen as progressive due to creating a working language which empowers performers of any nationality to create and produce cooperative labour. Even if transgressive elements are present within a wrestling production, pleasure and camaraderie is still enjoyed by its labour force. As Laine states, “getting beat is a cooperative effort, yes, but the physical performance of wrestling perhaps surpasses any regressive characters and narrative” – connoting that dedicated fans may also be able to see past these systemic practices to appreciate the livelihoods and desires of performers behind their presented characterisations (2020, pp46-47).

These important aspects of wrestling as a cooperative, emotional form of labour link back to an earlier study made by Tyson Smith. Smith notes the social consequences for workers within this context, observing the labour being undertaken as being due to sincere passion, in contrast to the poor conditions they often have to work under. These include a lack of concrete contracts to protect aspects such as pay, security, and health benefits, sometimes not being paid at all for their performances, and most wrestlers having to work a day job to support themselves and continue indulging in their passionate wrestling labour (2008, p160). Furthermore, Smith gives details of the process of such cooperative work,

explaining how the high-risk performances are handled with great care between both performers, with all wrestlers in each match understanding their ultimate responsibilities for each other's welfare despite their "outward display of hatred and domination." These elements of trust and respect between wrestlers for a performance is referred to by Smith as "latent empathy" due to the nature of the performance needing to adhere to a sense of suspending the audience's belief and not highlighting the cooperative aspects of their labour (2008, p169)

As for Laine's study, the more negative aspects of wrestling labour are also explored, such as the notion of wrestlers acting as branded bodies who "inhabit a visage everyday that is more often than not owned by someone other than themselves. That is, the wrestlers' bodies stand in for corporate identity and are used up and consumed (like any other consumer good) through their often (self-)destructive performances" (2020, p81), meaning that there is a negative aspect of companies such as WWE who legally manoeuvre around this issue by leveraging trademarks and likenesses against their talent in a move to control the financial stake in their performers and intellectual property (2020, p82). Lastly, these observations made by Laine revolving around theatrics of wrestling and labour practices offer up a unique way of understanding contemporary concerns with world political and ideological factors, as "the labour of wrestling bleeds through and reminds us of what unregulated capitalism looks like" with its brutal results of labourers going to extreme lengths to provide personal value in exchange for financial security (2020, p76), but can also offer opportunities to see "malleability and possibilities" for progressive presentations in professional wrestling on the commercial stage (2020, p55).

Another collection of works observing professional wrestling within a more contemporaneous context is in *#WWE: Professional Wrestling in the Digital Age* edited by Dru Jeffries, which includes a selection of essays examining the intersections between media, technology, and fandom by concentrating analyses on the WWE during its 'Reality Era' (2011 to present). Andrew Zolides contributes further to an understanding of labour practices and associated issues within professional wrestling, noting how struggles with labour rights within the industry are often suppressed with a tendency for WWE to define their wrestling performers as independent contractors. But wrestlers can empower themselves, despite not being able to collectively bargain through the use of social media and addressing the fan-base and wrestling community at large. Zolides connotes how WWE performers endure a unique level of struggle due to the transmedia era in which character portrayals are demanded to be spread across multiple forms of media, as well as other difficult aspects such as "peak physical conditioning" and a more flexible style of living in line with a "relentless travel and performance schedule" (2019, p61).

This labour struggle is also explored by Dru Jeffries and Andrew Kannegiesser, but through the tracking of the rise of WWE as a massive, global, corporate entity. They first build a framework of understanding WWE within the context of capitalism and neoliberalism, beginning by referring to observations made by McQuarrie (2003) noting how the term "sports entertainment" was coined by Linda McMahon as a means to avoid taxation and government regulation, and that this pursuit of "capital largely unchecked [...] functions as a concise embodiment of the company's neoliberal ethos" (Jeffries, Kannegiesser, 2019, p65). This connection between wrestling and neoliberalism is important, according to Jeffries and Kannegiesser, as the rhetoric implied by neoliberalism

such as social liberalism driving progressive advancement of society is contradicted by the “winner take all” logic of capitalism. When linking to the writing of Fiske of sport traditionally holding values of “fairness and equality for all its players, of respect for the loser and proper celebration of the winner” (2010, p79), the internal tension between neoliberalism, capitalism, and sport is reflected within the world of professional wrestling “which adopts the formal presentation of collective sport within a scripted narrative system.” The ‘fairness’ implied by sport and democratic capitalism contrast well with wrestling as it showcases the dirtier side of individualism and self-discipline over collectivism – all the while paying “lip service” to fairness, but promoting “entrenched positions of privilege.” (Jeffries, Kannegiesser, 2019, p67)

These observations made are apt in that the ‘work’ of the WWE – with the term ‘work’ defined by Jeffries and Kannegiesser as “anything that is scripted to occur or is planned in advance” (2019, p47) – is arguably to convince people of the very opposite of what the company does, which is to give a visage of fairness and morality within its presentation of wrestling and relationships between people. Yet their business tactics could be seen to tell another narrative of capitalism-driven, free-market driven practices of short term profits derived from worker redundancies. WWE has proven to have healthy profit levels, engaged rapid expansion into international territories deemed morally and ethically questionable (such as Saudi Arabia), and indulged in political and economic manoeuvring to avoid legislative and regulatory controls or taxation.

Jeffries and Kannegiesser note this “celebration” of their desired veneer of fairness and egalitarian philosophy “occurs even as WWE’s actions as a company proceed in the

opposite direction, denying its workers union representation or comprehensive health coverage”, as well as blackballing performers previously on their payroll (2019, pp67-68). In light of the WWE’s semi-recent expansion into the UK wrestling scene with a standalone televised product called NXT UK, my study of British professional wrestling coincides with the observations made with by Jeffries and Kannegiesser, namely in looking to explore and analyse the actions undertaken by the WWE in its UK expansion, the relationships developed with local, regional independent promotions and fans, as well as an advantageous and disadvantageous aspects which have materialised as a result.

Other studies within Jeffries collection of essays exploring WWE in the digital era include the works of Christian Norman (2019) and Sam Ford (2019) – all concentrating their analyses of WWE wrestling in terms of fan engagement and audience practices. Norman, redeploying a framework narrative theory explored by Phelan and Rabinowitz (2012), highlights how the notion of creative authority is negotiated between fans and producers of WWE televised wrestling, contrasting the varying levels of viewership diegesis such as the diegetic “narrative audience”, consisting of the crowd at the broadcasted event as well as the at-home viewership the wrestlers also address in their spoken ‘promo’ segments, the “authorial audience” which consists of the extradiegetic, contextualised and assumed audience in general. Norman explains how the ‘narrative audience’ in WWE wrestling “recognises the narrative as an invitation to invest in the world of the narrator” by emotionally connecting to its storytelling and characters within its own narrative world implied by the producers. What is also mentioned is how by looking at the ‘authorial audience’ of wrestling in terms of those outside of the narrative ‘bubble’ and engaging with the content with a meta-appreciation of its production (news reporters or fans on social

media, for example), the contrast between the two audiences may “provide insight into the power dynamics underlying the mode of narrative address, as well as the content of the story itself.” (Norman, 2019, p87)

Fans may use their power as residing within both types of audience in the digital era of instant access to information, participatory cultures, and collective resistance to empower themselves within the televised audience dynamic, acting with agency by showing appreciation or resistance to creative decisions by the WWE in the manner of vocalised chanting, or simply intentionally reacting in a way which opposes the desired one by the producer. As noted by Norman, this was originally embraced by the WWE with their introduction of the ‘Reality Era’ which played on fan awareness of backstage, ‘real-world’ issues within the company and intertwined them within the creative direction of the company’s content. However, WWE would eventually encounter an “extended struggle over creative authority” (2019, p95) due to having to submit to widespread negative fan reactions to various creative decisions made. Norman likens this to the decisions made by George Lucas to change approaches to the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy after receiving widespread fan criticism from *Star Wars Episode One: A Phantom Menace* (2019, p95).

Ford explores similar concepts of the fan-producer relationship in WWE wrestling shows, examining the “balance between collaboration and resistance” of WWE fans at events but going further to establish an understanding of how a fan community may also act on a sense of “moral economy” to somewhat police these issues. This behaviour arguably stems from these fan groups wishing to fulfil a sense of personal duty as being part of the media text created. (2019, p133). Similarly to Norman, Ford acknowledges the dynamic

between collaborative and resistive engagement by fans, but ruminates on where boundaries may lie between “exercising the unique autonomy of wrestling fans have in the live arena and fulfilling their duties as part of the media text being created for those viewing at home.” (Ford, 2019, p133) Ford explores this dynamic where fans can ‘hijack’ a live show by purposefully not responding as intended by the producer, but contrasts this with the tendency for some fans to push back against this behaviour by direct response at events via chanting, booing – but also external resistance through social media. There is an acknowledgement here that there is an unspoken form of contract between performers and audiences in wrestling, mostly due to the costs paid by them in return for desired entertainment and leading to a sense of entitlement over the story being presented. Ford explains that fan resistance at live events stem from this relationship, where the creative performances “defy fans’ desires”, violating this ‘contract’ and thus undermining their perceived value to the ongoing creative process (2019, p133). Ford acknowledges this process is not entirely new, comparing this “policing of borders” within the wrestling fan community to the historical defenders of wrestling ‘kayfabe’ trying to defend the suspension of belief for audiences. However, these notions of fans at broadcasted events policing resistive action at live shows has elements unique to the post-digital era, such as the meta-awareness of engaged “spect-actors” in wrestling (Di Benedetto, 2016, pp29-30) in knowing the value of providing a desired audience performance to create a more pleasing and attractive product for those watching at home. Regardless, this conversation yields insightful knowledge of the current wrestling fan community at large, showcasing those tendencies to “collectively perform as believing sports fans while also potentially engaging as critic performers and community-critic performers” (Ford, 2019, p131). My study aims to contribute to this discussion by exploring more national and regional cultural aspects of

such audience action – namely in the ways that wrestling productions and their audiences can be culturally formed, showcasing potentially unique traditions and fan cultures in the UK to help better understanding these resistive and cooperative factors of participation at live events.

A recent and very original contribution to professional wrestling studies is by Litherland et al, who offer an insightful and original discussion of professional wrestling as a framework to be used to understanding interdisciplinary fields, using wrestling practices and terminology to create meaning within an academic context. For example, they note how the language of wrestling can allow for a better understanding of contemporary debates within cultural, social, and political contexts, and particularly focus on how wrestling “can help us to understand the role of our own academic labour in studying such contexts” and act as “a model for positive and fruitful collaboration.” (2021, p216) They make an apt contrast between the research efforts within UK Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and that of the wrestling industry by stating how the British higher education system “want the right kind of creativity, collaboration, and innovation, and see little value in creative research for research’s sake,” particularly if it has little chance to make impact or make money, before making the comparison to wrestling, noting “it could be the most creative, innovative wrestling match ever performed, but if only three people paid to see it, it doesn’t matter. Creativity is being lost to the capitalist machine.” (2021, p226)

Another unique comparison made is to that of academic work being placed within a working mode of opposition or contestation. A point is raised in how most academic literature is about choosing which theorists within the field of study one wishes to set their

work up against in terms of further developing knowledge or outright contesting findings – therefore creating a “feud” much like in professional wrestling presentations. They question to what extent “the best academic feuds are based on legitimate interpersonal grievance, where the public performance has an edge to it because you know the people don’t like either backstage.” (2021, p225) These assertions and contrasts between the language and practice elements of wrestling and academia serve as a creative reminder that the critical study of professional wrestling can contribute greatly to better understand the world at large and its various social, cultural, and political aspects, as well as the malleability of professional wrestling studies as an institution to aptly contribute to other schools of thought.

Tom Alcott discusses wrestling in relation to the notion of celebrity, stardom, and the connection between performer and audience. Authenticity is a key factor in Alcott’s analyses – particularly focusing on the ways in which wrestling’s stars are mediated and perceived, showing it as a “negotiated process” whereby producers aim to “promote an aura of authenticity”, and audiences continuously “construct and reconstruct their readings” of those stars in order to find a sense of reality within them. (Alcott, 2018, p216) Alcott observes how WWE strives for a sense of authenticity in its performers by promoting them as legitimate, trained, and “tough” athletes but aiming to blend their public and private personas to create a sense of reality in their presentation. (p219) This process reflects the nature of the ‘Sports Entertainment’ moniker given to the form as the very ‘real’ sense of their dedication and unperformed selves are mixed with the “constructed and manipulated” elements of their presentation WWE produces (p220).

Alcott aptly explores the process of “authentication” which WWE wrestlers endure from audiences, namely in how they must be shown as “legitimate representations of what they embody” , such as rebellious, honest, cool or arrogant – and once those elements are authenticated they must then reach a second stage of authenticity by being shown to be extraordinary or special (p224). Furthermore, Alcott importantly distinguishes these authenticity factors present between audiences and popular, ‘mainstream’ wrestlers such as those in WWE and the less-established or well-known performers on the independent scene. To be popular on the independent wrestling circuit is to be “technically gifted” in terms of a capability to performing a complexity of manoeuvres and establish an impressive work-rate, as well as an important factor of being perceivably “self-made”. (p224-225)

These distinguished elements insinuate that to be aware and be a regular consumer of independent wrestling are factors mostly associated with the most dedicated and engaged fans of professional wrestling. Alcott uses the example of wrestler Daniel Bryan being promoted in WWE and referred to as an ‘indie darling’ – referring to his status as beloved by the more engaged, ‘smart’ and internet-based fan and relating this understanding to the same way in which independent cinema, its producers and creative talent are differentiated from that of Hollywood.

Alcott’s study provides great insight into how perceptions of authenticity are created and function between producers and audiences, but does not include any ruminations of how these relationships may form within a more national, regional, or local context. My study aims to do so, using a similar framework of combining the study of authenticity factors and audience participation to seek how British cultural aspects may affect them in relation to the global, collective scene. By doing this, a more holistic understanding of

Professional wrestling as a body of related but unique parts will be established. The next section of this literature review aims to highlight key studies exploring professional wrestling strictly within a British and European context, showcasing unique historical and contemporary social and cultural factors in its national presentation, production, fandom and spectatorship.

Professional Wrestling Within a British Context

Despite British cultural contexts of British professional wrestling being under-theorised in historical and contemporary academic discourse, there are a few select studies which negotiate the sport in terms of British aspects of practice, meaning-making, and historical factors. One such study is by John Griffiths, offering a historical reflection on hybridity in wrestling via a sense of transnationalism and adaptation of various wrestling styles, but specifically focusing on the pre-televised era of the 1930s and 1940s. Griffiths mentions the concept of “cultural hybridity”, describing it as a concept that may be associated with wrestling as it “postulates that transnational cultures were often adapted as they crossed national boundaries to fit localised conditions” (2015, p39). He aptly argues this point by offering a detailed historical account of the origins of various wrestling styles, such as the ‘Catch-as-catch-can’ form of mat-based technical grappling originating from styles exhibited from Northern England in the late-to-early-1900s. The name of this form links to the style whereby one would grab a hold where one could with intentions to verbally submit the opponent . Griffiths also mentions the vicious, free-fighting ‘All-In’ style first developed in the USA throughout the 1920s, which temporarily superseded the ‘Catch’

style mostly from a lack of athletic skill at the time and tendencies to produce more spectacularly violent presentations to excite audiences. These styles would eventually be shared and spread due to wrestlers touring in other countries during their off-season, where the style would become popularised and circulated among that country's own touring talent and eventually become stylistically hybridised within that community.

Griffiths also explores the unique cultural approach and reception to wrestling, particularly throughout British history in relation to the introduction of the more theatrical American style. He observes the contrast between the origins of American wrestling within circus and vaudeville communities, with British wrestling sharing some elements with its origin in public, carnival events but mostly stemming from regional, sporting events such as the Caledonian Games in Scotland and other smaller community events in areas such as Cumberland, Westmoreland, Lancashire and Cornwall. Griffiths argues this “retained their sporting integrity” as British wrestling athletes and the matches were “untainted by the American theatrics.” (2015, p48-49)

It is to be understood by Griffith's writing that, historically, the British style of professional wrestling has mostly been received as more sporting and traditionally competitive in nature. This is mostly due to being deeply rooted in the legitimate wrestling culture exhibited by the north of England since the late 1800s, as well as the act of watching wrestling being a staple of the time. This then led to these cultures naturally extending to that of the 'worked' professional wrestling style that Britain would later employ. This is not to say that Britain hasn't succumbed to the theatrics of its American wrestling counterparts, as larger-than-life characters such as 'Big Daddy' and 'Giant Haystacks' (see figure 1) would dominate the British wrestling landscape throughout the 1980s until

its demise, with their sensationalised sense of character and a central narrative focus being on size and strength over technical expertise. Even veteran wrestlers of the time, such as Mick McManus and Les Kellett, would employ exaggerated theatrical performances to entertain audiences, rather than a simple focus on wrestling technique – a notion very familiar in the ever-popular American, spectacle-based style. However, the traditional ‘catch’ style would not only still be ever-present through the classic British wrestling era, exhibited by talents such as Johnny Saint, Robbie Brookside, Dave ‘Fit’ Finlay, and Steve Grey, it has also survived through to the current day, seeing a resurgence of popularity among talent and spectators alike, including the work of current UK stars such as Tyler Bate, Pete Dunne, and Danny Burch. All have seen great success on the independent British scene, becoming so popular as to be employed by, and put beneath the spotlight of, WWE’s worldwide exposure.

One final notion Griffiths details is the notion of British wrestling as a staple enjoyed mostly by the working class, mentioning cultural values in pre-war sport in Britain being dominated by a sense of conservatism with a “suspicion of professionalism”, meaning that the amateur, Olympic style sports content could be admired but the professional variants would be distrusted even when theatrical content was minimal. Furthermore, Griffiths explains that “on just about every count, wrestling was [...] an affront to elite values and tended only to appeal to elements within the British and Dominion working classes. Indeed, professional wrestling found its most loyal audiences in working-class districts of London and in the north of England” (2015, p50).

A more intriguing argument is one put forward by industry professionals such as William Regal, a veteran of sport with experience working for *World of Sport*, WCW, and later WWE, who explains how the majority of people who watched *World of Sport* wrestling were indeed working

class and were employed within manufacturing and raw materials, where the days ended at around four o' clock – which he claims created a popular phrase at the time among fans as “everything stops at four o' clock”. Regal explains how people would finish work in time to come home and watch wrestling, justifying the huge viewing figures the programme saw throughout the prior decades. However, he further explains how the attitude encouraged by UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher throughout her terms in office to modernise British television and media led to a general dislike for wrestling by broadcasters as a ‘lower’ form of entertainment, seeking to bury it in the schedule by switching to a midday slot as opposed to the traditional four o' clock showing, meanwhile prioritising more aspirational and contemporary content to appeal to other demographics. Regal claims that this meant the majority of the established audience were not home to watch and hence the viewing figures plummeted, but were still holding a respectable enough figure of 4 million a week to justify keeping it in the schedule (Gorilla Position, 2015). However, Greg Dyke, head of ITV broadcasting at the time, decided to cancel *World of Sport* and its wrestling programming after its decades of service. This informs the possibility of arguing that professional wrestling in Britain was still a mainstay form of entertainment among the working classes, but was cut short due to external issues associated with image and perceptions held by Thatcher-era broadcasters, such as Dyke, who sought to dismantle long-established entertainment avenues to suit a more preferred audience – an attitude potentially reinforced by anti-worker sentiments displayed by Margaret Thatcher’s leadership shown in the breaking of the miners’ strikes, aims to diminish the welfare state, and focusing on individualist entrepreneurship over collectivist progression.



Figure 1: Big Daddy (Left) squaring off against Giant Haystacks (Right)

With the UK being a multicultural, diverse country and wrestling becoming a cultural staple once more, it would be interesting to see whether this 'cultural hybridity' has become manifest within the modern British wrestling scene, where international wrestling styles, approaches, cultures, and subcultures are so easily and readily accessed and witnessed through the evolution of the digital era, as well as a worldwide touring stage becoming more established in arguably the most populated era of wrestling ever known. However, the industry has arguably reached a post-Smart fan era of wrestling consumption whereby engaged wrestling fans are more aware of the inner industrial working of the sport and interconnect with shared information in an era of social media and remote connection. Therefore, it would also be insightful to establish whether this cultural hybridity can be observed within wrestling fandom itself and the cultures it exhibits as opposed to just wrestling styles - whether fan subcultures can still be disseminated by country of origin clearly as once before, or if a sense of hybridity has been formed through access to

worldwide mediated wrestling products and exchange of fan practices and sub-cultures such as chanting, perhaps even both simultaneously.

Carrie Dunn offers insight into the business of British professional wrestling surviving from its original *World of Sport* day of nationally televised wrestling to developing past the digital age of media-engaged fans and audiences. She offers accounts from both wrestlers, promoters, and fans at events to explore ideas of what contemporary audiences demand, the desires for performers in their careers, and the overall health of the UK scene going forward from the point of writing. Dunn offers some discussion of what has historically defined past generations of British professional wrestling production and the general composition and enjoyment factors of its fanbase. She gives an image of British wrestling from the *World of Sport* era, describing “hulking giants rolling around the ring, with little old ladies queuing up to hurl shows at the heels, the baddies, and kids screaming to cheer on the faces, the good guys”, as well as labelling it a “very peculiarly and particularly British leisure pursuit, coloured with the haze of nostalgia.” (2013, p9) Later, she makes interesting observations of how long-serving fans viewing the contemporary offerings in British wrestling express a distaste for the lack of engagement wrestling performers indulge in with the audience in the form of “banter” at live events, often recalling a more personal connection between fan and performer in a pre-digital, ‘kayfabe’ generation of audiences (2013, p17).

This leads to Dunn’s further discussion of the new generation of British wrestling fans at the time of writing, noting how the community of passive viewers of wrestling, in contrast to engaged, ‘smart’ fans and including both old and young people, are less inclined

to be engaged with the developing new regional scene of British wrestling. This, Dunn argues, is mostly due to having WWE programming as “their primary way in which [...] to develop and maintain an interest” once British wrestling was no longer televised or included within popular culture anywhere near as much as before. Dunn describes the newer generation of engaged fans of the time being a “small, albeit dedicated” community enjoying a “limited talent pool” of wrestlers (2013, pp18-19), but gives the sense that the cooperative nature of this limited community would help shape a potentially fruitful future for the UK wrestling industry. By spending more time and money on developing new unique talent and local scenes of production as opposed to relying on expensive imports of ex-WWE alumni to sell tickets, “relying on quality shows, a niche in the market, and increasingly professional attitudes” to grow. (2013, p256) Since the time of Dunn’s writing, the British wrestling industry has encountered many successes, developments, and even controversies – therefore, my study will aim to contribute to a more contemporary understanding and exploration of identities, meanings, and cultures which may have materialised beyond this point in history.

Although Dunn aptly highlights the popularly understood aspects of professional wrestling within a British cultural perspective, there is the issue of collective memory and a mythicised understanding of its audiences and public perception of the sports and entertainment product overall. Tom Phillips addresses this issue, presenting an important study dealing with the synecdochic nature of fan representation within British professional wrestling discourse. He observes how, within particular cultural contexts, a certain kind of fan becomes a type of “shorthand” for the community en masse, and in the case of British wrestling, that shorthand being constructed through a “heritage fantasy” comprised of

memories relayed by wrestlers and other commentators (2018, pp307-308). By examining historical articles via Nexis, Phillips compiled a plethora of evidence indicating a common reporting of traditional British Wrestling fandom as comprising mostly older, mature women, and characterised in a pejorative manner, reminiscent of the works of Jensen (1992) who explored how fans can be characterised as the flawed, dangerous 'other', "weaponizing objects representing their discarded domesticated femininity (handbags, umbrellas, casserole dishes) and embracing combative spirit." (Phillips, 2018, p312) Phillips highlights the nature of nostalgia and memory to conjure the synecdochic image of British wrestling fans of the past as loud, aggressive 'grannies', When doing this, he parallels the notions of nostalgia and comedic caricature observed by Dunn (2013) in which this sustained framing of mature wrestling fans is a form of belittlement and sensationalism, as well as utilising commonly used gendered wording since the Victorian era such as "madness", "hysterical", and "obsessed" (Click et al, 2010, p6), further sustaining patriarchal assertions of female fandom as well as reductive understandings of wrestling fandom overall. Lastly, Phillips discussed how these short-handed, synecdochic presentations of wrestling fans, and fandom in general, are used to "conceptualise an evocative image of fandom that can be used (in this case) to produce content that can be sold for the uses of humour, nostalgia, and curiosity" (2018, p319) – which links to the work of Booth (2015) noting how media industries take advantage of this for commoditisation and exploiting the mythic image of particular fandoms to create sensationalised content for the means of entertainment. This includes documentaries and reality shows such as the example given by Phillips as *Crazy About One Direction* which gives singular accounts of teenage pop music fans but "ignores the spectrum of communities which can make up a fan culture" (Phillips, 2018, p320) . This study by Phillips underpins the importance of studying the culturally

embedded aspects of professional wrestling as it provides a means to aid in demolishing mythic, reductive readings and provide more nuanced, critical understandings of its style, fandom and other potential subcultures within it. These are otherwise missed or underrepresented in popular and academic discourse, and my study aims to contribute to a better understanding of British wrestling in a holistic, comprehensive sense across the analysis of fandom, style, and cultural aspects combined.

Claire Warden presents a perceptive look at modern British professional wrestling on the local and regional level by focusing critical discussion on stylistic and cultural variations between smaller productions at British holiday camps, as opposed to the larger scene of WWE and other grander-scale televised wrestling productions. The primary mode of Warden's discussion shows interest in how spatiality, temporality, and location can affect the overall experience of wrestling for audiences. She notes how "space and place serve as essential contexts for the reception, efficacy, and attributes of professional wrestling matches" (2018, p865), connoting the sense that wrestling can be produced and showcased in vastly different ways depending not only on where the event is held, but also in the way it is framed for the audience to receive. Warden observes how wrestling has unique relationships with audiences due to reactions and enjoyment being held in substantially different ways depending on the place and venue the event is held. Location profoundly affects reception and even deliverance of wrestling, such as the Canadian Bret Hart being booed as a villain in the WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment), but then being cheered by fans in Canada the very next night. Warden states "if geography is inherently important to the reception and attributes of particular feuds and storylines, then location (the arena, hall, or theatre) is equally as important" (2018, p866), comparing the dichotomy of seeing WWE

'Summerslam' in a huge venue in the USA stocked with industrial lighting and pyrotechnics, to that of a quaint United Kingdom show held in a local working men's club or town hall. She notes how "from the pyrotechnic-filled Staples Centre to the Rushcliffe Arena, a hall used for hosting local badminton tournaments and five-a-side football leagues, the chosen venue is a vital element in the general scene" (2018, p866). This refers to how neither type of venue is necessarily better or worse for the reception, and can actually complement the intended value of the wrestling show presented. This is exemplified by how WWE's developmental brand NXT uses a smaller setting in a compact university media studio to capture the sense of exclusivity and awareness of 'hardcore' and dedicated fandom that the brand exhibits. Also, the primary visual focus of its production is on the in-ring action rather than exterior forces such as advertising, cross-promotion, and other non-wrestling coverage.

Most importantly, Warden explores the long-held national institution of professional wrestling being held at Butlin's holiday camps, a wrestling micro-culture which is aimed at families with young children and has content which can be directly compared to that of pantomime in its creative exaggeration of action and character. Warden applies her theories of location and venue dynamics to that of the Butlin's scene, claiming that "for in this delightful holiday camp space, wrestling exists in a vacuum, just as Butlin's exists in its own simulation. This marks it as distinct from other forms of professional wrestling, where storylines and characters are built up over weeks and even years" (2018, p870). Where Butlin's exists as a temporary space for carnivalesque escapism to be enjoyed by working class families on a budget, the same can be said of its wrestling productions. The hero-villain dynamic is over-simplified to cater towards an audience mostly consisting of parents and

children who may not even be introduced to wrestling and its dynamics prior to their holiday. Also, Butlins 'Redcoats' (hired assistants named after their attire) are utilised to direct the audience as to when they should boo and cheer and to incite particular chants depending on the actions of the in-ring competitors, as opposed to the standard form of wrestling presentation where the audience simply reacts autonomously to the action with the competitors and associated production members acclimatising to the environment set and performing accordingly. Warden mentions that in holiday camp wrestling "there seems to be no dissent", observing the contrasting dynamic where audiences are guided as to how to participate and engage or suppressed entirely, giving no entry point for where highly engaged 'fans' can identify and become immersed within the presentation (2018, p871).

Although Warden's study aptly exemplifies how space and place affect the production and reception of professional wrestling, it only goes so far as to simply acknowledge the notion of lacking any mode of dissent and true autonomy for its audiences. There is a real opportunity to further explore why this form exists entirely separately from the main culture of wrestling fandom, and for a deeper exploration of any potential problematic notions on how non-fans might perceive the establishment of professional wrestling. It will be insightful to explore why dedicated fans may or may not disassociate themselves with this particular micro-culture through lack of identification and avenues for true participation, as well as criticism of this area of British wrestling to contain extensive use of problematic stereotypes in its characterisations and encourage nationalism in its audience engagement. (ITV.com, 2016) Furthermore, it would be interesting to investigate how location and regionality can affect both the style and production of wrestling as well as any variation of how fans process and participate within their own local cultures, finding any

potential differences from Scottish and Welsh wrestling to that of English when considering that each culture may have its own established traditions and social structures.

Ben Litherland notes the tendency for the academic approach to professional wrestling studies to be based within frameworks of theatre and media studies, highlighting the issue of undermining the sporting value of professional wrestling via the focus on the obvious theatrical qualities widely presented in the sports and entertainment hybrid throughout history and contemporaneously. By studying professional wrestling, there is the ability to confront “some of the key tensions about what sport is” by asking such questions as “is sport for participating or for spectating?” (2018, p3). Litherland asserts that rigid definitions both displace the athletic form as outside both the boundaries of ‘the field’ in terms of sporting amateurism and the ‘stage’ of consumerist entertainment (p22), and therefore by studying professional wrestling we can potentially overcome this rigidity. His writing interrogates the history of British professional wrestling through lenses of performance and popular culture, highlighting particular topics such as celebrity, consumerism, masculinity, attitudes towards violence, and globalisation – all with a purpose to provide ideas of how people construct meaning and identities through the consumption of sport.

With a timeline stemming from the nineteenth to twentieth century, Litherland’s study aids in detailing the evolution of wrestling in Britain, stemming from amateur and sporting circles but evolving much differently to other sports in the way it would be sustained, namely in being performed and consumed according to different rules and iterations for profit and entertainment – rather than simply for competition and athleticism

(2018, p68). Litherland also insightfully notes its class origins existing within the context of carnival, providing a means of expressing anger and violence but within “the boundaries of licensed disorder as opposed to outright legality” and giving a rare sense of subverted power to ordinary, working people (2018, p24). Eventually this study links the notion of the developing nature of wider ‘celebrity culture’ in Britain being developed from the catalyst of popular and famous ‘celebrity’ wrestlers performing within a “melodramatic mode” of dichotomous performance between that of ‘blue-eyes’ heroes and ‘villain’ antagonists – eventually defining the structure of morality within wrestling (pp114-115). Lastly, Litherland notes the nature of influence the popularity of national broadcast television had on both fields of general sport and professional wrestling in the latter stages of the twentieth century, influencing televised sports overall to become sites of entertaining spectacles in-line with wrestling sentiment.

Litherland’s work is a prime example of the insight which can be achieved in assessing the development of cultural identities, practice, and the relationships existing between notions of social class, power structures, and media representations. The research for this thesis stems from the final years of British Wrestling’s most popular, nationally-broadcast period of *World of Sport* and ITV wrestling programming, moving beyond to modern and contemporary national outputs of the sport. Litherland’s work serves as a vital stimulus to inform the historical and cultural aspects leading up to modernity, as well as unveiling an important space to continue researching understandings of class and cultural development defining modern meanings of the sport and its national identity in contemporary eras of professional wrestling.

From examining discourse centered around professional wrestling within a British context, it is clear there has been some level of work made by academics to define various aspects of identity and meaning within a framework of fan participation and engagement, as well as historical influences leading to the sport becoming a cultural staple of entertainment. However, these efforts are overall quite limited in comparison to the overall historical drive of wrestling studies throughout the past few decades to focus on more general, mythic terms of professional wrestling aesthetic and spectatorship. By further examining professional wrestling within contexts of unique cultural identities and collaborative forms of creating meaning in practice and fan circles, a better overall understanding can be achieved for how common assumptions of the sport can be challenged and what it means to communities on a more localised, regional level rather than on generalised, global, and potentially reductive terms.

The following section aims to detail particular areas in general sports discourse non-specific to wrestling, regarding notions of spectatorship, audience identities, paradigms and ways of engaging as well as elements of hybridity between shifting, inter-relating communities of sports fandom. From exploring these discussions, opportunities will arise in terms of showcasing avenues to apply such concepts to the arguably malleable nature professional wrestling has to blend with other forms of sports enjoyment and engagement to provide contemporary identities and ways of creating meaning.

Sports Audiences, Spectatorship, and Hybridity

Daniel L. Wann and Nyla R. Branscombe provide insight into fan identification in sport by exploring “basking-in-reflected-glory” (BIRG), a concept originally coined by Cialdini et al (1976) and “cutting-off-reflected-failure” (CORF) phenomena within sports audiences (1990, pp103-104). These two processes refer to how fans associate with their chosen team, BIRGing relating to the desire to increase one’s association with the success of others, such as to witness their team score a victory or become a consistently successful force within their respective circles, and CORFing relating to fan allegiance with their respective teams coming into question when failure or loss is incurred or perceived (1990, p105).

Wann and Branscombe note how “sports fans vary in their allegiance or psychological attachment to a team” and the “degree of identification with a team may be an important moderator of BIRGing and CORFing processes” (1991, p105). If a team or outlet makes efforts to identify with their fans and create an emotional connection, fans are more likely to associate even when a lack of success is evident. Exploring the phenomena of "basking-in-reflected-glory" (BIRG) and "cutting-off-reflected-failure" (CORF) in wrestling communities is essential to understanding the dynamics of fan loyalty in the context of professional wrestling. However, it also acknowledges the need to consider the influence of capitalist motives within the wrestling industry. In professional wrestling, where outcomes are scripted and manipulated to shape audience perceptions and loyalties, it becomes challenging to discern whether fans' loyalty to a particular brand or wrestler is genuine or if it's primarily driven by consumerist tendencies.

Merchandise sales are an indicator of how fans create and express their identity within wrestling fandom, but it is important to delve deeper and investigate whether fan loyalty extends beyond mere consumerism. This complexity may be addressed through qualitative and ethnographic research methods, which can provide a more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of fan passion and loyalty in professional wrestling. Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge that the wrestling community, much like other fan communities in sports such as British football, can exhibit tribalism, which can complicate the definition of loyal fans and impact how these fans engage with BIRGing and CORFing processes. Therefore, a comprehensive study should aim to understand any causal effects and potentially problematic tendencies associated with fan tribalism in the context of professional wrestling.

Natalie A. Brown, Michael B. Devlin, and Andrew C. Billings (2013) quantitatively analyse fan identification in the world of mixed martial arts, specifically focusing on the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). They suggest that fans are drawn to combat sports by the thrill and sensation-seeking, with their findings indicating that "highly identified UFC fans scored the highest on thrill-seeking scales" and that increased fan identification leads to higher consumption of UFC media and attendance at live events (2013, p. 29). The study emphasises that fan identification extends not only to the entire sporting institution but also to companies and individual stars. This aligns with Wann and Branscombe's 'BIRG' and 'CORF' phenomena, where fans tend to follow those they identify with, persisting through successes and failures. However, it's important to note that fan attention is not always positive, as some may take pleasure in the failures of those they dislike. Brown et al also

highlight the significant economic impact of fan identification on ticket and merchandise sales and suggest that sports institutions and providers need to foster psychological connections with fans for financial success (2013, p. 29). This perspective, though quantitative, raises concerns about placing economic value on a media product and the potential exclusion of certain demographics. In the context of professional wrestling, this study suggests the importance of understanding fan perspectives and the role of merchandise as identity symbols, going beyond purely capitalistic viewpoints.

While Brown et al.'s study primarily focuses on mixed martial arts fan communities, its concepts can be applied to the world of professional wrestling. Despite wrestling's predetermined nature, it involves a significant display of athleticism and engages fans similarly to 'real' sports. Like MMA, fans in professional wrestling often follow individual wrestlers, supporting them regardless of their company, location, or character development. The blurred lines between reality and predetermined outcomes in both sports raise questions about the exchange of fandom. UFC, for instance, employs professional wrestling tactics in promoting fights, while wrestlers incorporate MMA moves and acquire ex-MMA stars, such as Ronda Rousey, who transition into wrestling's 'unreality'. This relationship between the reality of MMA and 'unreality' of professional wrestling is also observable with the actions of Connor McGregor being particularly newsworthy and even being accused by wrestling star Ric Flair of stealing his 'gimmick' when promoting fights and exaggerating his externalisation of character (Leech, 2022). To comprehensively study professional wrestling fandom, a qualitative and ethnographic approach is essential, allowing for a deeper understanding of fan perspectives and motivations, which may not be captured adequately by a purely quantitative approach. While Brown et al.'s theories offer

insights into fan responses to identification loss, they require a more in-depth exploration of contextual factors. These theories can serve as a starting point, stimulating research into wrestling fandom by observing fan communities, engaging with fans directly, and conducting historical analysis to contextualise findings. With potential future shifts in professional wrestling viewership, these identification theories become relevant and should be critically examined with a comprehensive approach.

While on the subject of hybridity in sports culture, it is worth examining a few areas explored by academics which can be applied to that of professional wrestling, as its fans arguably tend to exhibit behaviour seen in sports audiences, despite the subject of their fandom being considered a pseudo-sport. The first of these writers is Pieter Schoonderwoerd, who critically examines the role of chanting as form of identity in football fandom. He observes how “principally, the songs come under three categories: in support of one’s team, in support of one’s players, and in opposition to other teams/team’s players (whether being played against at that moment or not)”, referring to chants and songs performed by football audiences which indicate an ability to signify their level of enjoyment or general standing with the action spectated and being directed at a multitude of sources (2006, p124). Schoonderwoerd exemplifies the notion of music being appropriated by fans in football as a form of identity, noting how, “released in October 1963, Gerry and the Pacemakers’ number one hit cover of the Rodgers and Hammerstein classic *You’ll Never Walk Alone* has become more than synonymous with Liverpool Football Club. It has become a marker of closed (or close) community at times of glory or tragedy” (2006, p127). The popular chant showcases a commonality in Liverpool fan identity which then creates a structure of association with either success or adversity. This links to the Wann and

Branscombe notion of 'basking in reflected glory' (BIRG) and 'cutting off from reflected failure' (CORF), whereby the 'You'll Never Walk Alone' chant provides an effective signifier and way for fans to closely identify with their sports teams and players, proving to be so universal and culturally pertinent in football circles that it has since been adopted by many worldwide football fan communities.

Schoonderwoerd mentions a Simon Warner interview conducted by The Guardian in 2007 about the growth of popular songs being appropriated as chants, who observed how they are often initially adopted after pub singalongs. Warner states "if you've got 20 people in a pub before a match singing a song they'll take it up again when they get into the ground", but moves on to offer an opinion on how the British, and the English in particular, have a tendency to find public enjoyment through singing quite difficult and embarrassing, but chanting as a group at football games helps to overcome this – "You think of mumbled hymns in church or at school [...] but something about the football terrace washes that embarrassment away. If you release a few thousand young men on to the terraces of Leeds or Manchester, they suddenly find their voice. It's quite an interesting psychological hurdle" (Simpson, 2007, para 6-7). Although Schoonderwoerd aptly recognises this statement as mildly superficial and vastly generalised (2006, p131), it does have some merit in approaching the boundaries of how fans can willingly submit themselves to the carnivalesque, escapist enjoyment of collective identity by partaking in group chanting and singing to support their team, alongside enjoying the sense of community and belonging that such a subculture can offer.

Schoonderwoerd also observes how “the positioning and use of significant chants during specific points in the game is noteworthy” (2006, p131), linking to the idea that chants are used by fans as a signified response to various actions or happenings within a match setting. This notion, along with the general sense of carnivalesque enjoyment through chanting and singing, will be particularly relevant to my exploration of British professional wrestling fandom as such behaviour certainly exists within the general worldwide fan base in terms of chanting being used as a form of group identity and expression for signifying love or hate for characters, appreciation or disgust at certain action or content, as well as simply enjoying the escapism evident in public expression. Lambert does note in his book that in the early stages of the early to mid-2000s British wrestling resurgence a shift in fan activity at live venues was observed, noting it “wasn’t the kind of crowd I was used to [...] with kids running around waving foam fingers while angry old grannies attacked the bad guys with their handbags”, but it resembled something more along the lines of a “football crowd” with the use of “primeval chanting”, “liberal use of bad language”, sporting branded T-Shirts of their favoured wrestling brand, and consisting of mostly 18-30 year-olds (2012, p6). By keeping Schoonderwoerd’s observations about chant culture within British football in mind, it would greatly serve this study to explore why this re-appropriation of football fan culture started, and certainly continues to exist in the British professional wrestling fan community, how it directly links to an understanding of the enjoyment of sports and entertainment from a uniquely British cultural perspective, how it compares to the interactivity culture from wrestling fan spectatorship worldwide and whether any cultural exchange has occurred between these international communities resulting from a post-digital age of instant access and availability of worldwide, mediated products. Schoonderwoerd even states “one should bear in mind that [...] fans’ vocal

responses through chants are particularised by cultural outlooks and that one shouldn't expect those with different cultural backgrounds to have the same approach (across sports) in representing their fandom" (2006, p137), a statement which can be directly applied to that of professional wrestling crowds and how certain attitudes and approaches can vary from country to country in terms of how fans express themselves at live wrestling events, as well as culture-specific chanting being possible to observe and investigate.

The second study associated with hybridity which can be redeployed to the study of professional wrestling fandom is the 2006 piece by Ken McLeod, who identifies the distinct connection between music and sports – a relationship he notes as having an “escalating confluence” in the latter half of the twentieth century (2006, p531). McLeod's writing predominantly focuses on the nature of the music and sports pairing in the last few decades being linked to a sense of masculine control and commodification of such implied values. He notes that “typically, the music associated with most sports is sonically, rhythmically, and vocally aggressive— music that projects a stereotypically masculine image through tone, lyrical content, and performance”, mostly referring to how “extreme sports” such as skateboarding and snowboarding tend to align themselves with punk and heavy metal music genres to inherit the signified masculine and hard-edged values those genres tend to historically exhibit, although not monolithic in values, as well as associate with the demographics they are aimed towards and generally assumed to be consumed by (2006, p536). Other examples used by McLeod to exemplify this notion is stock car racing, noting the sport's fame for “its blue-collar southern country music connections” which appeals to the demographics of people from southern US states that typically mostly enjoy the sport. The National Association of Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR), however, fully understood the

power of association with music and branding of its sport, utilising a more diverse range of genres in its presentation and even planning to integrate original musical themes for individual drivers and teams (2006, p537) – a strategy very familiar in the world of professional wrestling. Lastly, although the National Basketball Association (NBA)'s attempt to garner support from varying demographics with use of multiple facets of popular music, the heavy use of hip-hop music aimed to portray a certain image to appeal to the specific male category, linking to McLeod noting “they often share a heavily aggressive heterosexual masculine image” when referring to popular assumptions of hip-hop music and star exploits (2006, p537).

Despite women's representation in sport arguably becoming more widespread in contemporary society, as well as this article assuming a lack of female spectatorship for such types of sport, McLeod's point still holds true in terms of the sports industry associating themselves with popular culture by way of music to “establish a recognizable sonic identity, or merely in order to cash in on lucrative cross-marketing potential” (2006, p540) – a strategy ever-present in today's world regardless of gendered marketing. Considering music is an integral part of professional wrestling by way of brand association and wrestler identity, an exploration of the pseudo-sport and its relationship with music in-line with McLeod's writing would offer additional avenues of discussion in terms of how fans may relate and connect with certain products and wrestlers, such as the 'hardcore' mentality of Heavy Metal, the anarchistic qualities of Punk or perhaps the seedy, underground value of electronic genres, as well as any ties which bind wrestling fandom to other forms of music communities, such as wrestling at music events and vice-versa.

McLeod's notion of masculine control through music marketing strategies may also be an aspect pertinent to critical examination of British wrestling fandom, as professional wrestling has long been deeply concerned with hyper-masculine presentation and the constant reinforcement of masculine and patriarchal values, particularly within the 'Attitude' era of WWE in the late 90s to early 00s. Exploring this notion may uncover whether these issues have been and are still imbued within the British scene and fan communities, or if any progression in attitude towards gender, sexuality and other cultures in general can be noted in current wrestling communities, and finding any justification for those potential changes. Lastly, any hybridity between the music and professional wrestling industries should also be examined – from perspectives of how fans from each culturally intertwine, form identities and generate meaning, as well as how the industry might respond to such hybridity to associate and cater for such demographics being expanded.

Lastly, McLeod also comes to similar conclusions to that of Schoonderwoerd with regards to the enjoyment of being part of an audience at live sports shows, and the association with music aims to complement such an experience. He explains how "the self-affirming, communal aspect of many half-time shows, of unison chanting or clapping, directly reinforces a collective and affirmative sociability that underscores human agency and participation in the spectacle", as well as observing how music in sports aims to capture this communal, human aspect of the enjoyment of sports events. He goes on to note how "the communal audience barking and fist rolling to 'Who Let the Dogs Out', for example, physically enacts the sense of both a sporting moment and the social atmosphere of a party. In their confluence these experiences thus serve to reinforce one another" (2006, p535). As mentioned before when exploring the works of Schoonderwoerd, this aspect of

carnavalesque enjoyment of live sport through chanting and music, as well as the joy of being part of a collective identity in fandom, shows a distinct similarity with wrestling audiences in the past few decades, but an exploration of how these factors are manifest within historical and contemporary British audiences and fans would serve this study greatly, potentially gaining a greater insight in to how British culture can inform professional wrestling audiences and fan communities, as well as contributing to the ongoing discussion of British cultural sports enjoyment in general.

Fandom Studies

There has been much in the way of academic research regarding the study of fandom. Henry Jenkins defines it as a discursive connection of interests across multiple boundaries, and where some fans may commit themselves to a single product, others use these single points as a stimulus of entry into broader communities linked to the inter-textual network comprised of an array of texts and programs (1992, p40). Alexis Lothian (2012) observed fandom as more of a set of subcultures bound together by digital ephemera. Other earlier studies of fandom and participatory cultures such as Jensen (1992) explore the role of class and elitism, namely with discussion of an 'us and them' divide between fans and mainstream society, stating "the objects of an aficionado's desire are usually deemed high culture [...]. Apparently, if the object of desire is popular with the lower or middle class, relatively inexpensive and widely available, it is fandom (or harmless hobby); if it is popular with the wealthy and well educated, expensive and rare, it is preference, interest or expertise" (1992, p19). Jensen's exploration of fandom as pathological utilises the contrast of scholarly and intellectual interest and focus being

comparable to that of fan engagement with favoured texts, but with structures of societal value and understanding placed differently. Put simply, other people may show similar engagement with something as fans do, but society tends to view the former as rational and considered from an educated manner, as opposed to the latter in fans considered obsessional, held by lower class members of society and as a result deemed a danger or a nonsense.

Francesca Coppa explores a mostly idealistic presentation of contemporary fandom as a participatory culture and communities of fans cooperating towards the understanding of and meaning-making within popular culture discourse, as well as empowering individuals as thought-leaders and socially promoted by fans as trusted sources for information. She notes “fandom [...] blurs the binaries between artist and audience, [...] or more accurately reblurs it; historically, culture was not made by specialists. [...] Theatre people go to the theatre more than regular people; classical musicians hear more chamber music, etc.” (2014, p78). Coppa acknowledges her idealistic stance on fandom, stating “petty production and media consumption aside, fandom provides a mode of social organisation that has the potential to move from being a subculture (that is, a social group based on common interests) to a community (that is, based on shared geography, kinship, or history)” (2014, p78), but aptly balances her assertions by noting the more toxic elements of a networked, mediated fan community and the “imperfections” that can be present in such a relationship. However, she focuses on positive aspects of how the ever-closing parity between producers and fans have been made possible by a modern era of accessible and widely available technology to inspire creative pursuits, empowering fans to participate and more closely

relate with their fandom, allowing for “opportunities for collective action” and meaning generation (Coppa, 2014, p77).

Coppa highlights issues with fan culture by warning of the effect of a contemporary capitalistic society, making fandom “in danger of being owned: our work, our communications, our relationships to and with each other. Fandom is more than its economic/revenue potential” (2014, p80), noting the problematic capitalistic drive reducing the aspect and potential of fans creating their own meaning and acting autonomously within their field of creative participation, as opposed to becoming subject to the capitalist ‘machine’ of dictating their enjoyment for profit over creative fulfilment. Erik Hannerz observes how fans can associate and move between different communities, aiding in definition of a more external mainstream version of their subcultural interest (2015, p36), a mainstream defined as a ‘sell-out’ or casual form of fandom as exemplified by Coppa, defining Comic-Con as an inauthentic, industrial version of a fan event (2014, p80). This relationship leads to the notion that the study of fandom is more effectively approached by associating it with what Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp argue as “a complex figuration of figurations that links up different local groups in a range of interdependent activities” (2017 p. 171), as opposed to one single, whole community.

Matt Hills confirms the need for this route, claiming fandom should be approached “not as a singular or coherent ‘culture’ (if we ever really could), but rather as a network of networks, or a loose affiliation of sub-subcultures, all specialising in different modes of fan activity” (2017, p860). He also observes the fact that many individuals who do not identify themselves as part of any particular community can still be analysed in terms of their

practices, digital or otherwise, and can contribute to a wider sense of possible pathways towards or within the “wider fan world” (2017, p872). Hills further stresses this analytical mode should not be taken as a simple contrast between notions of community and the individual, or merely as an array of experiences to be taxonomised, but rather as a wider, more informed and comprehensive set of “branches” which can aid in closing the gaps and “fuzzy boundaries” in understanding of what fandom means for any particular person, as opposed to just mapping out the world of fandom (2017, p877-878).

Overall, earlier studies of fandom are categorised into different eras. The first being dubbed as the “Fandom is Beautiful” era, comprised of the early ethnographic studies including afore-mentioned theorists such as Jenkins, Sandvoss, and Gray. These represented fan communities as collective efforts to form exclusive subcultural communities in response to negative portrayals of fans by the media and mainstream society deeming fandom an obsessive and pathological practice, only indulged by those with lesser intellectual capacity. Studies of this era “attempted to redeem them as creative, thoughtful and productive” by analysing and exposing positive assertions centred around common fan activities such as fan fiction, convention attendance, and collecting – subverting their common negative critiques received from the mass-media (Sandvoss et al, 2017, p3). This era also introduced the concept of the ‘aca-fan’, less commonly known as ‘scholar fans’ – a term referring to academics identifying as fans. That this relationship is problematic in terms of subjectivity and legitimacy of findings has been commonly debated in modern fandom discourse (Hills, 2007 ; Burr, 2005), yet there are still defences posited as to the benefits of academics sharing experience and understanding with those communities studied. Cristofari and Guitton offer a positive reflection of aca-fans, noting the researcher-subject relationship as

an arguably necessary process, that “being part of the fandom is a crucial way of gathering comprehensive and reliable information to elicit trust from fans and to form a comprehensive picture of fan communities instead of being restricted to publicly available data” (2017, pp726-727). Of course, the ethical concerns of academics existing as part of their studied community are raised in light of society and the media not having a particularly neutral stance towards fans, therefore subsequent research must acknowledge positions of subjectivity and strive for objective, balanced representations so as to avoid negative response from fan communities involved. In having prior knowledge of the intricacies involved with a subcultural fan community, being prepared and informed “might be a positive and ethical way to engage with fan communities” and “sound stance” to study fandom in contrast with the alternatives (Cristofari, Guitton, 2017, p727).

Shifting from a focus of celebrating fandom as a mode of resistance for the disempowered, the second wave of fan studies evolved as a result of the media shifting to a narrowcasted mode of provision and consumption in-line with technological advancements and transfer into a post-digital era whereby dedicated fans were subject to directed industry marketing. Parallels existing between fandoms and social hierarchies were sought after in this era and aimed to question normative concepts of fans “because it seemed to be at odds with a great deal of mainstream enthusiasm across different sociodemographic groups for television programs, movies, and popular music.” (Sullivan, 2013, p194) Categorisation of fandom has developed due to the wider availability of access to and development of modern technologies, outputs for media consumption and their convergence. Theorists such as Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) observed varying levels of engagement and enthusiasm, with a scale ranging from the likes of pure consumer to that of a basic

producer, with fans translating their fannish activity into a marketable profession directed back towards the fan community itself. Later, Sandvoss would define fandom in a more inclusive manner by accounting for fans on both levels of high engagement and the casual sense. He offers a definition of fandom in this period as the “regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text in the form of books, television shows, films, or music, as well as popular texts in a broader sense such as sports teams and popular icons and stars ranging from athletes and musicians to actors” (2005, p8). In a world holding an abundance of media products, everyone is a fan of something – the ongoing study of fandom, its facets, and relationships are all the more vital.

The most recent wave of fan studies focuses more on the individual impulses of fans and their satisfaction of engagement, as well as their relation and ties to wider societal structures, attempting to gain knowledge of how fan activity tends to relate to society as a whole, providing “fundamental insights into modern life” (Gray, et al, 2017, p9). Directions of this modern era of fan studies are informed by the combined sense of community and identity. Where traditionally established factors of identity, such as class, gender, sexuality, religion and employment, are growing less stable, identities of the self, formed by fans individually, become equally as important as the communities they become attached to in the imagined but voluntary sense (Gray et al, 2017, p11). With works within this wave emphasising the individual and venturing into the psychology and motivational factors of their engagement in an era of new media possibilities (Hills, 2007), fans are placed in the context of the mainstream and focused on in terms of “their importance as barometers that indicate general viewer attitudes”, acknowledged as important players for industry marketing factors (Siuda, 2010, p14). With the nature of this study stemming from periods

of history moving through these stages of fan studies and aligning with societal and technological development, it would be insightful to apply these stages of assertion on how identities are formed, how practices change and evolve in relation to properties of technological convergence, and post-digital methods of engagement to that of professional wrestling communities in the UK.

In terms of more contemporary studies of fandom , and particularly within the context of diversity and representation, there has also been much discourse in how aspects such as race, gender, and sexuality are represented in fan communities alongside reflections of the participation and views of those minorities overall. Elizabeth Hornsby notes the importance of including such communities and minorities with fandom discourse as online fan circles are “ever growing sites of social construction and participatory culture”, and that fandom exists within the broader realm of socially constructed realities. Fans find “multiple points of identification across multiple social identities”, Hornsby notes, but fandom still includes identity politics and is filtered through them (2020, pp17-18).

One aspect of representation explored is by Sam Pack who observed Navajo viewers of the TV film *The Lost Child*, showcasing how, by viewing the representation of their native culture, provided them with a better understanding of how they are perceived by the mainstream media and popular understanding. Despite criticism of various production factors and accuracy of depiction, Pack found that the reactions witnessed from the sampled Navajo community showed contrast between that of evaluation and enjoyment, offering ideas towards a criteria for how an unintended audience may still enjoy and participate in a product despite showing a sense of narrative dissonance through criticism.

Pack notes that his study could offer potential readings for screen culture as a “mode of cultural exchange in a period of rapid social change” – particularly in the current era of increased media personalisation and narrowcasting (2020, p47).

Referencing Kathryn Hume (1984), Carina Lapointe notes the expressive tendency of fantasy literature which provides an alternate representation of reality and can encourage discussions of how people view and understand the world. Lapointe argues the metaphors within fantasy fiction provide a particular path to understanding how racial thinking, subtly as well as overtly, “continues to influence everyday life”. (2020, p136) Although fantasy fiction tends to import “racially constructed ideologies” within its worlds and creatures, those racial undertones may emerge either consciously or unconsciously by the creator (Lapointe, 2020, p137) John Rumsby argues that the works of Tolkien, including *The Lord of the Rings*, included portrayals of race and discrimination potentially based on the authors own Eurocentrism, and states it “helped some forms of old European racism to subtly re-enter social and literary imaginations around the globe.” (2017, p42) Lapointe argues that playing *Dungeons & Dragons* provides a means to engage with how various racist or non-racist mindsets work while existing in the simulated game setting, letting players “explore possible solutions for overcoming the default method of thinking about racial differences”. (2020, p139) This is reminiscent of observations made by Clements, positing how it is easier to understand real-world racial issues within a narrative world defamiliarised from our own, and tabletop roleplaying games“ offer a unique space where the concept of race, often a difficult and uncomfortable topic of conversation, is questioned, criticised, and reshaped by the players”. (2015, iii) The nature of *Dungeons and Dragons* being prewritten but often ‘homebrewed’ and re-worked by participants allows for players to not merely act as

“passive consumers” but as those who can “actively challenge and question current representations and suggest possible solutions.” (Lapointe, 2020, p148) As Booth notes, fans are people who can re-imagine meanings behind the original text, re-read them in collaboration with other “divergent parties” and reproduce that relationship and meaning in much wider contexts (2009, ix). Fan participation and meaning-making with their engaged fandom can lead to progressive opportunities beyond what those source materials consciously or sub-consciously intended.

A more negative connotation of race representation in fandom is explored by Al Valentin who argues that factors of authenticity in ‘Let’s Play’ culture have been gendered and racialised in order to “reinforce gamer hegemony and shape gamer humour.” (2020, p196) Despite YouTube positioning itself as a democratic platform for content creation and distribution, its algorithms are argued by Valentin to work alongside cultural unrest in the gamer community to create hostile spaces for non-white gamers. Valentin notes the important point that the popular perception of gamers does not line up with the reality of who actually plays games, and those popular assumptions shape what is produced as well as how people define themselves within the community. This leads to non-white players having their authenticity as gamers “consistently embattled because their status as humans with value is embattled.” (Valentin, 2020, pp197-198) Authenticity in the gaming community tends to be assigned in-line with wider patriarchal values of whiteness and masculinity, leading to those demographics holding more power in terms of how popular understanding is constructed, understood, and mediated, as well as verifying what is and isn’t authentic. As Jackson states, “authenticity conjures up images of people, as animate subjects, verifying inanimate objects. . . . Authenticity presupposes a relation between subjects (who

authenticate) and objects (dumb, mute, inorganic) that are interpreted and analysed from the outside, because they cannot simply speak for themselves” (2005, 14-15) Valentin notes how this process is particularly important in context to the gaming community and ‘Let’s Play’ culture as ethnic, sexual, gender, and other intersectional identities are marginalised and devalued in the wider world, therefore those values are upheld within the established hierarchies within gaming culture (2020, p198). Ultimately, Valentin concludes, this materialises as those marginalised communities experiencing “harassment, microaggressions, and algorithmic disadvantages” which constrain their opportunities to become fully ‘authentic’, productive, and successful members within gaming circles (2020, p206).

Rukmini Pande explores the intersection of race and fandom, shedding light on how marginalised communities participate in and contribute to fan cultures. Pande argues that fan communities have often been dominated by white, heterosexual, and cisgender perspectives, stating “media fandom remains an inhospitable space for non-white characters, which inevitably get sidelined and erased even on the rare occasions that they have significant roles in canonical texts” (2018, p110) – but that people of colour and those from various marginalised backgrounds have a substantial presence and valuable contributions to offer in these spaces. The book delves into the experiences of fans of colour, considering their reactions to various media and their struggles against racial biases within fan communities. Pande’s work contributes to research on fan culture by emphasising the importance of recognising and promoting diversity within fandom, challenging stereotypes, and acknowledging the perspectives of underrepresented groups in popular culture studies. Pande’s writing aims to “broaden the debates around the truisms

that have so far structured examinations of the functioning of fan communities by bringing them into explicit conversation with notions of racial identity” (2018, p14) and thus enriches the discourse on race, fandom, and media studies by examining the often-neglected narratives of fans who occupy the margins of these cultural spaces.

Queer identities have also been debated in recent fandom studies, such as Emma Nordin who explores the concept of ‘queerbaiting’, defining it as “the more and more common practice of telling your audience there will be a queer character but then not delivering” (2019, p25), utilising such strategies to gain attention of queer viewers such as jokes, symbolic gestures, and various hints to outline possibilities for characters to identify as queer while simultaneously denying them in reality. Nordin suggests a modernised understanding of queerness is essential for the proper analysis of media due to the progression of representation in society surpassing simply that of same-sex couples to other non-conforming gender identities. However, she also notes it to be of importance to debate if certain queer representations are even desired or accepted by the communities represented.

After examining the issue of producers to rely on queerbaiting, particularly with the serialised nature of television offerings, to offer the promise of queer identity in their writing, Nordin states that “queerbaiting is no longer focusing on misleading hints but on a lack of representation overall”, with insufficient representation of queerness being exemplified by queer characters having unequal expressions to heterosexual ones as well as those that do being quickly removed from the plot (2019, p38). Monique Franklin associates the term with the additional aspect of “financial exploitation”, whereby producers are

accused of profiting from queer audience desires yet fail to fulfil them. Franklin stresses the importance of proper representation of queerness in the media by linking to the works of Hall, whereby the notion of culture is communicated through representation systems such as the media, forms those identities and better understanding of them within the public sphere. However, questions of queer identities are raised in terms of “current anxieties about fluidity and permeability” and the ever-evolving discussion and developing oppositions to established notions of binary gender identity (Franklin, 2019, p45). The fallacy here, Franklin states, is that legitimacy of identities are considered only when they are stable. All identities are constructed and the differentiating borders are defined arbitrarily – therefore showcasing the vast spectrum of gender and sexuality identities become ever more important (2019, p46).

Cultural Studies

Considering this study aims to provide a cultural understanding of professional wrestling on a national, as well as somewhat regional level, it is important to highlight some key discussions within historic and recent cultural studies discourse which can contribute to a framework of understanding going forward.

Dick Hebdige uses a structuralist approach to analyse youth cultures in Britain and focuses on examples of Skinheads, Rastafarians, and Mods. He argues subcultures differentiate themselves from the mainstream culture via subversion. Traditions are challenged and resisted and opportunities arise for disempowered youths to gain power and significance. Hebdige notes “members of a working-class youth culture in part content and in part agree with the dominant definitions of who and what they are.” (p86) A prevalent

characteristic observed within numerous subcultures is their dual engagement with and resistance to their social class. This might appear paradoxical, but these groups frequently magnify the characteristics that set them apart. For instance, Skinheads, who sported shaven heads and work boots, or Punks, who adorned themselves in ragged attire, epitomised the working class. Subcultures underscore actualities of the class hierarchy by highlighting these societal traits. Also, they provide a platform to express their dissent towards social classes and the challenges individuals encounter when trying to transcend their assigned class.

The primary aim of each subculture is to swiftly and efficiently communicate their distinctiveness from the larger populace. As Hebdige notes “the communication of a significant difference [...] is the ‘point’ behind the style of all spectacular subcultures.” (p102) It is through these distinctions that subcultures can criticise societal conventions. Additionally, these differences serve as a means to recognise and associate with fellow members within the group.

Hebdige states “if a style is really to catch on [...] it must say the right things in the right way at the right time” (p122), meaning that for a subculture to establish itself within a group, the process must unfold in a particular manner. In the case of Punk, this entailed a sufficient number of white, working-class youths experiencing discontent with the prevailing circumstances. It’s improbable that the punk movement would have garnered the degree of influence it achieved if only a small number of individuals had been compelled to express their feelings.

When considering studies of British culture more specifically, Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn explore the intricate relationship between social class and contemporary culture in Britain. It delves into various aspects of British society, from media and popular culture to politics, with a focus on how class structures influence and intersect with these domains. The authors provide an insightful examination of how class dynamics continue to shape and define British culture in the twenty-first century, shedding light on the enduring significance of class distinctions in the nation's social fabric. They state “throughout our lives we are buffeted by changing socio-economic circumstances which hammer at and refashion our classed identity, sense of self and individual status within social and civil society” (2013 p502-503), connoting the sense that British culture can be shaped by class-based lived experience associated with elements including political, economic, and social shifts. For example, Margaret Thatcher instigated a sense of individualism over collective class identity forming much of the neoliberal, free-market mentality of the 1980s, but meanwhile caused much struggle for working class movements exemplified in the Miner’s strikes (Brunt, 1987). Biressi and Nunn note “the moralistic and emotional values articulated in culture are strongly attached to submerged, messy, contradictory and sometimes aggressive collective and individual struggles for financial resources and resources-in-kind” (2013, p503), which leads to a potential exploration of professional wrestling as a potential class-based entertainment artefact serving as a form of both representation of struggle in Britain and a means of catharsis for those communities.

Conversely, Irene Morra stresses the issue of an understood fundamental divide between “established (or “imagined”) constructions of Britishness and Englishness and a contemporary political and cultural environment” (2014, p3) She argues that the

contestation of the notion of Britishness and Englishness have generally been associated with questions of ethnicity, gender, and race – as well as being informed heavily by the likes of Hebdige and other subculture scholars (2014, p4).

Morra mentions the established historical mode of assessing British culture which is to “examine the dominant cultural forms through which Englishness and Britishness have been constructed,” (2014, p5), which she exemplifies as items such as literature and architecture. However, contrary to this, Morra argues this approach as reductive and lacking enough reflection on more social elements of culture. As a solution to this, she offers the idea that analysing elements of pop culture can be a much more legitimate manifestation of how Britishness and Englishness can be defined. Popular music, in particular, can serve as the “primary signifier and expression of contemporary national identity” and serves a similar role in contemporary times to that classically served by literature (Morra, 2014, p6). While acknowledging that many contradictions may be present by examining such artefacts in relation to defining national identity, Morra states that using popular culture as a primary discursive evidence for cultural study celebrates a constructed heritage of popular music and attendant social values, inscribing a British character, identity, and sense of modern origin for an England in the midst of social and political change—and an ideal of national identity that England disseminates both to itself and to the world.” (2014, p10)

Considering professional wrestling is largely ingrained in worldwide popular culture, as Morra argues is an important set of artefacts to base cultural study on, it would be insightful to examine how wrestling in Britain represents national cultural identity through aspects such as style, fandom, and labour practices. Furthermore, it would be insightful to

investigate how those factors are culturally formed through structures such as politics, economy, as well as social factors as cultural theorists such as Hebdige, Biressi, and Nunn observe as important to consider.

This literature review has engaged with and reflected upon a comprehensive section of past and recent discourse on the subjects of professional wrestling and its many global and subcultural facets, studies on sports audience engagement and hybridity between varying practices and the ever-evolving discursive arena of fandom, ethics, and practices of research. Professional wrestling has witnessed a long-line of academic discussion and theorisation throughout the origins of Barthes, through to the ethnographic innovations of Mazer and Burke, to more contemporary studies provided by Warden and Litherland. Despite this line of discourse taking professional wrestling studies forward leaps and bounds to a better overall theoretical understanding, there is arguably still much space for further discussion and development of concepts involved with individual, national, and regional output of the sport in terms of its style, spectatorship as well as notions of fan identity, meaning-making, and interactional practice.

Witnessing the offerings of research regarding general sports audiences and the inter-contextual hybridity possible by looking at the effects of added processes such as effects of music on spectatorship and audience value placements, also leads to further opportunities for intertextual contrasts with how those processes effect the world of wrestling and its fans. Professional wrestling exists in both fields of sports and media entertainment, and arguably other modern assertions such as theatrical performance and resistant political identity factors. Therefore, applying historical and contemporary

arguments from the realm of fandom studies will aid in both further understanding the importance and meanings which shape the communities present within modern, contemporary British professional wrestling circles and how those tendencies relate to the wider, national and cultural environment of the sport. Through a comprehensive exploration of insights provided by both fandom and cultural theorists within and beyond the realm of professional wrestling studies, this analysis aims to unravel the ways in which structures can manifest differentiation and even opposition to the 'mainstream' and more dominant forces. By delving into these observations, the goal is to gain a nuanced understanding of how independent promotions might embody analogous concepts in relation to the widely popular and culturally dominant forms of wrestling, exemplified by entities like WWE.

More particular to this study, though, will be the exploration of how the British wrestling scene functioned past its successful, broadcasted era up until the late 1980s to a much smaller, niche industry which could be considered subcultural in relation to the widespread, international popularity of WWE. In other words, with WWE being a globally established player, holding little to no competition outside of a local, regional scale, it is important to look the identities, meanings, and practices formed to showcase how they differ from popular understanding and societal affect which WWE has established as long-time industry leader. Levi (2005) has already established a sense of how Mexican Lucha Libre wrestling was culturally informed and produced unique, exclusive meanings and practices in relation to its international counterparts, as well as more specifically to the common, collective assumptions of what professional wrestling is and can be. By looking at an exclusively British perspective, this central point can be further argued in relation to how

professional wrestling is culturally embedded, with its meaning-making, practices, and style being determined by associated culture and geography.

The concept of exclusively "British" professional wrestling will be argued throughout this study as first being shaped by historical and cultural factors. British professional wrestling has a unique and distinct identity that differentiates it from other wrestling traditions around the world. As the upcoming first chapter suggests, historically, British wrestling has a rich heritage dating back to the nineteenth century. It evolved independently and developed its own set of rules and techniques, such as the catch-as-catch-can style. This historical lineage has created a distinct British wrestling tradition, which sets it apart from American, Japanese, or Mexican wrestling.

Culturally, British wrestling has a deep-rooted presence within the country. It has a strong fan base and a unique style characterised by a focus on technical wrestling and grappling. Promotions like *World of Sport Wrestling* and organisations like PROGRESS Wrestling have been instrumental in preserving and promoting this British wrestling style. Moreover, British wrestling showcases a roster of homegrown talent and a strong sense of national pride. Wrestlers like William Regal, Fit Finlay, and more recently, the emergence of British stars in major international promotions like WWE, highlight the distinctive British wrestling talent pool. While there are undoubtedly global influences in modern British wrestling, the existence of exclusively "British" professional wrestling is a testament to its historical roots and cultural significance within the UK, making it a unique and valuable component of the global wrestling landscape.

Although a somewhat chronological, historical study of British professional wrestling has been undertaken by Litherland – as well as supporting works by Warden, Phillips, and Griffiths covering some elements of style, spectatorship, and fandom – this study aims to take a more holistic approach to studying such content. When looking at professional wrestling holistically, it is important to consider the specific context and contributions of British wrestling. The sport has a unique history and cultural significance within the broader wrestling landscape. Some points of discussion to be included are items such as heritage and traditions, the fall and revival of the British wrestling industry, the key promotions and performers involved, as well as cultural and representation factors. By incorporating these points in the subsequent chapters, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of how British wrestling contributes to the overall wrestling landscape and how it has evolved within its unique historical and cultural context. Before venturing forth with the first chapter of this study showcasing historical and mythical understandings of British professional wrestling, a justification and discussion of methodological approach for this research must be presented.

Approach

Methods and Justification

The main purpose of this study is to explore British professional wrestling with a combined historical and human experience-based approach, utilising ethnographic methodology and directly involving myself with the national community of professional wrestling fans, seeking to uncover passions and factors of high importance that exist within the modern wrestling community. As a fan of professional wrestling for over two decades, my own personal experiences will also inform some level of direction with this study in terms of seeking out subcultural communities to engage with and the appropriate ways in which to do so, as well as identifying key locales in which to conduct my fieldwork most fruitfully and effectively. With the use of auto-ethnography through the critical use of my own personal experiences and the audience ethnography data provided by direct consultation and connection with both wrestlers and members of the fan community, a more comprehensive overview of modern professional wrestling in Britain shall be achieved. It is first worth discussing academic viewpoints on ethnography as an effective research methodology and its varying degrees of execution relevant to my study and prior works on professional wrestling.

Existing studies in past professional wrestling academic discourse have offered insight into how the ethnographic method and its varying approaches are appropriate and potentially most effective when approaching the analysis of the sport, its fandom, and inherent subcultures. As discussed in the literature review, McBride and Bird provide an

exploration of the growth of a backyard wrestling phenomenon resulting from a growing digital era whereby fans would have the most instant and easy access to insider information and community networks than ever before, as well as the means to produce, market, and distribute independent wrestling material cheaply and quickly. Although some element of an ethnographic approach was used with the inclusion of their personal experiences of viewing such material and speaking to the community in person to uncover views expressed, they conclude with a discussion of the potential for audience ethnography being an effective means for future professional studies. They state that ““ethnographic studies of media audiences and fans reveal dimensions of experience that social criticism does not” (2007, p176), and that “audience ethnography can access the specific knowledge of the mediated phenomenon – the interaction of producer-fan practice and fan values”. Furthermore, they continue to note how “a mass-mediated cultural phenomenon such as wrestling is sustained by the interaction of physical, productive practices within the context of a socially learned aesthetic” (2007, p176). For them, the interaction between fan and product, as well as the subcultures and practices formed by that relationship, are paramount towards the overall understanding of not just how but why professional wrestling is enjoyed in contemporaneous times. Here ethnographic methods provide pathways towards insight and understanding of these processes via direct experience, interaction with communities concerned, as well as a constructivist acknowledgment that context, experiential insight, and avoidance of generalised assumption is key to a deeper, more informed understanding of fandom.

Although the scope of her study was limited, Burke also offers reasonings for why ethnography can provide a deeper understanding of wrestling audiences. She states that

ethnographic analysis allows for specific description of wrestling culture and “examining the relation between the text and the viewers, and the complex of interpretative activities, in regard to questions of social status, power, and ideology”. By experiencing social audience groups and their viewership of wrestling products, Burke notes how the approach allowed for “dialogic relationships with the text” to be perceived and analysed, leading to the conclusion of patriarchal structures being evident within the observed group, and similar attitudes to women between the product and audience being noted. This then means the procedure “allows for seeing ways which the audience is embedded in a network of ongoing cultural practices and relationships” (2001, p6), showcasing how audience reception can be shaped by practices exhibited by mediated products, as well as how ordinary people take part within interpretive situations and construct meanings through narratives made aware of through use of ethnographic methodology (2001, p7). From observing the insights achieved by Burke into understanding motivational factors of audiences and practitioners involved with wrestling, it is clear that an ethnographic approach to researching professional wrestling can prove fruitful when enacted effectively.

The original methodological concept for this thesis was to take a hard-line ethnographic approach whereby observations and interviews would be undertaken within a summer touring schedule alongside a local, independent British wrestling outfit – which would have potentially yielded a comprehensive array of primary findings to inform discussion and analysis. Observations of and integration with fan interaction would have been included, as well as participation at live events, interviews with wrestlers and backstage producers, potential first-hand experience of production via voluntary work and discussion of experiences and points of view with other fans. Due to the COVID-19

pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns put in place during the majority of the period of research, the majority – if not all – of the country’s entertainment industry was shut down. All live, attended events were cancelled for the foreseeable future. This meant that the methodological approach for this had to be adapted to conform with British safety regulations in-line with the circumstances – namely social distancing and self-isolation when exposed. Despite this shift, experiences at live wrestling events were already witnessed and data was obtained from them before the first lockdown, including some live International Pro Wrestling (IPW), Revolution Pro, LDN and New Japan Pro Wrestling (NJPW) shows, and interviews were conducted in a remote manner to gain qualitative insight and justify defining the project as a quasi-ethnographic study of British professional wrestling – therefore still justifying a defined quasi-ethnographical approach.

Interviews were conducted and recorded in a distanced, digital manner by way of either using the Skype or Zoom video calling software. Participants interviewed include both active and retired professional wrestlers from contemporary and past eras of British wrestling, various personalities within the industry such as writers and producers, as well as fans. Lines of questioning and leads towards potential interviewees were informed via a short preliminary survey constructed and released at the beginning of the research process. The survey was made available via Twitter and Reddit and garnered a reasonable response of 140 participants, and questions asked revolved around promotions they personally viewed or were aware of, personal opinions on content, the industry as a whole as well as their hopes for the British industry as a whole. Again, the preliminary data gleaned from this short survey allowed for a superficial but still useful account of potential common likes and

dislikes among the fan community and informed ideas for questions to be put to future interviewees for the project.

Due to the shift from focused ethnographical research to a quasi-sense using some of those community-based methods to gain primary data, this study still maintained its largely qualitative approach but developed into more of a critical history and cultural exploration of British wrestling utilising a combination of mostly historical analysis, interviews and limited observational data via attendance of various pre-pandemic live events – the latter of which aided to establish further experience of audience participation on top of the personal, biographical data already obtained as a long-time fan. Although these changes made in reaction to national lockdown measures arguably embody the problematic notions defined by Borneman as a postmodern tendency in research to substitute true ethnographic experience with “surrogate ethnography, puppeteering, and textualism” (2009, p8), efforts made to provide informed, detailed history of British cultural produce and gain insight from interview subjects from the industry to supplement these discussions should work some way towards providing enough primary contribution to the research, rather than relying on second-hand accounts and textual work.

Berger states how studying history “helps us find meaning in the events of the past” (2016, p318), referring to the method of historical analysis which can be used effectively to ascertain a timeline of events via the use of artefacts – including interview footage, documentaries, news articles and other historical literature and indicate how a particular area of interest has developed over time. This links to Phifer’s original framework of varying facets to historical methods (1961) – particularly the notion of it relating to outlining the

development of a particular idea or movement, as well as a sense of regional and institutional study – whereby attention is concentrated on a certain organisation or geographical factor. The issue with historical analysis, as noted by Gidley, is that the “authenticity of documents must be assessed” for it to be considered even remotely objective (2012, p271). Although true objectivity in historical research is difficult to achieve, if at all, due to opinions and viewpoints tempering meaning and value of information, it will still be imperative to ensure all documents and artefacts considered for use and analysis in this project are scrutinised for legitimacy and authenticity within the realm of British wrestling history. These will include academic discourse, journals, television footage, programmes, posters, flyers, and magazines as the main catchment of historical knowledge and context, and not relying solely on industry ‘experts’ and their personal experiences.

Making good use of this method alongside observational data, this thesis aims to give an up-to-date and fresh account of British professional wrestling history. The periods of study will range from the latter days of its ‘TV era’ – referring to the final days of its popular national ITV broadcast as part of *World of Sport* and more in the 1980s – to contemporaneous times of British wrestling today existing within the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. The studying of these periods aims to provide a cultural framework of understanding considerations of identity, meaning and subcultural practice among its fans and performers while challenging the popular, mythic notions of professional wrestling as a mode of sporting performance – both in a local national and international, generalised context.

With the shift from face-to-face interviewing to talking with participants in a remote, digital fashion, establishing a relationship and sense of trust with potential interviewees would be difficult. James and Busher stress the factors relating to this issue when stating how “online interviews are devoid of the normal social frameworks of face-to-face encounters between researchers and participants” (2012, p181), whereby we interpret social signals more directly and personally when sharing a physical space. Further contributing to potential setbacks with online interviewing is the possibility of visual anonymity by way of participants being able to control what the interviewer sees and how they see it. This was a largely expected factor due to the nature of lockdown effects de-incentivising factors such as personal and environmental care, as well as simply not wanting to include one’s surroundings or personal residence in a video call. Either way, “this visual anonymity can reduce researcher/participant effects as the physical characteristics of the other are absent” (James, Busher, 2012, p181), making it essential to build prior rapport with participants so as to make the conversation run fluidly, develop trust, and give confidence to the interviewee to share experiences without concern.

In order to increase a sense of trust and rapport with participants prior to interview, it was important to not just provide full transparency on who I was and what my intentions were, but to also handle the interviews in a way which would alleviate the potential for social awkwardness and short answers being given due to having no prior relationship with participants. A semi-structured approach was chosen in conjunction with treating the interviews as social interactions to further gain trust with participants, avoid potential interactional problems leading to laboured answers, and allow them freer rein to express their opinions and reflect on experience based on the line of questioning offered. Gubrium

and Holstein's use of the 'vessel of answers' metaphor refers to the nature of what interviewees can contribute while existing as "repositories of facts, feelings, and the related particulars of experience" (2002, p13), leading to the academic incentive to place value on the use of semi-structured interviews as an effective means to interact with and gain knowledge from these 'vessels' of information in an efficient, responsible, and fruitful way.

Some weaknesses are attributable to this type of approach in interviewing, particularly when conducted in a remote, digital fashion due to social distancing commitments whereby data loss could occur as a result of unaccounted connection issues, alongside potential language barriers caused by lack of microphone clarity or regional differences in dialect. More general issues with this approach relate to the flexibility of the researcher to underrepresent the community of study by being unable to engage enough responders (Denzin, 2017). The possibilities of limited responses to questions are also present from multiple factors of either the interview not being prepared with prior understanding of the topic or the interviewer not being flexible to continue the flow of conversation and momentum of discussion. Another main issue arising from such a semi-structured yet mostly conversational approach relates to statements made by Warren, who notes "the question for the interview researcher is whether or not the socially interactive nature of the interview makes it unsuitable for use as a vessel of topics" (Warren, 2012, p140). The objectivity and intentions of the participant should be interpreted, asking as to whether the interviewee is fabricating knowledge or framing experience in a way to repackage into something perhaps more spectacular or appealing to the interviewer. Issues raised here in the context of interviewing wrestlers lies with the potential for experiences to be presented more spectacularly than reality – which is arguably expected due to the nature

of the performed notions of self possibly bleeding into that of the real, as well as ideological stances colouring opinion to the point of extreme bias. The latter is of no real concern as participants were selected on the basis of providing varied opinion and stance so as to inform a sense of discursive balance in analysis, and the majority of questions presented were based around these notions of experienced opinion – rather than providing historical facts which the aforementioned issues lie within.

Although difficulties were experienced in securing interviews with industry personnel associated with WWE due to company policies and attitudes to third party, untrusted media and academic circles, interview opportunities were acquired with a wide range of independent industry personalities and fans through simple digital communications and organised follow-ups. Practice interviews were conducted with peers prior to commencing with research interviews so as to maximise potential for full flexibility and flow with actual participants, as well as testing lines of questioning and topics to be included for discussion. With varying potential pitfalls of semi-structured interviews being averted, many of the noted advantages of using semi-structured interviews as part of quasi-ethnographic approach to research were experienced. With the inherent practicality of the interview form for undertaking in-depth conversation on a particular subject, multiple strands of progression can be achieved by the interviewer by simply taking up visible or emotional cues posited by participants as reactions to certain parts of questioning or answers to those questions – such as laughter, irritation, or even silence in reaction to certain items being mentioned. By being flexible and acting upon these moments to influence impromptu side-lines of sub-questioning, the interview may achieve a more nuanced, multi-layered conclusion when later analysing the interview data (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003).

The fan interviews are not meant to replace professional perspectives but rather complement them. The professional interviews provided the industry's inside view, while the fan interviews contributed a grassroots, audience-based perspective, which is equally essential for a comprehensive analysis. The depth of insight from the fan interviewees may compensate for the limited number of fan perspectives overall. The included fans have provided rich, in-depth narratives, anecdotes, and perspectives that add depth and context to the research and were emblematic of broader fan sentiments. This made them a powerful asset and their voices valuable. There were instances in the study where fan voices played a crucial role, such as documenting and exploring audience opinions towards independent and mainstream promotions as spectators and participants at live events, as well as more particularly their views towards historical moments such as the *World of Sport* reboot on ITV and subsequent failure to catch on with a loyal viewership. These fan-specific insights were particularly enlightening and offered unique angles not found in the professional interviews.

Some methodological value can be sifted from non-academic and fannish modes of gathering information and construction of historical understanding. 'Shoot' interviews are a known genre within the field of professional wrestling media, referring to the process of conducting interviews with professional wrestlers within a non-'worked' framework of talking outside the realms of their performed character state and with their real-world identity. This materialises as wrestlers discussing backstage events, the planning of matches, biographical information about themselves prior to wrestling and so on. Examples of 'shoot' interviews are the likes of Rob Feinstein, owner of wrestling media company RF Video,

typically taking a structured approach to questioning wrestlers and giving a more formal, straightforward environment for interview. Sean Oliver, owner of Kayfabe Commentaries – a company offering wrestler interview content similar to RF Video – adopts a more semi-structured and conversational approach to interviewing wrestlers. Either way, these forms of fanish production encouraged by a sense of ‘Smart’ fandom (Watson, 2010) serve as an empowered function for non-academics to provide an alternate means of constructing historical understandings outside of the hegemonic power structures held by the industry leader WWE (Walus and Wilcox, 2021).

It is obviously not the intention to mimic the interview style and environment of wrestling interviews supplied for entertainment, but to take influence from the successful factors of combining semi-structured lines of questioning and a more casual, social interaction-based environment for interview in order to maximise potential for trust between interviewer and participant, as well as the quality of experiences and knowledge gleaned. Although there may be objectivity concerns with keeping this form of environment for interview rather than a more formal, structured one, specific participants were sought after due to their status and prior contributions to the industry, as well as their high potential for availability. For instance, obtaining interviews with WWE personnel poses a challenge due to stringent contractual obligations and the level of fame that discourages active engagement. Securing permission is especially challenging unless conducted by a reputable and well-established media company, which may face external pressures to present the organisation in a favourable light. Therefore, seeking voices of knowledge and experience on the independent level would be equally as, if not more, powerful to represent this quasi-ethnographic approach given participants have history of notable

contribution to the industry, including promoters, wrestlers, writers, and associated media personalities. As Warren observes, “the interview encounter is framed by the circumstances that got the interviewer and the respondent to the moment of it. For the interviewer, these circumstances include prior interest in the topic, training in the method, and negotiations such as those between graduate students and mentors, granting agencies and principal investigators, and researchers and human subjects committees. For the respondents, they include the biographical and current features of their lives” (2012, p131). Connecting these observations to the context of seeking interview with wrestling participants, prior knowledge of legitimate, meaningful contributions to the industry and community made by potential respondents is essential to guarantee a higher quality of nuance and experience-based data to inform the study and supplement observations and arguments posited. It was deemed important for the ethnographic contribution to this research to be represented by experienced wrestlers, promoters, and producers within the British wrestling industry, with the intention of obtaining an informed response to questioning as well as gaining a sense of objectivity from seeking participants with varied ideological stances and backgrounds within wrestling. Although there were difficulties in providing full diversity in terms of gender and race representation in the respondent cohort for this research, namely with contractual obligations of availability and issues of controversy stifling opportunities for communication, some level of diversity was achieved via the inclusion of voices from a variety of industry roles, regional origins, stages of career, and levels of experience.

Lastly, some level of auto-ethnographic data was obtained via the attendance of various live events and engaging directly with audiences within a live context of wrestling consumption as an embedded, experienced member of the community at large. This links to

the points made by Ellis et al (2011) whereby the positionality of the research is a pivotal point to inform the reliability of the data included, connoting the aspect that information related from an experienced source may be more convincing than others due to potential for literary license to be taken for granted. Furthermore, when considering the criticisms of the auto-ethnographic method being “insufficiently rigorous” and lacking analytical power (Ellis et al, 2011, p283), this remains a supplemental method of data only and as a means of simply exemplifying theoretical assertions made at points in this thesis.

By including biographical experience as anecdotal data for this research, it aids in the power to “encourage a universalistic and encompassing approach, encouraging understanding and interpretation of experience across national, cultural and traditional boundaries” to better appreciate the individual motivations for engagement with the community researched (Bornat, 2008, p344). This biographical experience materialises in the thesis simply as past experiences at live wrestling events and personal historical experience of consuming wrestling media outside of the research timeline.

Researchers must consider the ethical and moral consequences of undertaking their work in terms of dealing with working with participants, conducting themselves in a responsible manner (Sheehy et al, 2005). This leads to notions of informed consent which was sought for purposes of ethical transparency and legitimacy for the project, including full communication of researcher identity, the purposes and goals of the research, and how their data will be used and most importantly ensuring the participants are identified in the way they wish, excluding any personal information deemed too personal. For example, one participant preferred to be identified by their online alias ‘UTTRob’ – which refers to the

Twitter handle used for their popular wrestling news and discussion account holding a follower count of over 23,000, as opposed to utilising their real name. For obvious reasons, UTTRob wished to keep their real name anonymous due to the large following on social media and not wanting anyone to have access to their personal information. Only one other complexity was incurred when agreeing on name identities for participating active professional wrestlers, as it is understood from experience as a fan of professional wrestling that 'real' identities of practitioners outside of their wrestler, or 'stage', names are often kept secret or veiled from public knowledge to protect day-to-day livelihoods, as well as generally remaining as some level of taboo to be mentioned – a mentality left over from prior eras of 'kayfabe' in the industry, whereby wrestlers would act in the same way as method actors by way of living as their characters and preserving a sense of authenticity for fans when seen in public. It was therefore deemed a straightforward compromise to ensure which identity they would each prefer to be known as when referred to in this research. In some cases the names of practitioners are the same as those they perform under, but the majority of active performers wished to have their professional, working identities used, in contrast to some participants agreeing to both their real names and performed identities being mentioned.

It is essential to acknowledge that this study exclusively focuses on the iteration of International Professional Wrestling (IPW) that was active during Billy Wood's ownership from 2017 to 2019. While it's worth noting that criminal allegations have been made and subsequently cleared against company's previous owner, Daniel Edler, it is crucial to emphasise that our research only involved interactions with the company following its sale to Billy Wood in 2017. Therefore, there was no direct association or engagement with Daniel

Edler during the course of the study, which encompassed attending live events and conducting interviews with promoters. The final part of this section provides a breakdown of participants interviewed for this project, relaying an understanding of their positions within wrestling and some justification as to why they were approached for interview and intended value to be brought through discussion of their views and experiences.

Interview Participant Profiles

Cody Hall

Cody Hall, an active professional wrestler with over a decade of experience, is known for his success in NJPW (New Japan Pro Wrestling) and as the son of the famous wrestler Scott Hall, also known as 'Razor Ramon'. Although the context for the interview was less than ideal, conducted through Instagram messaging due to his limited social media engagement, it provided a valuable opportunity to test and refine interview questions for future participants. Hall's insights into his experiences as an American wrestler in the contemporary British wrestling scene proved invaluable for the study.

Sha Samuels

Sha Samuels, a seasoned figure in the modern British wrestling scene for nearly two decades, gained international recognition through *TNA: British Bootcamp* (2014), a reality program by the American promotion TNA. Samuels is also a regular performer for RevPro, a top UK independent promotion known for its collaborations with NJPW, expanding his

exposure worldwide. Given my prior awareness of Samuels' work and the need to explore the progression of British wrestling in terms of style, identities, and ideologies, I initiated contact through his official Twitter account to arrange an interview via Zoom. The interview with Samuels, who has witnessed shifts in attitudes and practices over his multi-decade career, is essential for understanding these historical contexts. Additionally, his wrestling persona, reflecting a stereotypical 'tough' Londoner, provides an intriguing lens to discuss British identity within the wrestling context. It's worth noting that Sha Samuels secured a WWE contract months after our interview.

Oisin Delaney

Oisin Delaney, a professional wrestler since 2015, trained in Ireland before moving to London, England. He is part of the 'NIC' (Northern Irish Connection) tag team with Charlie Carter and wrestled for various independent promotions across the country. Delaney also gained exposure through Progress Wrestling, a London-based promotion and WWE partner, and worked as a trainer at the 'Knucklelocks' training facility in London. His extensive experience as both a wrestler and trainer offers valuable insights into performers' perspectives and the entry points for British wrestling fandom beyond WWE.

Robin Lekime

Robin Lekime, a veteran professional wrestler with 23 years of experience, wrestled in various promotions across Europe and Canada. Settling in the UK, he worked for the Knight family of promoters, including Ricky Knight and Saraya-Jade Bevis, known for her role in WWE's women's division and the 2019 film *Fighting With My Family*. An interview with

Lekime aimed to provide insights into traditional perspectives within British professional wrestling. This countered the anticipated modernist views of younger talents regarding style, gatekeeping, and business practices. Lekime's traditional, 'old-school' views on wrestling presentation, performer conduct, and gatekeeping offered a balanced and objective counterpoint to the progressive views of contemporary talents.

Kasey Owens

Kasey Owens, an experienced wrestler based in Scotland, has worked in top UK promotions, including IPW, Progress, WWE NXT UK, and Insane Championship Wrestling (ICW). An interview with Owens, conducted over a recorded Zoom video call, aimed to provide a female perspective on professional wrestling. The interview focused on British wrestling style, scene development, and historical aspects. Owens' extensive experience and understanding of the demands posed by the industry leader, NXT UK, made her a valuable interviewee. Female voices in British wrestling, essential for addressing issues of equal representation and diversity, informed key arguments in the thesis.

Carl Stewart

Carl Stewart, now a retired practitioner in the British professional wrestling business, was active during a period when televised content other than WWE and American outlets was limited. A veteran of the 'Hammerlock' wrestling school, and involved in wrestling and promotions during the mid-1990s to late noughties, he contributed to the research project by providing wrestling footage from his personal archives. This footage helped contextualise

discussions of the traditional style and presentation of British wrestling. Stewart was interviewed via Zoom, and his insights into the early nineties, a time of obscurity and uncertainty for the British wrestling industry, were particularly valuable. His traditionalist views on the sport's presentation provided a contrast to the modernist perspectives of younger practitioners, enhancing the thesis's objectivity.

Billy Wood

Billy Wood, an entrepreneur and former owner and promoter of International Pro Wrestling (IPW) and Fight Nation Wrestling (FNW), was interviewed via Zoom. His experiences as a football club owner and wrestling promoter were explored in the context of British fans' cultural practices at live events, especially the similarities with 'ultra' culture in football. The discussion aimed to gain insight into the challenges faced by modern independent wrestling promotions in the UK, particularly with WWE's presence in the scene through NXT UK. The conversation with Wood provided valuable perspectives on industry standards, fan identities, and practices at live events, contributing to a better understanding of what it means to be a wrestling fan in Britain in contemporary times.

Sam West

Sam West promotes wrestling in his home area of Leicester for Wrestling Resurgence, as well as undertaking his own doctoral thesis research into storytelling in independent professional wrestling. After agreeing to a recorded video call via Zoom, West provided great insight into the challenges and pleasures of promoting wrestling on a small

scale and within the context of arts and theatre performance. Also, gaining understanding of modernist takes on where the boundaries may be pushed in British wrestling style and performance, both in terms of in-ring content as well as overall presentation and promotion, were also very useful in providing nuance to discussions in this thesis. With the creative drive of Wrestling Resurgence being motivated by arts and theatre aesthetics, approaches to creative production and presentation as well as holding progressive attitudes to diversity in representation, discussing these concepts with West would aid in detailing alternate paths of British wrestling identity outside of popular assumption via varying, modernised characterisations of gender, race, and sexuality in its chosen performers – as well as generally representing younger, more progressive attitudes found in contemporary wrestling circles.

Dean Ayass

Dean Ayass has fulfilled a plethora of roles in the British wrestling industry throughout his tenure since 1993, including performing as a manager and on-screen personality for the original Frontier Wrestling Alliance televised programming, regularly providing commentary on live recordings for an array of promotions, as well as writing for wrestling journalism outlets such as Whatculture. Interview discussions with Ayass provided knowledge and understanding of the 'dark', post-TV phase of British wrestling throughout the 90s, remaining identities and passions for both fans and practitioners in this age, as well as giving nuance to conversations based around WWE neoliberal expansionism in the UK as well as assertions of inauthenticity involved with the failed *World of Sport* rebrand, WOS Wrestling. Due to his ongoing engagement with the contemporary British wrestling scene

and holding a vast level of knowledge and experienced gained from such a varied, lengthy career in the industry, Ayass gave an objectively critical perspective on multiple aspects of discussed concepts associated with the sport in the UK, namely developing notions of stylistic identity in a modern scene, fan practices and ways of creating meaning both in a live and remote format of spectatorship, as well as aiding in clarifying the problematic of WWE's establishment as direct competitor to thriving independent promotions in Britain.

Dante Richardson

Beginning as a wrestler and eventually filling various roles in British wrestling such as production, writing and commentary, Dante Richardson was contacted via a mutual acquaintance for interview and agreed to a recorded Zoom call. His experiences working as part of the production team for the *WOS Wrestling World of Sport* rebrand attempt by ITV in 2016-2018 were of particular interest for research, as well as his insider knowledge of the business from the joint-perspective working as an editor for *Inside the Ropes* magazine. Discussing his experience informed by working in the field in a multitude of facets proved to be particularly useful to understanding the intentions and reasons for the failings of various modern efforts at British wrestling promotion and attempts to work with national broadcasting companies. Considering the attempt to rebrand and reintroduce *World of Sport* wrestling to British television audiences is a significant part of British wrestling history and its ongoing struggle with maintaining an identity within an ever shifting global arena, a figure such as Richardson is a particularly important participant to consider due to his direct involvement and willingness to highlight the issues encountered and results of failures incurred from its production and reception.

Frank Cullen

Frank Cullen, a British wrestling legend with a long and storied career in the industry, offered valuable insights through a Facebook interview. Cullen's experience spans the televised era of *World of Sport* and ITV wrestling during the 1980s, where he achieved the title of junior heavyweight champion. Despite identifying as retired from in-ring competition, he remains active in wrestling as a trainer and promoter in both British and international circles. The purpose of interviewing Cullen was to gain historical perspectives on prior eras of British wrestling, specifically the televised era, where little academic writing or theory exists. Ethical concerns related to the age and health of potential participants, compounded by COVID-19 lockdowns, made the process challenging when trying to recruit participants for interview from past eras of wrestling. Nonetheless, Cullen's participation enriched the research by providing insights into the impact of WWE and NXT UK on the independent scene, anecdotes from his wrestling career, and an understanding of the historical and contemporary British wrestling style. His traditionalist attitudes, rooted in decades of experience, contributed to the discussions on the evolution of British wrestling, the challenges of broadcasting the sport, and the journey of entering the wrestling business as a participant.

'UTTRob'

Referred to as his requested identity and Twitter handle for the purposes of anonymity and ethical handling of participant data for research, UTTRob hosts a popular Twitter feed with a dedicated following of wrestling fans – sharing and providing comedic and satirical takes on current wrestling news. UTTRob offered to participate in the project and be interviewed as a dedicated long-time fan of the sport and was enthusiastic to share experiences and opinions of the industry. Although acting as a form of ‘fandom leader’ (Castellini, 2019) is still a subjective position to hold, and those in these positions may not necessarily reflect collective understandings of what the sport means to contemporary and historical communities, there is still the value of a fandom leader having active understanding of current discourse and problems raised by such communities regardless of personal positioning. Therefore it was deemed essential to discuss the concepts for this study with UTTRob in terms of understanding key elements of modern British wrestling that have been deemed problematic, have been resisted and the multitude of views formed in the community at large – mostly in the actions of WWE and promoters in the UK regarding creative direction and handling of athletes and performing talent.

Leigh Broxton

Leigh is a long-time wrestling fan based in Nottingham, and was contacted for further interview after showing enthusiastic, detailed, and nuanced answers to the preliminary Google Forms survey sent out. It was deemed that giving more qualitative depth to fan voices further than a simple survey would give the research a more comprehensive and varied informed context, rather than focusing purely on experienced industry workers

such as wrestlers and promoters. Rather than relying heavily on my own biographical and quasi-autoethnographic experiences to inform notions of fan identity and meaning-making, discussing such concepts with a fellow fan seemed important to include in the interview process for aiding in defining shifting concepts of British cultural identity in modern professional wrestling, especially one such as Broxton who showed such dedication and nuanced approaches to relaying opinion and experience based on data gathered from preliminary research efforts. Given that Broxton has contextual variations to that of my own fandom and notions of self-identity and ideals for the sport, it further supports the notion that varied positions of experience contribute to ongoing hermeneutic discussions – the qualitative mode of “resisting notions of objectivity by exposing a range of possible meanings” (Smith, 2010) – lead to a better and more nuanced understanding of a concept - namely British cultural identity in professional wrestling.

Now that the approach to research and methodological concerns have been defined and discussed, the following first chapter of this thesis aims to outline historical origins of British cultural wrestling aesthetic and style, showcasing influences gained from traditional circles of amateur wrestling practice dating back to centuries prior, as well as the evolution of the sport in Britain into a domestically popular pastime of televised entertainment. Furthermore, the eventual downfall of wrestling television in Britain will be explored as well as varying stances on factors for such a decline, including creative exhaustion, political issues involved with broadcasters, as well as shifting global ideological factors of neoliberal expansionism affecting corporate culture.

First, it is important to establish mythicised notions of what professional wrestling means from a popular, global context, and how British cultural approaches to practice and engagement from both positions of presentation and spectatorship may deem these mythical understandings as reductive. Ideas of professional wrestling as a sexist, racist exercise and 'camp' aesthetical output will be criticised, arguing contrasting interpretations of resistive and progressive attitudes involved with the form and an overall paradigm of sports-based presentation taking precedent over typically argued assertions of comical, theatrical intentions.

Chapter One: British Wrestling, Origins and the Televised Era

A Discussion of the Mythic, Americanised Understanding of Modern Professional Wrestling Versus the Traditional British Aesthetic

Before venturing into the brief history of British wrestling and its original successes, it is worth defining the assumed mythos of professional wrestling as a general concept and defining how the British cultural approach to the sport may align and differ to that mythos. As explored in the literature review, there are many generic assumptions of what professional wrestling comprises of culturally and socially. Barthes (1993) observes wrestling as a deeply mythic experience of morality – a constant clash of good versus evil providing a sense of catharsis for the viewer or audience when the former triumphs over the latter, as well as responding emotionally to the process and visualisation of conflict. McBride and Bird contribute further to this basis of professional wrestling definition by arguing it as a “ritualised combat taking place in a space resembling a boxing ring” (2007, p166), with ‘ritualised’ being an appropriate word as the wrestlers assume different identities, making the display the primary factor and setting apart from contemporary, ‘real’ sports. Despite these distilled readings of the underlying, base factors of the aesthetic and appeal of wrestling, they simply are not flexible enough to cover the vast cultural and social variety that contemporary professional offers, as well as long-standing historical national approaches and spectatorship of the sport. In modern wrestling academia, Jenkins III makes a generalised definition of professional wrestling as masculine melodrama (2005), seeking to provide a means which male viewers may live vicariously through the observed hero of the wrestling match and, linking to Barthes, enjoy a sense of fulfilment in the successes and

victories of them. Barthes' essay on "The World of Wrestling" does remain important due to its insightful analysis of the symbolic and theatrical elements of the sport, highlighting how wrestling serves as a microcosm of societal values and myth-making, reflecting the dynamics of good versus evil, spectacle, and the engagement of the audience. However, its reductive nature lies in the fact that it oversimplifies the cultural significance of wrestling, reducing it to a mere spectacle without fully considering the complexities and nuances of the sport. Wrestling can hold a deeper cultural relevance, embodying social and political commentary that goes beyond Barthes' somewhat limited interpretation. Therefore, while his essay offers valuable insights, it should be approached as a starting point for a more comprehensive understanding of wrestling's multifaceted role in society. By exploring more of these culturally embedded aspects of wrestling, the generalised, reductive readings of professional wrestling and common misconception of the sport as a "a soap opera for men," (Salmon, Clerc, 2005, p167) can be challenged.

With personal experience, if the average person is asked what image is conjured up in their mind when professional wrestling is mentioned, that image will most likely contain a memory or representation of WWE or WWF wrestling – whether it is the 'Say your prayers and take your vitamins' era of Hulk Hogan, Ultimate Warrior, and Andre the Giant era of sensational, highly externalised physicality (see figures 2 and 3), or the 'attitude' of post-millennial, ultraviolent and hyper-sexualised 'sports entertainment' such as witnessing the likes of Stone Cold Steve Austin, Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson, and The Undertaker (Mark Calloway) displaying hyperbolic presentations of conflict, and the problematic, misogynist portrayal of women with the likes of Trish Stratus and Sable (Rena Marlette Lesnar) having value placed on sexual appeal as opposed to wrestling ability. When the average person is

asked to conjure an image of British professional wrestling, it is most likely that there will be mention of Big Daddy (Shirley Crabtree) versus Giant Haystacks (Martin Austin Ruane) – big, out-of-shape, sweaty men jumping on each other in an old, poorly-maintained ring. At a push, there may be mentioning of the likes of Kendo Nagasaki (Peter Thornley) donning his mask and upholding the ‘kayfabe’ of his ongoing character as a reincarnation of an ancient, Japanese warrior. Either way, the apparent focus on and embedded representation of these popular representations of British professional wrestling have led to an unfair and reductive general understanding of the wider net of style and tradition that the national sporting output has showcased for decades. Another way of understanding this notion of mythicised, generalised understandings being an issue can relate to the work of Alan Meades when exploring the history of British amusement arcades. He conjures the image of “the neon-and-videogame arcade that most people imagine”, using the film *Tron* as an example to describe it as “a space of orange neon, youth, noise, and technological prowess.” By understanding Flynn’s arcade in *Tron*, we are reminded that this image is “simply a dominant arcade archetype that bears little relation to real arcades other than during a specific point in their continual evolution”. This is defined by Meades as the “mythic arcade”, where these established elements have “taken on mythic, totemic significance,” helping establish a “collective gaming memory” (Meades, 2022, p7). In a similar way to Meade’s definitions of how collective memory and dominant images of a form can hinder true understanding of cultural differences, understandings, and approaches of them – the same can be said for how more popular forms of professional wrestling, namely WWE, as well as the most popularised aspects of British wrestling, such as Big Daddy and Giant Haystacks, only serve to hinder the true representation and understanding of what

professional wrestling can be, mean, or entail based on various cultural backgrounds and approaches.



Figure 2: WWE's Randy Savage (Left), Miss Elizabeth (Centre) and Hulk Hogan (Right)



Figure 3: WWE's Ultimate Warrior

There is also the subject of race representation in historical outputs of British professional wrestling in past eras, whereby problematic stereotypes are perceived to have been rife through the sport's tenure on national television and consistent tours throughout the halls and arenas of the country. Nicholas Porter analyses classic British wrestling from the period of the 1970s to 1980s within a critical framework of post-colonial race and ethnicity. Porter observed developing attitudes to character representation throughout this period, noting the widespread use of problematic stereotypes in-line with "new racist" sentiments (Barker, 1981) embodied by sections of British society resistant to immigration and tribal worries of cultural displacement, as well as being caused by a Thatcher-led era of politics promoting a national identity which "sought to consign immigrants to periphery" and marginalise non-white communities in Britain (Porter, 2017, pp177-178). Porter notes the level of stereotypes used in character portrayals during this period running in-line with cultural developments and fears, such as the nationalist political overtones displayed with the popular character Big Daddy (see figure 4), representing a "hybrid of nationalism and working-class whiteness" and embodying the reactionary attitudes nationalist sections of British society had at the time against the evolving generation of racial diversification (2017, p178). Racially stereotyped characterisations were witnessed such as Honey Boy Zimba and Masambula (see figure 6) portraying an overtly clichéd and westernised representation of African tribal culture, showcasing exaggerated mannerisms over athletic technical skill and reinforcing colonial superiority through the reaffirming of such problematic stereotypes.



Figure 4: Big Daddy sporting nationalistic attire

In contrast to racially stereotypical characters in this era representing wider cultural and conservative attitudes, Porter observes this period as also allowing space for resistance to such assertions of stereotype to character, noting that despite some characters being depicted with a primary defining mode of heritage, as opposed to actual places of birth, the skill and performance of some black and Asian athletes were shown to be equal to that of white counterparts and often placed in ‘babyface’, ‘blue-eyes’ roles to much positive reception from audiences, as well as bypassing any sense of othering by wearing similar attire and in-ring aesthetic to most other wrestlers – namely the use of basic wrestling trunks with only a flag to indicate national heritage. An example of this would be the developing in-ring personalities of Johnny Kincaid (see figure 5) and Dave Bond, both shifting between being depicted as a problematic and stereotypically-charged tag-team gimmick called “Caribbean Sunshine Boys”, but later both shifting back to singles careers

performing as themselves individually without an externalised, racially-charged ‘gimmick’ and wrestling ability being prioritised over heritage. With these concepts, Porter argues wrestling in Britain served as an “unlikely but necessary forum for British multiculturalism in the face of marginalisation and suppression” (pp182-183).



Figure 5: Johnny Kincaid (Left) wrestling Bobby Barnes (Right)

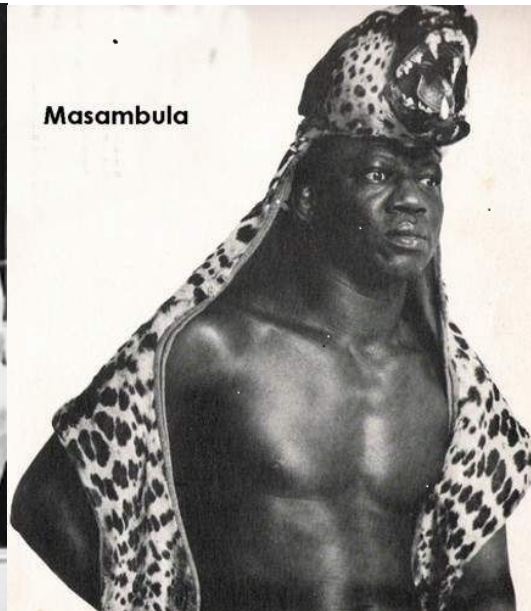


Figure 6: Masambula

Again, the point here is that although there is evidence to suggest absolute use of racist stereotypes throughout points of British wrestling presentation, the application of these instances have led to a reductive, common stance among popular understandings and recollections of the sport as such. I argue, as much as Porter does in their writing, that the consistent defining factor of British professional wrestling is the mode of athleticism and style of practice required from its performers by way of technical proficiency, sporting contexts, and competitive narratives of struggle and determination, as well as the rules, presentation and pseudo-legislation imposed by the industry’s structures of power and ownership. Although unfortunate presentations of problematic stereotypes have occurred

at points during the history of the sport and to this day, contrasting levels of resistive presentation have also been witnessed in characterisations. This all leads to the notion that professional wrestling certainly suffers from ongoing popular assertions of identity and meaning based on reductive, mythical terms. This point can be developed further when challenging reductive readings of British wrestling as traditionally sexist or misogynist alongside the sport being engaged by a predominantly male audience. It is clearly observable when viewing televised material from the *World of Sport* era and earlier that audiences were entirely mixed between all genders and ages. Ironically it can also be observed that there was often a large turnout of elderly women seen populating the front rows at wrestling events historically, engaging with fervour as active, audible agents with the presentation of conflict in front of them. On his recent podcast, retired British wrestler and ex-WWE, WCW and *World of Sport* star William Regal discusses the regularity of this demographic of elderly women attending shows and notes the particularly immersed, and often aggressive, manner of their engagement. Regal notes the skill villain wrestlers had in being able to rile up the audience to emotionally respond, contrasting this reaction and engagement with the context of the struggle of working-class living, whereby a sense of catharsis from real-world political, economic, and social difficulties was experienced. He notes how the audience, mostly working-class and particularly elderly women, would attend wrestling shows to vent frustrations as well as live vicariously through the heroic characters morally defeating the bad. Regal explains how this deep sense of immersion and engagement due to contextual factors of class struggle often led as far as violent action, and that it was common for these women to approach the ring during a match and attack the villain with their handbags or items from them. "That was a well-known thing for the old ladies to put [ceramic pots of] Pond's hand cream in their handbags to go up and [beat] you

with”, Regal states, relaying his experience witnessing a fellow wrestler at a show being attacked with a hat pin, stating “I saw an old lady come up, [...] she had a hat pin [...] and I watched her stick it right through his thigh” (Gentleman Villain Podcast, 2022).

Other than the evident widespread engagement and participation from women on an audience and fan level, there were also female professional wrestlers performing throughout this period, such as Mitzi Mueller, Rusty Blair, Nicky Munroe, Hellcat Haggerty and Klondyke Kate (see figure 11). Although women were not featured on television as much or provided as many opportunities for their matches to be broadcast until later after this period, women’s wrestling was very much an established feature on the UK live event circuit. However, it would consistently be set back by sexist attitudes which saw suppression of women’s involvement and promotion as athletes continuing to be put into action. News reports throughout the decades as far back as the 1930s showcase examples of women’s professional wrestling events either being protested against or cancelled entirely due to council legislation or general protest from communities such as religious groups or groups holding generally conservative attitudes (see figures 7-10). One early example shows statements from the Provost of Chelmsford Cathedral labelling women’s partaking of the sport as “degrading, horrible, bestial, depraved”, and bearing the opinion of the audiences for such material as having “depraved minds” and being a “certain class of people whose pleasures are a travesty of healthy sport.” (The Evening News, 1938, figure 7) Attitudes towards women by society in general at the time were further passed on to female wrestlers, with monikers given to the gender as “the fairer sex”, sincere presentations of female wrestling patronised as “simple girlish fun” and patriarchal assertions of control by issuing bans where possible and agreed to by council committees (BBC, 2021).

WOMEN'S WRESTLING—

"Degrading, Horrible, Bestial, Depraved," Says Provost

(Continued from previous column) for, and expect, the usual jerks of stopping and starting.

It was practically impossible for trams and buses to start and stop without a jerk of some degree. It was quite true that the quicker the jerk on stopping, the more one was inclined to be thrown forward towards the front of the bus; and in this connection it was rather curious that Mrs Tindle, according to her evidence, was thrown the other way.

His Honour should have thought that it was a physical impossibility that that was due to the jerk of the bus.

SIDWAYS FALL

Mrs Tindle said she was thrown sideways and hit the seat on the other side of the gangway with her head. That again was a rather curious thing to happen if it was due to the sudden jerk.

If Mrs Tindle had been still sitting in her seat and the jerk was so tremendous as to throw her, she would have been thrown forward and would have struck the seat in front.

But there could be no doubt that she fell, and it seemed most probable that she did move along the seat and was actually in the position of rising up when the bus stopped.

In those circumstances a comparatively slight jerk would cause her to fall and might cause her to fall sideways. He could not help feeling that that was what happened.

Mr Percy Rowland, who has held a similar post under the Folkestone Corporation, has been appointed as the first entertainment manager at Southend-on-Sea.

STRONG criticism of women wrestlers was uttered to-day by the Provost of Chelmsford Cathedral (the Very Rev. W. E. R. Morrow). "To my mind," he said, "nothing is more calculated to degrade human nature to its most bestial depths than the sight of an apparently healthy pair of young women wearing nothing

GRANNY DOESN'T KNOW BEST

Discussed infant welfare at the Royal Sanitary Institute Health Congress at Portsmouth, to-day Dr Grace Oliver, of London, said that a child's grandmother was often a greater cause of difficulty in the child's proper upbringing than its own parents. The grandmother told the child's mother what she would have done if it had been her own baby.

more than a bathing dress indulging in all the repugnant postures of all-a-wrestling to the accompaniment of leers and promptings of a mixed crowd of onlookers."

The Provost spoke of the "horrible" exhibitions staged "to satisfy the depraved minds of a certain class of people whose pleasures are a travesty of healthy sport."

"I find it difficult to comprehend the mentality of those who can stoop to organise or to witness such disgusting shows," he added.

One of the organisers of a recent women's wrestling match at Chelmsford said: "Our shows are perfectly respectable and clean and we intend to keep them so."

Warwickshire post since 1955.

Bridgnorth Mayor

A former Mayor of Dudley, Coun. George Marlow, licensee of the Woodberry Down Hotel, Bridgnorth, is to be next Mayor of Bridgnorth. He was a member of Dudley Borough Council for 25 years and Mayor in 1950-1 and 1951-2.

Women's wrestling

Despite objections by a magistrate and a vicar, a women's wrestling bout is to be staged today in Uttoxeter Town Hall, Staffordshire. A council spokesman said: "If we cancelled it at this late stage we might have been involved in a claim for damages."

Road crash victim dies

After the death yesterday in West Bromwich District Hospital of a motor-cycle pillion passenger from injuries suffered in a road accident nine days ago, Wednesbury police have appealed for witnesses.

holders in the Finham have signed a petition as the move.

One demand is that the too short a time between and April 1 to con arrangements, including warding of the three all areas into the city, and the date for operation o Order should be postponed April, 1966.

TALK WITH TENANT TAKE RECORDER

A tape-recording made machine carried in a land pocket when he went to view a tenant, was play Kidderminster County yesterday. Briarcliff Prop Ltd., of Stourport Road, brought two claims for rent against Mr. Douglas Ke Mann, of Comberton Hill denied that he was in ar

Judge Norman Carr said he found the recording pro corroboration that sums due. The case would never

Figure 7: The Evening News 18/07/1938

Figure 8: The Birmingham Post 03/03/1965

No women's wrestling in Redditch hall

Birmingham Post Redditch Staff

WOMEN'S wrestling is not to be allowed in the council-owned Kingfisher Hall, Redditch. A recommendation by the Baths and Entertainment Committee that a women's bout should be allowed at the next tournament run by the Stratford Rovers Recreation Football Club was defeated by 9 votes to 8 at the meeting of the council last night.

Coun. W. J. Stranz said: "I do not think that this sordid lowering of taste is necessary. It is the council's hall and we are responsible for what goes on there."

"I do not think that we can avoid our responsibilities by saying that those who do not want to see it do not have to go."

Coun. G. Ricketts said that he was surprised that some councillors set themselves up as a form of Watch Committee. "I do not think that we should decide what sort of entertainment the people of Redditch should have," he said.

Coun. H. Shakes said that he was concerned about the effect on any children who might go to the wrestling. Coun. R. Dickens said that children could see worse things than women's wrestling any night on television.

I was hurt, not drunk —doctor

Birmingham Post Worcester Staff

A WORCESTER doctor accused of driving a car when under the influence of drink told a jury at Worcester City Quarter Sessions yesterday that his abnormal behaviour during a medical examination was due to concussion and not to alcohol.

Dr. Leslie Harris Griffiths (60), of Shaw Street, Worcester.

Figure 9: The Birmingham Post, 28/09/1965

Despite opposition Go-ahead for women's wrestling

Women's wrestling in Tamworth has been given the go-ahead — despite an attempt by two female councillors to crush the move.

Female wrestling at the town's Assembly Rooms was banned in 1965, and since that time no one had tried to put on women's wrestling shows, members of the Borough Council's Leisure Activities Committee heard.

But Tamworth's Recreation and Amenities Officer, Mr. Brian Moore, said the council had now received a request to include female wrestling on the bill at the Assembly Rooms.

He recommended that the request be granted in view of the Sex Discrimination Act.

TERRIBLE

Opposition to the request came from Councillor Miss Susie King, who said she thought female wrestling was "terrible".

She added "I may be old fashioned, but I can't see real women doing this."

Councillor Miss King was supported by Councillor Mrs. Lily Tricklebank, a town magistrate, who said "I think female wrestling is degrading. I voted against it in 1965 and I don't think we should accept it now."

Anyone who did not like female wrestling need not go to the shows, Councillor Phil Smith claimed.

He added "If some ladies want to display their physical fitness I have got no objection at all."

Chairman of the committee, Councillor Ron Cook, pointed out "You can't say 'Yes' to men's wrestling and 'no' to women's."

A Ford Escort car worth £220 was stolen from the locked garage of a Belgrave house on Saturday night. The car — registered number OOJ 253G — was taken after the garage door at 269, Waveney, was forced open.

A child's Raleigh Chopper bicycle was stolen from 22 East Street, Dosthill, last week. The machine was valued at £26.

Figure 10: Chronical Herald, 26/11/1976

Despite a conservative, traditionalist suppression of female wrestling coverage on the mainstream level, women were still very much active in this period competing in front of live crowds where possible. Although the number of women on the scene during prior decades were minimal in comparison to that of men – even as low as less than twelve in the 1970s according to some figures (BBC Archive, 2022), female representation was still found in classic periods of professional wrestling in Britain, alongside audiences not being exclusive to male demographics. Regardless of some unfortunate fetishist and objectifying identities placed on female performers, such as British and European champion Mitzi Mueller being dubbed “The Kinky Blonde” – this is evocative of values placed from patriarchal societal attitudes, and similar to what has been argued with black representation in historical British wrestling outputs in terms of popular assumption being based on reductive understanding. Without equal footing in a broadcasted context, women’s wrestling still attracted paying wrestling fans with the talented athletes among them proving “immensely popular with audiences” (Wrestling Heritage, 2020, para 2). Popular assumptions of women in wrestling are challenged here, showcasing the resistive, and sometimes progressive, qualities from wrestling that can be observed by way of suppressed minorities actively engaging with passions despite adversity and constant scrutiny.



Figure 11: Klondyke Kate (Left) wrestling Mitzi Mueller (Right)

Further contributing to generalised, mythic understandings of professional wrestling aesthetic and appeal is the common association between the notion of ‘campness’ and the way professional wrestling is both intended to be presented to, as well as consumed by, the audience or viewer. Professional wrestling can be considered "camp" due to its embrace of theatrical excess, over-the-top characters, and exaggerated storylines. This characterisation does not necessarily diminish its value but acknowledges a specific aspect of its entertainment appeal. Camp is often associated with a sense of deliberate artificiality and theatricality, and professional wrestling certainly incorporates these elements. Wrestlers adopt larger-than-life personas, complete with eccentric outfits and spectacular entrances.

The storytelling in some facets of the form is often filled with absurd plotlines, featuring everything from supernatural powers to soap opera-like feuds – therefore this unapologetic embrace of the absurd and exaggerated can be seen as ‘campy’. Moreover, Camp can be a form of self-aware entertainment that encourages the audience to enjoy the spectacle, not despite its apparent artificiality, but because of it. Wrestling's fans often appreciate the Campy aspects of the sport. They find enjoyment in the playful blend of reality and fiction, and in cheering for or against characters who are intentionally caricatured.

Susan Sontag’s seminal works ‘Notes on Camp’, originally published in 1964, makes a detailed examination and definition of the concept, pointing to various interpretations such as holding a general aesthetic of eccentricity, an essence of the “glorification of character”, as well as noting that “the hallmark of camp is the spirit of extravagance” (Sontag, 2018, pp16-21). It is clearly observable that many of the most well-known stars of classic British wrestling adhere to these notions of camp – the obvious examples being Big Daddy and Kendo Nagasaki (see figure 12). The former illustrated an excessive physique complemented the “garish patriotic overtones” observed in the nationalist colour scheme of the ring and ropes and with his common attire of a union jack top hat, sparkling capes and an overall demeanour of exaggerated patriotism. Whereas the latter in Nagasaki was presented as a far-fetched gimmick involved with the wrestler being described as a Japanese warrior holding supernatural powers, as well as being dressed in stereotypical Japanese fencing garb. This relates nicely to Sontag’s notion that “pure Camp is always naïve. [...] The pure examples of Camp are unintentional; they are dead serious” (2018, p13), meaning that the evident ‘campness’ of Kendo Nagasaki is not necessarily intentional in its iteration but can be taken as such when admired through a non-contextual lens.



Figure 12: The masked wrestler Kendo Nagasaki

There are obvious examples which could certainly support that Camp is intentionally instilled to seek the associated reaction and sentiment. One such example is the comedic and tongue-in-cheek style of Les Kellett whereby the self-aware playfulness in his matches and exaggerated 'drunken' style of his character could be considered as being Camp. But Sontag's statements remind us of the true nature of Camp as an "art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is 'too much' " (2018, p17), therefore linking to the notion that perhaps the moniker of classic British professional wrestling as a 'Camp' portrayal of sporting conflict could be stemming from a mostly reductive, popular perception of wrestling based on common, obvious threads of material as opposed to dedicated, informed fans or engagers otherwise aware of the intricacies the British history of the sport contains. What I mean by this is that rather than taking the "it's

good because it's awful" (Sontag, 2018, p3) approach of taking the most 'Camp' highlights of British wrestling, focusing on the popular likes of Big Daddy, Giant Haystacks and Kendo Nagasaki – one can simply look further into the wider net of wrestling content of prior British periods in wrestling which showcase a more genuine, sporting presentation of the phenomena – one which aided in defining British wrestling as an original, sought-after style based on skill and technical prowess, and defined the industry itself for decades prior to its eventual decline. For example, one will definitely make a Camp reading of a match such as Les Kellet versus Leon Arras (World of Sport, 1974) due to the mode of style they purposefully exhibited and were known for - namely the tongue-in-cheek and pantomimic form of over-exaggeration, comedic action, and intentionally making the crowd laugh from farcical set pieces. However, I would argue it is difficult to have the same reading when watching matches such as Johnny Saint versus Robbie Brookside (ITV Wrestling, 1987), Steve Grey versus Danny Collins (World of Sport, 1974), or the more recent series of matches between Walter and Ilja Dragunov (NXT UK, 2020, 2021) . The latter matches showcase a more sports-based presentation of technical, mat-based wrestling whereby the Campish elements often read in wrestling, such as overacting, absurd storyline, and characters are at a minimum. The audience watch in silent concentration as both competitors, simply presented as experienced athletes rather than any form of hyperbolised characterisation, vie for bodily control via an array of holds, submissions, throws, and slams often seen in legitimate amateur wrestling competition. For example, wristlocks, gut-wrenches, leg-locks, trips, and double-leg takedowns. The latter and more modern match showcases a more aggressive, violent form of wrestling which perfectly embodies the Barthes notion of performed suffering – including heavy striking, kicks, and visible bodily damage incurred by way of bruises and skin damage. Similar to the suspension of disbelief achieved by the

simplistic, sports-based presentation of the classic match examples, these elements permeate through the veneer of simulation to emotionally connect with audiences with something perceivably 'real'.

Professional wrestling can be camp, but it can also be consumed and read as a sincere, quality form of sports-based drama which can connect with an audience on a serious emotional level. Regarding a defining factor of Camp whereby "the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails" (2018, p23), Sontag suggests that campness often revolves around a deliberate and exaggerated embrace of seriousness that ultimately falls short. When considering the aforementioned examples of British professional wrestling throughout the decades, it becomes evident that not all instances of wrestling align with the Camp aesthetic. While wrestling often showcases theatrical elements, exaggerated personas, and dramatic storylines, it does so with a significant degree of self-awareness and intent to entertain. Wrestlers and audiences acknowledge the scripted nature of the sport, which sets it apart from the unintentional failure of seriousness that characterises Camp. In professional wrestling, the seriousness is performative, and the audience actively participates in the suspension of disbelief. Therefore, professional wrestling, despite its theatricality, is not always 'Camp' in the sense that it typically lacks the failure of seriousness essential to the Camp aesthetic.

Another way of debating professional wrestling as a Camp form of entertainment is the act of 'selling'. This term, referring to the overreaction of wrestlers when pretending to be hurt, is a quintessential example of camp and being 'too much' in professional wrestling. This theatrical exaggeration, often referred to as "selling" in wrestling terminology, involves

dramatic displays of pain and suffering that go far beyond what one would expect in a real sporting contest. Wrestlers writhe in agony, contort their faces into exaggerated expressions of pain, and sometimes engage in comically melodramatic performances, all of which are intended to either entertain or emotionally connect with the audience. Exhibiting such actions playfully and in exaggerated fashion can add a layer of absurdity to the storytelling, contributing to the campy nature of professional wrestling. This over-the-top reaction to pain is a fundamental aspect of the sport's charm, and fans often appreciate the skill and artistry involved in these performances, even as they knowingly suspend their disbelief for the sake of enjoying the spectacle.

While calling professional wrestling "camp" is a valid perspective that acknowledges the intentionally exaggerated and theatrical elements that make wrestling a unique form of entertainment, it does not encapsulate its full scope and complexity. To 'over-sell' is often considered bad practice in the industry of professional wrestling. Jim Cornette, a notable and experienced figure in the industry since his debut as a wrestling manager in the early 1980s, states how wrestlers should react to action in a way that "people can feel....that is real" with body language anyone could relate to. He does mention how a more animated form of 'selling' exists, but only reserved for the bad, 'heel' character, and iterated within the psychology of the match whereby the good, 'babyface' character makes a come-back and begins to overpower and succeed in the match. He concludes by mentioning how 'over-selling' can ruin the flow of a match, lose the emotional momentum, and cause a form of narrative dissonance with the audience – all due to failing to achieve a sense of suspension of disbelief (ArcadianVanguard, 2018). The art of 'selling' in wrestling is a balancing act of performance psychology utilised by wrestlers to build what is referred to as 'heat'. Al Snow,

veteran wrestler and WWE alum, defines 'heat' as "a want, a need, a desire...that you build in the audience" (THE HANNIBAL TV, 2016). Connecting the statements made by Cornette and Snow, it can be understood that both the desired effect from producers and sought after result from some audiences are based on effective, controlled manipulation of emotion and expression. Therefore the very idea of addressing wrestling as Camp on the grounds of an exaggeration of performance is stifled by the notion of the industry's disdain for that mode of presentation, as well as the sincere and positive reaction gained from most, but not all, audiences when these performances are not 'too much'.

To conclude this discussion, although professional wrestling is a unique form of entertainment that has been globally successful for decades, I argue that referring to it as Camp in a broad sense can be reductive and fails to acknowledge the complex artistry, athleticism, and cultural significance that the sport embodies. To label professional wrestling as Camp can oversimplify a multi-dimensional art form that combines elements of theatre, athleticism, storytelling, and performance. Sontag states how Camp entails "love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration" (2018, pp7-8). The levels of exaggeration and hyperbole sometimes used and the success of the likes of Big Daddy and Hulk Hogan support a reading of wrestling as Camp, but denying alternate readings of wrestling outside of the status of outright Campness is reductive, dismissing the sincere 'love', counterpoint to Sontag's definition, fans may have for the athleticism and professional skill practitioners embody, the very real dangers they face doing it, and the sincere sense of emotional connection, immersion, and admiration they gain for those performers in the process. Lastly, Sontag's definition of Camp is contested in later discourse, with Meyer defining it as more strictly a form encapsulating queer identity, and criticising Sontag's work as

downplaying the homosexual connection and creating a sanitised understanding of the form more fit for popular, public consumption (1994, p6). Queer identities have been presented historically within wrestling, such as the androgynous portrayal of Adrian Street in 1970s British wrestling and later within American territorial circles – but his presentation was arguably a form of “queerbaiting” (Brennan, 2019) in terms of suggesting a non-hetero status but not fulfilling true queer identity. There are true LGBTQ+ representations in contemporary wrestling, such as AEW wrestling stable The Acclaimed who celebrate diverse sexualities in their characterisation and overall aesthetic, but the connection between wrestling and Camp – although apt and present within many readings and examples – can be distanced due to both not always fulfilling the parameters set by both Sontag and Meyer.

Although these sensationalised manifestations of wrestling have certainly existed over time, they simply do no justice to the true heritage and qualities presented in wrestling historically within various cultural contexts and serve to only represent more populist takes. This study both aims to shine a light on often disregarded and forgotten qualities culturally produced in British professional wrestling, and challenge the consistent, reductive stance of professional wrestling academia alongside popular understanding.

Definitions of mythic, semiotic elements of wrestling set by Barthes and explorations of its form as masculine melodrama by Jenkins are accurate when concerning wrestling in a broader context. However, they may also be read as fairly reductive when taking the sport on a more specific, cultural and social context. As earlier stated, Barthes original essays do serve great purpose in providing an understanding of the symbolic, mythic nature of the form and the connections it makes between performer and audience, but it

must be appreciated that Barthes essay was written within a particular time and place of wrestling – namely mid-century France, and there is much space for exploration into how professional wrestling is culturally influenced and integrated across different nations. As Griffiths states, “the assumption of a global homogenous wrestling culture is challenged” (2015, p39), and therefore such individual cultural approaches to professional wrestling – both as a style, process and subcultural mode of spectatorship – must be observed and studied. By acknowledging works by earlier mentioned scholars such as Levi exploring culturally produced practices, aesthetics, and meanings generated in Mexican Lucha Libre – showcasing the quasi-religious nature of masks used by performers and its presentation being “faster” and “more acrobatic” (Levi, 2005, p98) than the power-based style of America – it can be understood that the cultural context of professional wrestling elevates its value and meaning beyond the discursive mode of aesthetics that Barthes and the majority of academics have traditionally set out.

In a similar way that Levi looks at history, aesthetic and social concerns to create a framework in defining Mexican wrestling as a significant cultural artefact, this study aims to provide insight into the history of British professional wrestling from the television era to its eventual downfall and revival, observable aesthetics, and socio-cultural factors which have developed and morphed in-line with societal changes. With the use of historical accounts from literature and media – alongside personal accounts from interviewed participants – these factors are intended to contribute to the often disregarded area of wrestling academia, namely the study of British cultural wrestling output and its intricacies.

Before embarking on a critical historical exploration of British professional wrestling, spanning from the televised era and beyond, it is crucial to establish an understanding of the traditional aesthetic associated with British wrestling as a cultural phenomenon. This understanding is pivotal in comprehending both the essence of British wrestling as a cultural output and its role in shaping the common, mythic paradigm of the sport. This section aims to delve into the cultural origins of wrestling in Britain, briefly examining its roots in both the sporting and amateur realms of grappling that have unfolded over centuries. It further explores the transition of wrestling into a professional, 'worked' context while retaining the influences of sports and amateur grappling aesthetics. Moreover, this initial section on British history contextualises historical factors that arguably contribute to contemporary mythicised frameworks for understanding professional wrestling more broadly. The narrative then unfolds to explore the meteoric rise and eventual controversial decline of nationally broadcast wrestling in Britain during the tumultuous 1980s.

"All the Americans had was punch and kick...": A Brief History of the Sport and Aesthetics of Traditional British Professional Wrestling

Professional wrestling has a rich history encompassing its evolution into 'sports entertainment' and its genuine competitive origins. Historical accounts, such as the "Field of Cloth and Gold" event in 1520, demonstrate wrestling's popularity for centuries (Kent, 1968, p107; Sim, 1999, p161).

The development of professional wrestling style drew from pre-1900 forms, particularly in Northern Britain, characterised by close hand-to-hand grappling and holds akin to those in contemporary amateur wrestling. These grappling techniques gave rise to the style known as 'Catch-as-catch-can,' described by Griffiths as "a rougher style of wrestling" popular among the urban working class. It emphasised holds, joint manipulation, and body control, with striking playing a minimal role (2015, p41).

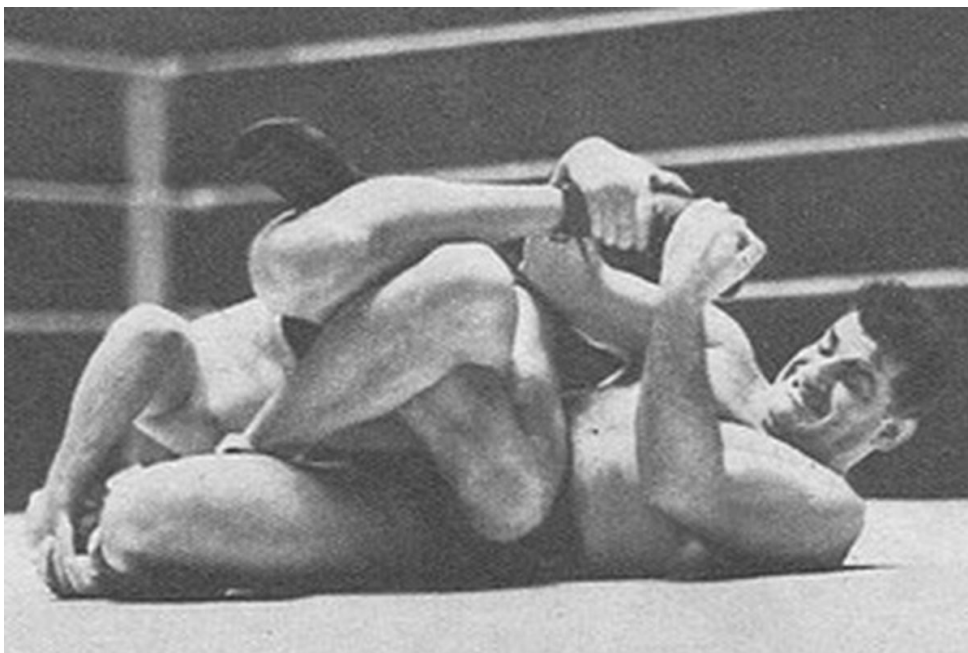


Figure 13: Two wrestlers engaged in 'Catch-as-catch-can' wrestling, attempted leg locks on each other

Catch-as-catch-can wrestling, with Lancastrian roots, evolved from Devon and Cornish wrestling styles. Matches had no rounds, with victory achieved by pinning the opponent or obtaining a submission (see figure 14). Ruslan Pashayev noted early 1800s news reports describing Lancashire-based wrestling, which later developed into 'catch-as-catch-can'. It involved one-on-one competitions, with an 1824 Morning Chronicle report mentioning moves like "catching the antagonist by the knees and throwing him backwards," akin to today's 'backdrop' or 'back body drop' in professional wrestling (2019, p11).

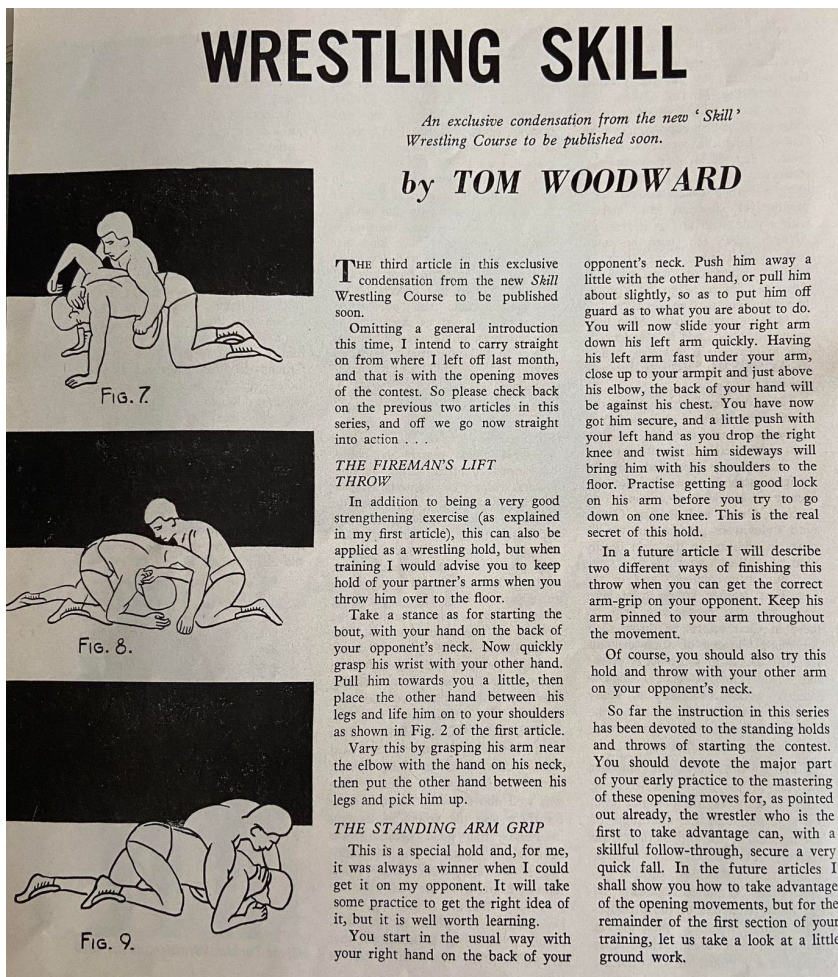


Figure 14: Examples of 'Catch' wrestling holds featured in Wrestling World magazine c1962

These observations likely pertain to the sport's original, unscripted form, which later transformed into a "worked," predetermined version. People have been aware of wrestling's scripted nature since its post-war popularity and perhaps earlier. In today's digital age, wrestling fans engage with the sport differently. Rather than suspending disbelief for competitive matches, Jansen notes that fans now consider the "real" aspect of wrestling to encompass backstage politics, writers' decisions, and corporate judgments (2018b, p637).

Wrestling's success in Britain attracted famed wrestler and strongman George Hackenschmidt, who toured the UK under entrepreneur Charles Cochran's promotion. He challenged British champions, defeating Tom Cannon in Liverpool in 1902, and setting box office records across Europe (Lister, 2002).

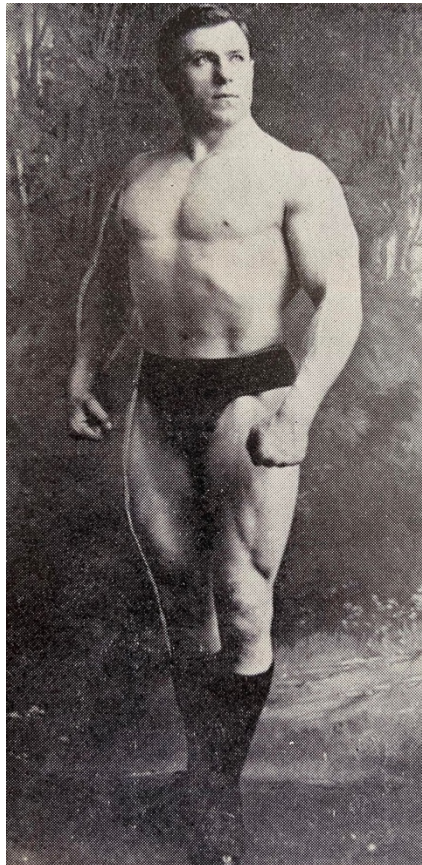


Figure 15: A young George Hackenschmidt

During the 'Music-Hall' era of the early twentieth century, wrestling reached immense popularity in the UK, making it an integral part of entertainment. This period marked the internationalisation of wrestling, breaking gender stereotypes by appealing to diverse audiences. Additionally, gambling became prominent within the industry, facilitating the development of scripted wrestling (Snape, 2013, p1421). The World Wars, particularly

the depression of the 1930s, disrupted wrestling worldwide and contributed to the emergence of a more mythic, Americanised form of the sport. This era saw larger, less skilled competitors joining the wrestling circles, leading to the development of a more general strike-based style (Griffiths, 2015). Popular inter-war sports like Greyhound Racing and Speedway influenced this evolution, appealing to working-class audiences seeking excitement. Despite its transgressive conduct and ties to gambling, "All-In" wrestling remained popular, featuring a spectacular showdown of 'good' versus 'evil' with little regard for rules (Snape, 2013, p1424).

This wrestling style, prioritising spectacle over traditional fair play, raised concerns and was likened to bare-knuckle boxing and 'no holds barred' fighting. The lack of regulation and adherence to rules in All-In wrestling led to violent and unsavoury conduct in matches. Notably, a lack of talented wrestlers contributed to the downfall of this era, with big, unskilled performers overshadowing technically skilled practitioners. Most matches ended in brawls, both inside and outside the ring, prompting London to ban wrestling just before the war due to the chaotic nature of these events. After the war, attempts to revive the sport were met with challenges such as smaller audiences, limited event spaces, and opposition from local councils (Garfield, 2007, p20-21).

In North America, professional wrestling faced a growing distrust and caution among the public. Griffiths notes that in the USA, wrestling was increasingly presented as a "staged" exhibition with gimmicks and stunts, eroding its credibility with some segments of the audience. Many began to return to boxing, seen as a more "authentic" sport rather than engineered entertainment (2015, p41). The notion of wrestling as a "worked" and

predetermined presentation of sport dates back further, possibly even to the pre-nineteenth century. Circus promotions with strongmen and fighters were early examples of manipulating audiences into believing in staged contests. Wrestling-specific language, such as the term 'Mark,' which referred to a susceptible audience member, has historical roots in this practice.

The shift in the American wrestling circles towards an entertainment format, including the popular "good guy versus bad guy" scenario known as 'face' versus 'heel,' marked the beginning of what can be termed the modern mythic paradigm of professional wrestling. This transformation ultimately led to the territorial era of American pro wrestling, where major cities and states had their wrestling territories, promoting local shows and television broadcasts (Griffiths, 2015, p41-43).

In post-depression Britain, the sport of wrestling faced a level of disdain similar to other nations. However, Britain managed to maintain some legitimacy in wrestling through local and regional codes and practices. In contrast to the American wrestling scene influenced by itinerant 'barnstormers,' British wrestling was shaped by English regional codes, with origins in Westmoreland, Lancashire, and Cornwall (Griffiths, 2015, p48).

While American wrestling was more influenced by international factors and the circus and strongman circuits, legitimate wrestling in Britain could still be found at regional events like the Caledonian games, untainted by American theatrics. This maintained a degree of legitimacy for professional wrestling variants and retained an audience base, and the British press often emphasised the distinction between the "Britishness" and

"Englishness" of amateur British wrestling and the more commercialised American variant (Griffiths, 2015, p48-50).

Despite the survival of 'catch' wrestling in Britain, there was a prevailing sense of conservatism, and professionalism was met with suspicion. Elite values in English sport viewed professional wrestling as an affront, appealing primarily to the working classes. All-In wrestling, in particular, remained largely unknown to middle-class individuals and didn't enjoy royal patronage or significant newspaper coverage due to doubts about its authenticity (Griffiths, 2015, p50; Snape, 2013, p1418). British wrestling seemed to be sinking into obscurity without the support of the establishment and faced an uncertain future. In response to the prevailing distrust and disdain for wrestling in Britain, a series of reforms were introduced to re-establish the sport's respectability and promote a more sports-oriented format. Admiral Lord Mountevans, a wrestling enthusiast, collaborated with influential figures in parliament, such as Maurice Webb, Naval Commander Archibald Bruce Campbell, and Olympic wrestler Norman Morell, to establish a committee responsible for regulating wrestling in a more "controlled manner" (Garfield, 2007, p20-21).

These new regulations introduced official weight classes, ranging from lightweights at 70kg to heavyweights at 95kg, and allowed matches to conclude in various ways, including winning by a best of three falls, with falls achieved through pin, submission, knockout, or technical knockout. Disqualification was possible, with a maximum of three public warnings issued by the referee for unsporting conduct and unsavoury offenses. Additionally, the rules defined various legal holds for competitors to use during a match, including half and full-nelsons, waist holds, scissor holds, bridges, and arm levers (Evans,

1951). The transformation of professional wrestling in Britain revived the industry, leading to the emergence of various touring promotions. They formed the alliance Joint Promotions, similar to the American National Wrestling Alliance (Lister, 2002). Bill Abbey of Dale Martin Promotions noted issues with wrestler cooperation within Joint Promotions, saying, "We agreed not to poach venues or operate within a ten-mile radius of each other. Wrestlers who didn't show up risked having future dates cancelled." (Garfield, 2007, p24-25) The entertainment tax, which was only abolished in 1960 due to protests and threats by figures like J Arthur Rank, significantly hindered the live wrestling circuit. Failure to pay the tax incurred heavy fees for promoters (Fisher, 2012). Its removal marked a turning point, allowing live wrestling to flourish in Britain. In 1955, wrestling began its first national broadcast, a ground-breaking moment in the sport's history. The next section will delve into the television era, discussing participants, audience, styles, and the reasons behind its eventual decline.

Everything Stops at Four O' Clock: The Television Era of British Professional Wrestling and its Eventual Downfall

British televised wrestling was a staple in sports and entertainment, particularly beloved by the working class, despite ongoing conservative scepticism. Its high viewership in the late '60s to early '80s allowed it to compete with other popular programs. The show's simple and effective in-ring storytelling resonated with audiences. The time slot, often referred to as "everything stops at four o'clock," aligned with the schedules of many working class viewers (Gorilla Position, 2015). Live studio audiences were mainly working class families, with elderly women and adult males in attendance. While there are claims

that wrestling outperformed the FA Cup final in ratings, this remains unverified, though ITV Wrestling suggests it had a substantial audience (ITV Wrestling, n.d). Notably, the Duke of Kent's memoirs (Crossman, 1975) claim that the Queen allegedly watched wrestling, suggesting its potential to transcend class barriers with its timeless in-ring storytelling.

During the classic era of *World of Sport* wrestling, popular wrestler Johnny Kincaid challenged the notion that wrestling was purely enjoyed by the working class. He observed a diverse audience that included doctors, surgeons, solicitors, magistrates, and judges among the attendees at the Albert Hall (Kincaid, 2007, p185). This diversity highlights the timelessness and universal appeal of wrestling's mythic physical storytelling, irrespective of style or aesthetic.

Kent Walton, a long-time presenter and commentator for ITV's *World of Sport* wrestling (see figure 16), emphasised the sport's ability to connect with people emotionally and present various sexual ideals. He described wrestling as a TV program that appealed to a broad audience, offering viewers a vision of the people they aspired to be and meet. Walton also commented on its simplistic portrayal of moral conflict between good and evil (Garfield, 2007, p59), suggesting a connection to Barthes' concept of mythical catharsis through the triumph of good over evil in the presentation of conflict. However, the cultural context of the time remains a key factor to consider, particularly in the context of the challenges faced by the working class. The sense of promise out of poverty with a focus on individualism and meritocracy appealed to some working class voters, showing Margaret Thatcher as entrepreneurial and capable (Brunt 1987, Hall 1988), as well as “the simplicity of the Tory party’s free-market solutions, led by a direct and firm woman prime minister”

being noted as being “attractive to the British public” (Christopher, 2015, p182). Despite this apparent subscription to her leadership, the era of Margaret Thatcher’s leadership and conservative neoliberal paradigm would prove to be destructive and disadvantageous to some working class communities.



Figure 16: Kent Walton commentating on the action for World of Sport wrestling.

Before delving into the political shift and various factors contributing to the decline of televised wrestling in Britain, let's examine the components of British wrestling during this period, including its aesthetics, audiences, and spectatorship, to understand the values it promoted and how viewers engaged with it.

From the inception of British televised wrestling until its discontinuation in 1988, the traditional 'catch' style remained prevalent, adhering to the established Mount-Evans committee rules. Joint Promotions regularly broadcast wrestling on ITV, securing a coveted four o'clock time slot as part of the Saturday afternoon sports show, *World of Sport*, from

1965 until its cancellation in 1985. This commitment to 'catch' wrestling and the strict adherence to guidelines in the presentation of the sport in Britain was complemented by a closely-guarded and exclusive industry.

Becoming a wrestler was not an open path. It required recognition through legitimate toughness or fighting skills, whether in amateur or professional circles, and sometimes, even a reputation for street toughness. Figures like Johnny Kincaid and Mick McManus were discovered due to their accomplishments in amateur sports, with Kincaid participating in amateur wrestling and boxing clubs and McManus being active in similar circles and weightlifting clubs (Kincaid, 2007, p55-56). Provocative wrestler Adrian Street, a popular villain in British wrestling during the 1970s and successful in the American territorial system, also gained industry attention through his achievements in amateur boxing. Additionally, a prominent professional wrestler from the 1950s and 60s advised Street to join an amateur wrestling club to gain proficiency in the genuine sport before considering a professional career (2012 A, p269). Street was surprised to learn that even wrestling champions like Bert Asserati had to work additional jobs to supplement their income (2012 B, pp13). Wrestling in Britain, even when performed on television, was driven by passion and required dedication, as monetary gain was seemingly not the primary motivation.

As highlighted by ex-WWE wrestler Daniel Bryan in his autobiography, William Regal was renowned as a "shooter," signifying his genuine wrestling prowess in the world of professional wrestling. Regal's journey into the industry was a testament to his toughness and commitment. Beginning wrestling at a young age, he even performed in carnival shows, occasionally squaring off against members of the audience (Bryan, Tello, 2016, p. 66).

Before earning a place in the industry, Regal had to master amateur wrestling skills and navigate the demanding Blackpool circuit, notorious for arranging bouts between professional wrestlers and local residents willing to prove their mettle, with a cash prize at stake for the victor. Regal's personal accounts provide valuable insights into this unique facet of wrestling history:

“The wrestlers lined up outside. [...] Challengers would get £10 for every round they lasted, and £100 if they lasted all three or knocked the wrestler out. [...] Now Blackpool’s a tough place. There’d be gangs of lads who would have been roaming around, drinking all day, and they’d be up for it. “Is there anybody else?” and a bigger guy would step in. Now the crowd would be on the hook. They’d *ooh* and *aah*, thinking the big guy was bound to have a great chance. Then everybody would file in and pay their money to see the matches. It was a great place to learn about crowd psychology. When the big fellow got in to have a go, you could tell everyone was thinking “Now here’s someone who can win.” The wrestlers who took the challenges usually wore masks. There were a couple of reasons for that. Firstly, it made you look more like a monster when you were standing outside and Steve was getting people in. Secondly, if trouble really kicked off in the shows – which it did – or if you had to give someone a really good hiding, you could bugger off when the police came because no one knew what you looked like. (Chandler, Regal, 2005, p16-17).

The idea that this continuance of carnival and circus-like presentation of wrestling as a way of swindling the unknowing public of their money, especially at such a late stage of the sport's lifespan, somewhat justifies the way in which professional wrestling had such ease in terms of suspending public disbelief of any pre-worked or negotiated aspect of the sport – but the main point here is that the performers simply had to be skilled fighters or entail a high level of toughness to begin with in order to be successful. This, in combination with a dedication to a sporting presentation ruleset and aesthetic being traced to the genuine origins of Lancastrian, Cornish and Cumbrian 'Catch' wrestling, arguably led to televised British wrestling becoming so quickly and easily domestically enjoyed.

Laurence De Garis highlights the distilled elements crucial for wrestling's success, emphasising that the best matches replicate the excitement of sports contests and create narrative moments akin to dramatic sporting victories (De Garis, 2005, p201). While De Garis mainly speaks from an American context, his insights shed light on the distinctive identity of classic British professional wrestling. Unlike modern American wrestling with its emphasis on sensationalism and soap-opera-like narratives, British wrestling remained committed to the sporting formula. Even as it introduced entertainment-based gimmick characters like Kendo Nagasaki, Big Daddy, and Giant Haystacks, it maintained legitimate backgrounds and supporting bouts involving technically-skilled competitors. The focus was on in-ring competition, rather than backstage melodrama. British wrestling's dedication to simulating live sporting events, showcased in familiar town events halls, created a strong cultural connection with its working-class British audience and set it apart from its international counterparts.

As Claire Warden explains, “the space where wrestling occurs in a material and temporal sense—the arena, the hall, the backyard—remains a vital facet of the wrestling experience” (2018, p864). Although Warden is noting the context of the connection between place and time negotiated between live wrestling presentation and the live wrestling audience, this very factor is what gives classic British televised wrestling its edge and cultural connection in comparison to its international variants. In context, wrestling was broadcasted as part of an afternoon package on *World of Sport* – meaning that it was sandwiched between other, genuine sports content such as football and rugby, with results even being broadcasted as wrestling footage was being aired. Alongside this, a simplified and honest display of live sporting combat was shown, utilising the commonality of town events halls as a live space for broadcast and an audience of ordinary, working British people to reflect the exact kind of viewership the broadcast would draw the attention of.

It was plausibly the decisive, highly technical and fluid in-ring action that drew the excitement of millions of viewers every Saturday afternoon for *World of Sport*. William Regal recounts his experiences being part of this era of British wrestling, speaking of the likes of fellow wrestlers as Terry Rudge, Dave ‘Fit’ Finlay and Marty Jones, stating “they all did extremely believable-looking wrestling, just the style I liked. Whenever they went at it in the ring it was as real as wrestling ever got because they’d knock the hell out of each other. They used to work so hard and when they came out of the ring, drenched in sweat, it looked like they’d had a real battle.” (Chandler, Regal, 2005, p38). Wrestlers usually competed for long periods of time, as the Mount-Evans ruleset warranted with the general presentation of each match being set for usually six, five-minute rounds. It was essential for wrestlers to

create a highly technical, fluid match involving a plethora of holds and transitions in order to keep the audience entertained for such a long period, as well as suspending their disbelief to enjoy the match in a sporting context.

Regal strongly asserts this process as important, explaining that “to keep people interested, you had to learn a lot of moves. You had to learn the psychology of it too. Wrestling at its best is high drama and, just like drama, psychology is so important. A lot of people don’t understand that – they just think it’s two blokes screaming and shouting.” (Chandler, Regal, 2005, p53-54) The psychology Regal refers to is the efforts made by the wrestlers to maintain the connection with the audience that what is being presented is something to be enjoyed as genuine competition. This is represented via the moves being used, the contextual environment and presentation of space, as well as the fact that the largely vocal and verbal hyperbole found in American circles simply was not observed traditionally in British wrestling. In fact, the only way wrestlers in Britain were witnessed in the context of verbal discussion was at conferences and media interviews – as with any genuine sporting product of the time.

However, this sparsity of verbal hyperbole and distinct advantage of sports aesthetic redeployment still allowed for some leeway with regards to justifying the use of mild comedy and slapstick without insulting the intelligence of the audience or breaking the barrier of disbelief suspension. An example of this would be the work of Les Kellett (see figure 17), whereby his matches would usually involve the use of comedy antics, providing entertaining verbal and slapstick back-and-forth with his opponent – as well as the referee. Despite this use of comedy, the establishment of legitimacy through aesthetic, the

professionalism of performers and so on, the line between reality and suspension of disbelief never was crossed. In fact, these matches would usually be taken in the context of a friendly exhibition match with Kellett as the older, crafty veteran against either an impatient, short-tempered, or unsavvy villain. In a way, this notion of friendly exhibition and comedic values within a believable sporting context can relate to the widely enjoyed annual friendly exhibition doubles matches at Wimbledon, usually involving Mansour Bahrami providing a laughter-provoking display of 'trick' tennis for the audience to enjoy, both in an entertainment and genuine sporting context. The audience understands the context, therefore are not insulted (Wimbledon, 2019).



Figure 17: Les Kellett, "The Clown Prince" of British Wrestling

After struggling to find any retired or semi-retired wrestlers who were active during this period who were able or willing to talk about their experiences for the purpose of this study, I finally managed to get in contact with a veteran wrestler of the *World of Sport* era and beyond, who also continues to train the next generation of wrestlers both in the United Kingdom as well as all over the world. Scottish wrestler Frank 'Chic' Cullen was twice British Middle-heavyweight champion during his ITV wrestling run throughout the decades of the 1970s and 1980s, involved in classic feuds such as a rivalry with second generation wrestler and infamous British 'villain' Mark 'Rollerball' Rocco (see figure 18). When first chatting to Cullen, he gave details of the way in which, as a young man, he managed to convince Welsh veteran wrestler Orig 'El Bandito' Williams to train him in the art of professional wrestling and break into the industry. Cullen explains the vastly different approach to entering the industry in prior decades, whereby there were no training schools as seen in contemporary times, as well as the community in the industry being mostly closed to newcomers with high barriers to entry. Cullen notes "no one wanted to help anybody else for fear of losing their own position", and therefore had to repeatedly approach promoters for a chance to "break in" with his experience as an amateur wrestler since childhood. "When I say I harassed [Orig Williams] to death, I really did to the point he told me to 'eff off quite a few times. On the fifth or sixth occasion he said 'OK, you want to come and be a wrestler? Take me to your parents'." After getting parental consent and fully convincing the promoter of his dedication, Cullen would begin training and transitioning into the role of professional wrestler. "The British Wrestling Federation, at the time his company was known as, it was hard. It was tough. The equipment, the rings, were falling to bits. That's what it was like back then." (See appendix 13)

Cullen's recollection of his experiences breaking into the business of professional wrestling is a fairly typical one compared to other recollections of the time, showcasing the very closed and protected nature the industry held before the age of the internet, instant information and digitally connected fan communities. The believability of the aesthetic, presentation, and inner machinations of the business was something closely guarded by its insiders, so as to ensure that the next generation of wrestlers and those considered deserving enough to be brought into the fold were to treat their trade with the utmost respect, not share the trade secrets to the public and spoil the illusion of legitimacy the presentation of wrestling had fought long and hard to maintain – otherwise known as upholding the wrestler's code of 'Kayfabe'. When asked of this particular culture, Cullen noted the seriousness of it all when first training, saying "it was usually second or third generation wrestlers back then, so anyone coming in was considered a threat, a spy or you were going to un-kayfabe the business. They tried to deter you, but I wasn't easily deterred". From my understanding of Frank's recalling of this process, 'detering' usually meant turning potential trainees away from wanting to participate further by either training them excessively hard with exercise drills until they were beyond exhaustion, or getting them in 'un-worked', genuine holds for them to feel the actual pain to be suffered when caught – all to the point of second-guessing their potential involvement.

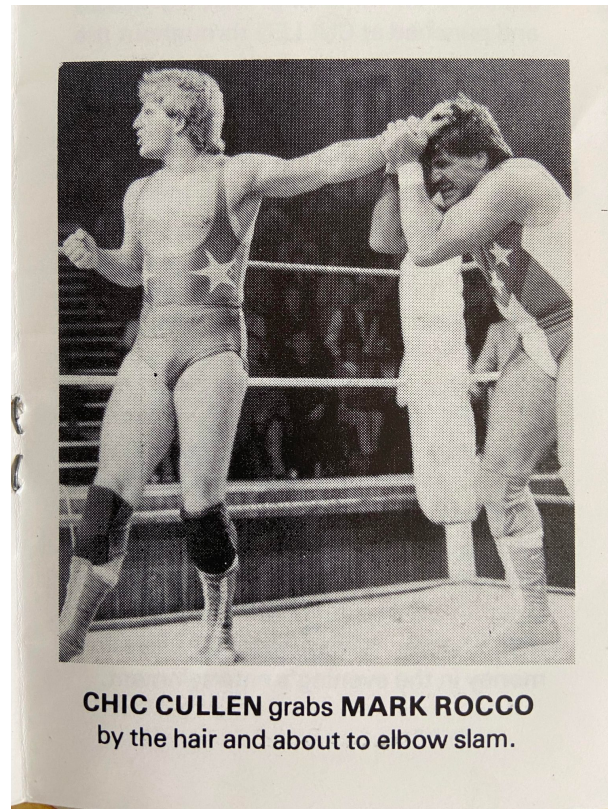


Figure 18: Frank 'Chic' Cullen (Left) wrestling Mark 'Rollerball' Rocco (Right)

I continued to discuss British and European wrestling with Cullen, where I uncovered a distinct shared passion between the both of us in our admiration of the traditional and more technical 'catch' style, over the more modern, high-flying and gymnastic styles seen consistently in contemporary wrestling promotions worldwide. Frank recalled the privilege of being able to travel over to Stampede Wrestling – a famous, long-standing Canadian promotion ran by the Hart family, who would sire eventual popular WWE wrestlers Bret 'The Hitman' Hart, Owen Hart, as well as help further train British greats such as Davey Boy Smith, also known as 'The British Bulldog', and Tom 'Dynamite Kid' Billington. Frank discusses his passion for the British and European wrestling style and its adoption overseas by his Canadian counterparts, eventually having an effect worldwide with those British stars becoming successful: "I'm a huge advocate of British and European wrestling. Any wrestler

worth their salt wanted to learn it”, as well as exemplifying its importance in the fact that he and fellow upcoming British wrestling talents would travel to Canada to work for the Stampede Wrestling promotion owned by Stu Hart. The promotion’s admiration for the British and European style would lead to further influence of future stars of modern professional wrestling, continuing its stylistic traditions “because it’s the heartbeat, it’s the nucleus of pro wrestling – British style wrestling. All the Americans had was punch and kick. That had to change as people had enough of it and wanted to see some ‘wrestling’ for a change.” (See appendix 13) Here, Cullen observes that the British and European style of professional wrestling placing primacy on technical, athletic skill would supplement the typical American style which focused more on the spectacular performance of character.

Furthermore, when talking to Cullen about his experiences over the years as a trainer and how the British and European style of wrestling tends to factor into the absolute basics and backbone of professional wrestling presentation, he came alive in close agreement – both in what the continuance of utilising the classic style of technical holds and sports-based presentation brings in benefit over the more modern, Americanised, and somewhat Japanese, approach of striking and high-flying, high-risk manoeuvres. When making a bold insinuation in asking if British wrestling exists as the core fundamentals for other wrestling to follow, Cullen exclaimed agreement noting American communities he has been involved with as a trainer now refer to this style as “chain wrestling”, whereas Cullen still appreciates it as the “nuts and bolts” of wrestling originating from the British and European styles. Making an insightful symbolic connection to that of Lego bricks and slowly building something from the ground up, Cullen further defines the survival of the British style and in-match mentality as a “whole manual of moves [...]. Ins and outs, counters and

attacks, but they can adapt it any way they want [...]. It's endless, the things you can do with the various types of British wrestling skills, holds and moves. It's like knocking a house down and using the same bricks to rebuild something different." (See appendix 13)

It was arguably these building blocks consisting of a multitude of ways to apply holds, locks and provide a consistent and lasting sequence of wrestling presentation that allowed for an ease of suspending disbelief for the mostly ordinary, everyday folk that were watching and enjoying wrestling of this period in Britain. As I have found whenever discussing classic British wrestling and their audiences with fellow fans and followers of wrestling, it is a common erroneous assumption that live and home audiences of traditional British wrestling – televised or otherwise – were family-based and featured a large cross-section of young children. Although this can be argued to be the case for the latter stages of *World of Sport* wrestling on ITV due to the plentiful use of larger-than-life characters in reaction to the growth of WWE content – including the likes of Big Daddy – this generalisation simply cannot be made for the whole period. As Cullen says, when asked of who he witnessed attending shows in the televised, popular period – “I'd say there were more kids and families now than there was back then. It was a night out for adults back then more so than kids. Adults could be the kids if they wanted, they could go crazy and make a total fool of themselves. It was acceptable, right? If they walked into the supermarket doing that they'd be arrested”. The latter part of Cullen's statement here also gives insight into the cathartic nature of professional wrestling fulfilling emotional needs of British people – particularly in the period of the 1980s in which mining strikes, the Falklands War, as well as a period of economically neoliberal attitudes were forming, negatively affecting some

communities of ordinary, working people of the country – particular those involved in sectors affected by Thatcher’s drive for deindustrialisation (Tomlinson, 2021).

Mick McManus makes an apt observation of how wrestling appealed to its spectators and allowed for a certain amount of release from the harsh reality of post-modern living as a working person, first stating how “You could really let yourself go. You could scream and shout. No one ever took notice, because it was the norm. If you went somewhere else, they’d say ‘bloody lunatic’.” He observed the cathartic qualities from wrestling originating from established meaning presenting in characterisations commonly understood as undesirable, stating “in people like me they could perhaps see the traffic warden or the income tax man, the foreman at the works or the governor or all the nasty people. There was a therapeutic value, I suppose.” Importantly, McManus observes the working-class nature of sport stemming from its highly accessible price points, noting “it was what I call a low-budget sport, not terribly expensive and quite within the bounds of people, whatever they earnt. At the ringside, the ladies would be running up. I used to make sure that I didn’t get too near the ropes, otherwise someone came up and banged you on the head with a shoe or a bag.” (Garfield, 2007, p13).

It is also worth noting from McManus’ statement that women were a major demographic for wrestling, just as much as men were – which further debunks the established, reductive myth that wrestling serves as a masculine melodrama exclusively for male enjoyment. The main issue here, though, is the notion of the primacy of spectator enjoyment of professional wrestling being placed within the process of catharsis potentially catering for a distinctly British sensibility and need. Adrian Anthony Gill makes a cynical yet

convincing argument in his book *The Angry Isle: Hunting the English*, whereby he argues the stereotype of English people observing a constant state of politeness and casual apathy hides a much deeper sense of repressed anger and rage – mostly spilled over from a violent past of failed empire. Gill colourfully states “what the English are eternally concerned with isn’t fairness, it’s unfairness. There’s a constant mutter of grievance at the deviousness, mendacity and untrustworthy nature of the rest of the world that has moulded the bottom half of this island”, also mentioning that the concept of fairness within the specific context of sport is certainly “an English obsession” (2006, p7).

Gill, despite making generalisations, makes an interesting note about how anger plays a role in post-colonial British society, making it “an ugly race” but leading to a sense of “heroic self-control” in controlling their “daily struggles”(2006, p8). Wrestling then, when taking Gill’s observations into consideration, has arguably served a vital role historically to sustain a sense of catharsis with the audiences of British working people throughout the decades of its broadcast, so much as to potentially placate this proposed repressed, post-Empire and colonial rage. Although this reading stems from a mostly classist, gendered understanding of Britishness, the idea of wrestling serving as an output to vent built-up frustrations and stress from everyday life for general audiences engaging in its unreality can be sustained. This links to the theories of Jean Baudrillard involving the concepts of simulation and simulacra (1988), whereby instead of the simulation of reality and its ‘Disneyfication’ rendering true reality meaningless, wrestling may act as a two-fold level of simulation whereby spectators understand this unreality and gain it as a lens for viewing the fragility of true reality. Wrestling could arguably exist to distract us from the sense that everything is perhaps a ‘work’ or has an unfair balance against the ordinary folk of the world

(Warden, 2018). It makes us aware of those inequalities, representing it in the form of a competitive back-and-forth display of dramatic fighting – but all the while grants us some sense of catharsis in witnessing a form of justice play out in the triumph of the rule-abiding, hard-working ‘babyface’ or ‘blue-eyes’, over the nasty, unfair and dastardly ‘villain’ or ‘heel’. This then leads to a certain level of power being granted to the presenter – a power which can be used responsibly to provide that simplistic sense of positive catharsis that I argue most traditional forms of wrestling entail – or irresponsibly to control one’s audience and their habits, such as spending money or even political sway. This is a concept which will be revisited in later chapters – namely with the advent of the WWE becoming a dominant force in the worldwide industry of wrestling.

Later in the lifespan of televised British wrestling, *World of Sport* on ITV would see a vast decline in ratings due to a multitude of negative forces. Firstly, it can be argued that the viewership gradually dwindled from a distinct lack of efforts to raise the next generation of young wrestlers to take the scene forward, while relying too heavily on popular, spectacular characters such as Big Daddy and Giant Haystacks who presented an overly-simplified and spectacular style of wrestling involving the more Americanised approach of larger, lumbering physiques in comparison to a relegation of sporting presentation offered in prior decades. Talent such as Stephen Regal, Robbie Brookside, Dynamite Kid, and Mark ‘Rollerball’ Rocco did provide the more sporting content seen and enjoyed from prior decades, but this tended to be relegated to the background in comparison to the larger-than-life characters. Another potential factor was the political standing of ITV and Greg Dyke, the Director of Programming, at the time of the demise of *World of Sport*, and the

pressures set forth by Margaret Thatcher for a wholesale modernisation of British television, entertainment, and technology. Regal argues in his 2015 *Gorilla Position* interview that ITV wrestling was still showing very strong viewing figures in comparison to other popular programs at the time, and yet decisions were made to move ITV wrestling to an earlier and much less convenient time slot of midday for its viewers. Considering the majority of the audience supporting televised wrestling at the time relied on the prior time slot due to the nature of their working schedule – hence the popular term of the time “everything stops at four o’ clock”, this would aid in a further cutting of the common British wrestling demographic and eventually the program would be cut altogether in 1985. This is highly reminiscent of observations made by Aughey who notes “one could argue that Thatcherism represented an attempt to reassert Britain's universal significance [...] with market evangelism as the secret of England's greatness” (2003, p51). This statement shows that even something considered as niche as professional wrestling (despite still holding decent popularity amongst the British masses) would be cut and outsourced to a cheaper, offshore competitor. Thatcher’s motivations, faced with the then-new forces of the European Union as well as the general Conservative cohort, were focused more on the financial sectors as opposed to homeland production.

Many, including William Regal, argue that ITV wrestling was still cancelled prematurely despite viewing figures being down in comparison to previous eras, and that it was due to a general distaste from the Conservative majority of the period towards wrestling, and the media’s perception of the product as a working class, and therefore ‘lesser’ form of entertainment, that led to a blunt approach of outright cancelling, as

opposed to redeveloping the programming. This is further exemplified by historical reporting of the sport as 'fake', focusing on the 'fixed' elements to suggest dishonesty, and using derogatory language towards its viewer to insinuate a lower level of intelligence or class (see figures 19 and 20)

Ian Wooldridge
COLUMN

The wrestling wagons roll

BLACK KWANGA BEATS BEETHOVEN AND BACH

YOU can call it depraved, degenerate, disgusting, or just another goddam sign of the Winkle-picker Age. But for every ONE person watching Cup or League Soccer yesterday SIX had their beady eyes fanatically focused on a new national sport.

It was conceived in Britain 30 years ago on the wrong side of the blanket, exploited by a succession of thuggish foster-parents, castigated in the High Courts as a congenital delinquent and sent packing from respectable society.

Now, wearing a well-cut suit that testifies to tycoonish prosperity, it is back. Six million people yesterday watched professional wrestling.

When any sport makes that kind of impact it is time to jump on one's personal prejudice and gallop straight into the enemy camp. I anticipated a thick ear from a bad penny. Instead I was welcomed by a firm, but friendly, prodigal son.

Tops world

"Look," said Leslie Martin. "don't come around here telling me newspaper publicity can do us any good. The only time the Press have mentioned us is when they've kicked us in the teeth."

Martin, at 54, is director of the biggest professional wrestling company in the world. His headquarters are in an untidy backroom office in Brixton. His empire embraces every sizeable promotion from the Albert Hall, London, to the crumpled Corn Exchange in any two-horse country town south of Coventry.

In 1946 he launched out on £50. Today he purrs home in a Jaguar and has a delicate taste for wallpaper and flamenco music. His suburban house is not ostentatious, he does not flash a diamond ring and the occasional cigar is a luxury.

Leslie Martin and I argued from 11 a.m. one day until 1 a.m. the next on two vital points. Is wrestling a sport or a bruising by-product of show business? And is the whole business so fixed that it attracts only mugs, morons or masochists?

Martin unequivocally claimed that it is sport and that it isn't fixed. But at his evening show at Beckenham he made no attempt to conceal a classic situation—two huge heavyweights conversing together as calmly as a couple of

and something of more Freudian significance are probably the reasons why the halls are packed. It is the same story in more cultural venues. Black Kwanga is far bigger box-office than Beethoven or Bach at Bristol's Colston Hall or the Bournemouth Winter Gardens.

Soccer slashed

Saturday TV shows have completed the boom. ATV slashed a further 20 minutes of conventional Soccer news out of their afternoon programme. Let's GO to pack in more wrestling. Its audience soared to 6,000,000.

Peter Cockburn, its 35-year-old commentator, treats his subject with the same objective dignity he would devote to a royal occasion.

There are no strikes or disputes among the wrestlers. The two heavyweights I met at Beckenham make around £2,500 a year for fighting twice a week. A brilliant 1961 billed as Mike Marino from Milan coins nearer £5,000. Ray Hunter, from

LESLIE MARTIN . . . his empire spreads from an untidy office to the biggest professional wrestling set-up in the world.

Figure 19: Dispatch Sport (1961)

A FAKE? YOU BET IT IS!

EVER been had by the groaners like the Wild Man of Borneo? Millions have. They think wrestling is a death-dealing sport.

Today "The People" opens their eyes. We've proved that all professional wrestling is a fake and millions who watch it on TV are being taken for a ride!

WILD? The only wild thing about him is his hairdo!

'300,000 RENT CUTS IN LONDON'

RENT cuts for hundreds of thousands of families all over Britain were forecast last night by a Government housing

Start the BIG LAUGH today!

Read the lowdown on the wrestling lark on Pages 2 and 3. It will give you the laugh of the year!



Figure 20: *The People* (1965)

As Simon Garfield states in an episode of *Timeshift* (2012), Thatcher called for more “aspirational” forms of entertainment, which wrestling certainly was not seen as. This is a continuation of observations made by Griffiths when writing about traditional conservative attitudes which resurface in this period and a classist disdain for something enjoyed by the working and poorer communities of Britain, stating “on just about every count, wrestling

was [...] an affront to elite values and tended only to appeal to elements within the British and Dominion working classes. Indeed, professional wrestling found its most loyal audiences in working-class districts of London and in the north of England” (2015, p50). Classic British wrestlers Jackie Pallo Jr and Adrian Street place full blame of the failure of British televised wrestling in the end being due to the wrongful focus on character over skill – particularly with the overuse of Giant Haystacks and Big Daddy, the two mainstay wrestlers of the latter 1970s-80s and adopted widely by British popular culture of the time. Street mentions disdain of Big Daddy, and by extension, Max Crabtree for promoting him as a main fixture and aiding in British wrestling’s demise, as opposed to the American syndication being a fault, claiming “they replaced good wrestlers with bad actors” (WSI Wrestling Shoot Interviews, 2022), referring to the lack of wrestling skill held by Big Daddy and the focus on size as a placement of performance value. This is confirmed by Pallo Jr, who states “Shirley had two moves and one of those was terrible.” He compares this to the wrestler’s common rival Giant Haystacks having some intrinsic value to wrestling production due to having “looked like a monster”(see figure 21), but overall, “they turned it into a kids show” by making the sensationalised presentation of heavy bodies (see figure 15) and hyperbolised characters the primary creative focus of British wrestling output (*Two Falls To A Finish*, 2015). This replaced the sporting sense of simulated wrestling-based combat which arguably underpinned the very success of the product to begin with.



Figure 21: Giant Haystacks (Left) receiving a strike to the face from Big Daddy (Right)

In talks with Frank Cullen, insights were gained about his take on the matter of ITV wrestling and its decline – whether he believed it was due to the product not evolving with the times and producing fresh talent, or if he sided with many of his cohorts in the industry that make the case of political forces making every effort to kill the sport due to personal distaste. He did not agree with either approach, and instead provided a realist approach to the issues of return on investment by stating “it was economics. [...] Back in the day it cost thirty thousand pounds to send the truck out and record the show. In the meantime, they’re only getting two weeks of viewing out of it”. Cullen compares this to the successful growth of the WWE during this time with Hulk Hogan as its leading creative drive to connect with audiences, eventually expanding globally by offering cheap syndication. He then posits that WWE approached ITV with an offer of free syndication of their products, most likely to gain visibility for future expansion and pay-per-view sales, and that “there were no agendas, that’s exactly what it was. Money. They had thought UK wrestling had outdrawn its time,

and with Big Daddy at the helm I'm sure they were right. But things have changed and people wanted something different." (See appendix 13)

Cullen's realist approach at defining the downfall of British televised wrestling as a hard-line economic decision makes sense considering the neoliberal climate of the time, in which the Thatcher-Reagan mentality of profitability over quality reigned supreme. However, I challenged Cullen by mentioning the opposite and contrarian viewpoint in that ITV wrestling perhaps could have survived with a bigger audience if grassroots training and the building of newer, younger stars was committed to, instead of the reliance of tired, old gimmicks such as Big Daddy – albeit successful ones – to draw attendance at halls and viewing figures. It was the case that once *World of Sport* was cancelled, wrestling continued to be shown on UK television for a few more years but under a reduced capacity and constantly changing time slots. The rights to the television broadcasting of British content was now shared between Brian Crabtree with Joint Promotions, and a new promotion led by a young Brian Dixon called All Star Wrestling – a company still in business today touring the country's holiday camps and town halls. Despite half the weekly content broadcasted being the cheaply-acquired syndicated WWE content from abroad, British wrestling still saw play with the likes of some younger talent such as Robbie Brookside and Frank Cullen himself sharing the spotlight, continuing the presentation of a traditional, historically enjoyed technical style. However, I was presented with another contrarian thought when asking Cullen of this period, as well as the possibility of whether a grassroots focus on younger talent could get attendance up. With a shrug and a shake of his head, Cullen gave a response based on his experience of the period: "it's not like it was the television people's product and they just happened to pick a promoter and say "We'd like to put you on TV,

here's the money". It didn't work that way anywhere else either", describing how the process for broadcasted wrestling production was for promotions to film their own content and issue it to the broadcaster for no charge. All creative "angles", otherwise known as established narratives between characters in wrestling, were made on these televised showings, and the visibility gained from airing gave a "shop window" to sell tickets for events around the country in response to interest gained from the showcased rivalries and action. Cullen went on to explain how promoters of the time, such as Brian Dixon of All Star Wrestling, were lacking in terms of ability to promote and propel fresh generations of talent. "It was like a soccer club buying in ready-made stars. That's what he'd do, he brought them in. What's happening in WWE now is what happened years ago with All Star and Joint Promotions. People jumped ship from Joint Promotions because All Star were offering more money. It was great for Brian and All Star, but nobody was getting a push. That's where the breakdown was, the promoters weren't capable." (See appendix 13).

These discussions of the televised period of British wrestling showcase how convoluted and complicated things were when trying to balance the economic demands of broadcasters, understanding the wants and needs of the viewership, as well as the inner politics, ideology and "office holds" (Pallo, 1985, p14) held by those with power inside the industry of wrestling promotion – a consistent narrative throughout the history of wrestling and still in play in today's climate. However, regardless of the arguments for the downfall of televised wrestling in Britain – whether due to the distaste of broadcasters towards providing content which attracted an undesired demographic, or due to economic rationalisation, ITV's *World of Sport Wrestling* was cancelled in 1985 after seeing prior decades of success and impressive viewing figures. ITV would continue broadcasting

wrestling but with cheaply syndicated American, WWF content being foregrounded over the more expensive to produce British material. At this point, even the concept of British wrestling was clearly disliked by the establishment and relegated to obscurity and the fringes of satellite broadcasting once its terrestrial broadcasts came to a full cancellation in 1988. The foundations of what held British wrestling on top for so long had now crumbled, with talent now seeking work elsewhere and the remaining stars of yesteryear either beginning to age out or become disgruntled with the industry at large. Even the long-serving British wrestling star Jackie Pallo would release a book entitled 'You Grunt, I'll Groan: The Inside Story of Wrestling' (1985), unveiling the secrets of the industry and expressing his concerns and personal experience. This was an action not taken lightly by the wrestling community of the time considering the sacred tradition of 'kayfabe', and furthermore aiding in diminishing the magic that kept fans intrigued by the sport for so long, allowing fans to venture beyond the metaphorical curtain previously denied to them.

Leading into the beginning of the 1990s, WWE wrestling would now dominate the world landscape of professional wrestling, with its main competitor WCW (World Championship Wrestling) still fighting close behind for a dominant stake, funded by billionaire media proprietor Ted Turner. This wholesale shift in dominance of the more Americanised, simplistic presentation of wrestling on British TV sets would go on to have a profoundly damaging effect on the nation's industry as a whole, with British-style wrestling no longer having a shop window to market itself and leading to a vast drop in attendance at live events across the country and a wholesale lack of interest towards the traditions and origins of the sport. With stars of yesteryear now having to venture out to other parts of Europe, as well as attempt to gain the attention of the American market – it seemed the

British playing field for professional wrestling was in for a period of sparseness and uncertainty.

The following chapter will detail what is commonly referred to as the 'Dark Period' of British professional wrestling, whereby the lack of support from home-based televised wrestling products led to a lack of star power remaining on home turf, instead taking contracts with the larger American companies, and dwindling audience figures across the halls of Britain that had once bustled with crowds of eager fans desperate for their weekly fix of wrestling. This era would see a decade of wrestling obscurity in Britain before a resurgence in British grassroots movements would begin, but the chapter will start with an investigation into what remained in the post-TV era, the types of people who continued to wrestle, the stylistic shift in promotion, as well as some personalities and experienced voices detailing the characteristics of the period.

CHAPTER TWO

FROM 'DARK' DAYS TO GRASSROOTS: THE DEATH OF THE TELEVISION ERA TO THE BIRTH OF MODERN PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING IN BRITAIN

'Lights out': The Rise of WWE Machismo and Fall of Classic British Wrestling on Television

Since the demise and cancellation of *World of Sport* wrestling on ITV (Independent Television) in 1985, a once nationally broadcast wrestling production which boasted regular ratings of up to 16 million people each week in its heyday (*Timeshift*, 2012), British wrestling experience a decline. After a long struggle to maintain decent viewing figures, as well as the availability of cheaply syndicated American wrestling television via WWE, ITV decided to cancel *World of Sport* in 1985, and eventually professional wrestling broadcasts entirely in 1988 – programming which had been a cultural mainstay of British television for decades. WWE syndication would now be the dominant outlet for wrestling content for the United Kingdom going forward (as well as the rest of the world), displaying the hyper-masculine, “hard bodies” often presented in American media products of the period – existing as cultural emblems of strength, courage, and determination, and symbolising the experience of “personal power by identifying with an individual hero’s victory over fictional antagonists [...] through the pleasurable collective experience” (Jeffords, 1994, p28). These hyper-masculine presentations of physique are defined by Kac-Vergne as “excessive” or “glorified” masculine bodies, showing the physical specimen as “spectacle whilst associating masculinity with dominance” (2012, p2), and are clearly exemplified by the likes of WWE wrestlers of the late 1980s and early 1990s such as Hulk Hogan, Ultimate Warrior and

“Ravishing” Rick Rude. Again, this mentality of presenting physical excess connects to and is highly indicative of the wider cultural *raison d’être* of an ideologically challenged, post-Vietnam America during the Reagan-era whereby a use of hyper-masculinity in television, and particularly within Hollywood cinema, is summative of the post-Vietnam response to “reawaken America’s sense of political and military virility” (Shail, 2005, p111). This could arguably provide justification for the overwhelming success of WWE when shifting to a national output for wrestling from a regional position – due to both the cultural significance of wrestling becoming a mass-consumed form of entertainment, but also connecting the wider cultural ethos of empowerment and pro-American sensibilities in its stories, characters, and general aesthetic. In terms of the effect on British audiences, the mere aspects of higher quality production, sensational and effective spectacular presentation would be more than enough to hold the gaze of British audiences and affect the production of what was already on offer. Big Daddy and Giant Haystacks would continue on the British circuits beyond the cancellation of *World of Sport*, but by this point audiences were already accustomed to and hooked on the production values and high-drama of American wrestling, able to continue to access it from the convenience of their remote control. Arguably the consistent use of larger-than-life characters such as Big Daddy and Giant Haystacks was an answer to growing success and acknowledgement of American wrestling productions since the late 1970s, but an absolute reliance on such characters as dominant creative fixtures would be observed – and a wholesale backgrounding of the more traditional, sporting presentations of wrestling seen and enjoyed in prior decades. However, it is reasonable to assert that the wider cultural context of “hard bodies” (Jeffords, 1994) being the standard and ideal for Hollywood, and the success and influence of American cinema in the global

market, led to audience desires to subscribe to the more spectacular, sensationalised content of WWE to that of British efforts.

Despite the arguments and multi-faceted debates about the reasons for the cancellation – whether about basic economics, a classist mentality towards viewership or otherwise – British wrestling would continue for a short while on various satellite television outlets such as *Screensport*. Eventually, however, wrestling as a televised product would die off and become relegated to small, local shows without media backing for almost two decades, no longer existing as a mainstream entity but continuing to thrive as a simple form of working-class entertainment aimed at families and young children. It would sustain itself in the wrestling drought of the period with time-honoured traditional productions such as holiday camp wrestling and carnival shows offering “vacuum-packed” and narratively disconnected spectacles (Warden, 2018 p870).

There is little written on this particular period of British wrestling – mostly due to the sparseness and limited nature the scene would experience, but there are various key accounts made by wrestlers during this time which aptly reflect the dire circumstances of professional wrestling in Britain, but also the distinct passion showed by those still willing to participate in an attempt to carry the once-popular cultural staple towards future generations. Robbie Brookside, British wrestler and past star of ITV and latter-day *World of Sport*, gives a rather stark account of the ‘dark’, post-television era of wrestling in the UK in the BBC 2 documentary series *Video Diaries* (1993), offering personal perspective via his experiences on the road as a working wrestler struggling to make a full-time wage, as well as life outside of wrestling. To begin, Brookside details memories of Liverpool Stadium and his

start as a wrestling fan, when the stadium saw great success with regularly promoted and well-attended wrestling shows, as well as noting the skill possessed by wrestlers of the past, saying “It was the atmosphere I fell in love with, the actual relationship the wrestler had with the crowd, how he could control the crowd and have them do what he wanted. Make them laugh, make them cry” (BBC 2, 1993). The nostalgia Brookside expresses is short-lived, however, pointing at the derelict space the old arena is now. “Look what’s left now, a little park. The two schools are knocked down, and the place that started me off in wrestling is knocked down,” Brookside states. When observing footage of action between himself, Doc Dean, and the ‘Superflys’ (both working as a tag team at the time) at a family wrestling show, he states “the old days of sticking a headlock on for five rounds are long gone. Action. In your face. That’s what we give the people now,” as flashes of American-style wrestling hyperbole is witnessed, as well as a staged back-stage altercation in-line with the exaggerated displays found in American ‘promo’ segments – a culture which would be implemented out of desperation in the latter days of televised British wrestling and onwards in an attempt to inherit the same successes. Unfortunately, this did not communicate as intended due to the aesthetic clash that tradition British wrestling posited, and had been celebrated for.

Robbie posits that working in such an era of wrestling was still akin to “getting a shit deal,” mostly due to wrestlers having their passion for the job and being part of the community taken advantage of in the name of personal profit. Despite this, Brookside noted “there are compensations along the way; you meet people who become like family” such as Klondyke Kate being like a sister to him on the road with their shared experiences and both already being considered veterans of the industry by then (*Video Diaries*, 1993). Despite the

positives of workers in the period supporting each other and carrying on a sense of community in hard times, promoters relied on the passions of those involved to wrestle shows for very little money, all in the name of keeping their promotion running. Cullen sarcastically quipped in our interview about such a situation, saying in our conversation that “wrestling promoters are like farmers, they all complain they’re broke but you never meet a poor one!” (see appendix 13), noting the potential misconduct that was encountered and endured, even by those once celebrated and sought after on British television.

The remaining promotions, mainly the likes of Brian Dixon’s surviving continuation of All Star Wrestling (ASW), would heavily rely on the import of journeyman American wrestlers, such as eventual ECW and WCW alumni PN News, to be used as heels – utilising simplistic, nationalist approaches to character and instigating audience response and participation at shows. Despite most of the UK’s once-popular wrestling stars leaving for other shores to find better income, including William (then Stephen) Regal and Giant Haystacks finding success in the American promotion WCW – some popular stars of yesteryear would still remain on the scene, such as Dave Taylor – although, alongside Robbie Brookside in *Video Diaries*, sarcastically notes the downfall of the British side of things, exclaiming “I can’t wait to go back next week, the people were all on my side! All sixty of them....” (*Video Diaries*, 1993). Apart from the holiday camp shows at places such as Butlin’s where audiences generally could be fairly sized due to natural catchment of holidaymakers looking for all-inclusive entertainment at no extra cost, the halls across the country were difficult to draw crowds in as Taylor jokingly notes. Naturally, this made it a tall order for wrestlers to make a full-time income – even those as experienced as Dave Taylor and Robbie Brookside – the latter of which woefully claimed he had to resort to

applying for a job with a window company at one point to survive (*Two Falls to a Finish*, 2012). In my interviews with various experienced wrestlers working through this period, this general theme of sparseness and loss of heritage was paralleled. Carl Stewart, a retired wrestler originally trained at Hammerlock gym and veteran of many tours of the UK, Europe and Canadian wrestling territories throughout his career, remembers this general period. He concurs with the typical summary of this era, saying “people refer to it as ‘dark times’ and it really was! It was chronic, really”, before stating the temporary increase in live attendance witnessed as a result of wrestling no longer being broadcast on ITV. “By the mid 90s it was dead as a doornail. [...] So you just had to keep plugging away hoping something would happen” (see appendix 1).

Dean Ayass was another generous contributor to this project via our discussions on British wrestling. Ayass started in the industry at a similar time to Stewart, going on to work multiple roles over the years as a commentator, manager, and writer. He related his memories of this period, and much like Brookside and others of the time, had to rely on other streams of income to maintain his participation in the wrestling industry. “Crowds were tiny and there was literally no money” says Ayass, noting he earned more overall from starting a premium phone line presenting and discussing wrestling news with fans. “If you got three hundred people that would be a massive house – which is small and disappointing now”, as well as conveying how events could even be attended with as low as double figures. Ayass notes the reasons for this arguably stem from the fact a lot of the talent in the period were “green as grass”, and their lack of overall experience led to a less than favourable quality of product (See appendix 8). Even the now-exported British stars would only find success via the use of heavily stereotyped characters, having to compromise on

their high level of acquired skill and experience by wrestling the American and more simplistic presentation. An example being William Regal (then referred to as Stephen Regal) who found fame by adopting the stereotypical monarchist and elitist gimmick the American audience would respond well to. He notes “I’m still a trunks-and-boots wrestler but with a gimmick,” alongside Brookside, stating “It’s actually easier to wrestle their style” – hinting at the superficial nature of the American format but the ability to still stand out based on the skill and experience acquired and known for as a British practitioner (*Video Diaries*, 1993). This export of British stars and a cultural over-riding of wrestling output with the push of American content on UK television would have a further knock-on effect on the British wrestling industry – making the remaining stars of yesteryear slowly forgotten, supported only by the most dedicated of fans. As the regular contender on ITV wrestling Mal “Superstar” Sanders observes, “it used to be a glamour thing. We were Rock Hudsons, and there used to be beautiful women. Now we get changed in broom cupboards, with only cold water from rusting taps, one step up from a toilet attendant” (Garfield, 2007, p209). This sense of the industry being in dire straits would also be clearly observable by fans, too – not just by practitioners. Andrew Garfield ends his seminal experiential reflections by relaying his feelings of attending a show during this period, comparing it to that of the golden era: “It was about 7pm. When the show began an hour later, there were only 120 people in, an appalling spectacle. The tickets were £6 each, the same price as three years ago. Any more and there would have been even fewer. It was the start of 1995 in England, an All Star Promotion run by Brian Dixon. This was practically all that was left. I remember looking around and feeling sad” (2007, p176).

Paying 'Tribute' to WWE and the Issue of Authenticity in 1990s British

Wrestling

In this period of the 1990s, the then WWF's televised syndication in Britain became very successful with its broadcasts on Sky television. As a reaction to this, the remaining promoters such as Dixon and Orig Williams would begin promoting self-proclaimed 'tribute shows' as an exploitative survival tactic. In a similar way that exploitation cinema would capitalise on current trends in producing cheap content for profit, these 'tribute' acts would exploit the popularity of American wrestling and WWE characters by adopting cheap, copied versions of said content with the explicit mentality of selling tickets and surviving as independent promotions. Although this link does not cater towards the consistent presentation of sexually explicit content which exploitation cinema is commonly known for, these tribute shows remain reminiscent to such an industrial approach to entertainment from the capitalising of "time-tried formulas" experienced from WWE content, and containing the typical "bad acting", cheap production quality, and a clear for-profit mentality as seen in exploitation content (Roche, 2015, p1). Copycat and exploitation shows were a common sight across the town event halls in Britain alongside this American wrestling boom, aimed at capturing the "neon spandex" and "pop-cultural excess" that the WWF would instil in its character designs and presentation (Shoemaker, 2014, p259). For example, copied versions of The Undertaker (see figure 22) and Kane, as well as other well-known American gimmicks including The Road Warriors (see figure 23) were promoted in order to connect to a sense of familiarity with the general wrestling audience community and draw reasonable crowds. Despite the cheapened manner of presentation and clear copycat nature of this style of promotion, it would prove more than successful enough for

promoters to continue with favourably over the more traditional formats. The remaining wrestling companies would continue touring live circuits across the country, but an immense shift in audience desires would be observed and the identity of British wrestling would see a decline into a much more Americanised and diluted form (*Two Falls to a Finish*, 2012).

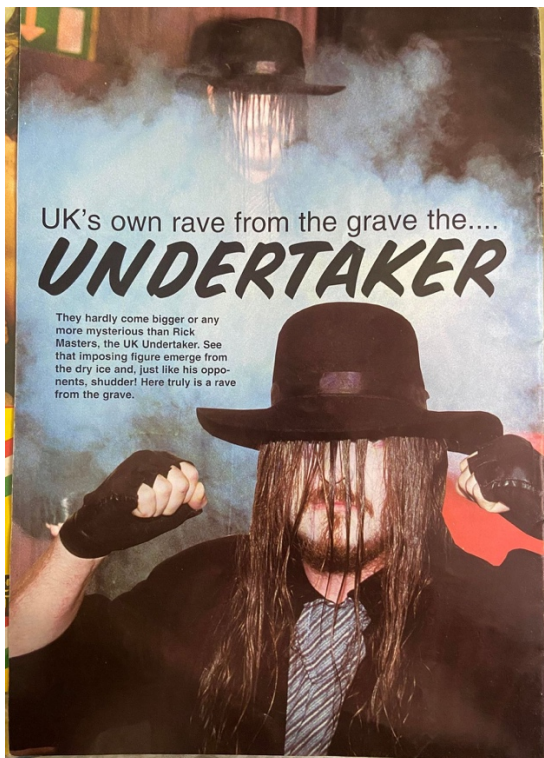


Figure 22: The 'UK Undertaker' paying homage to the WWE character

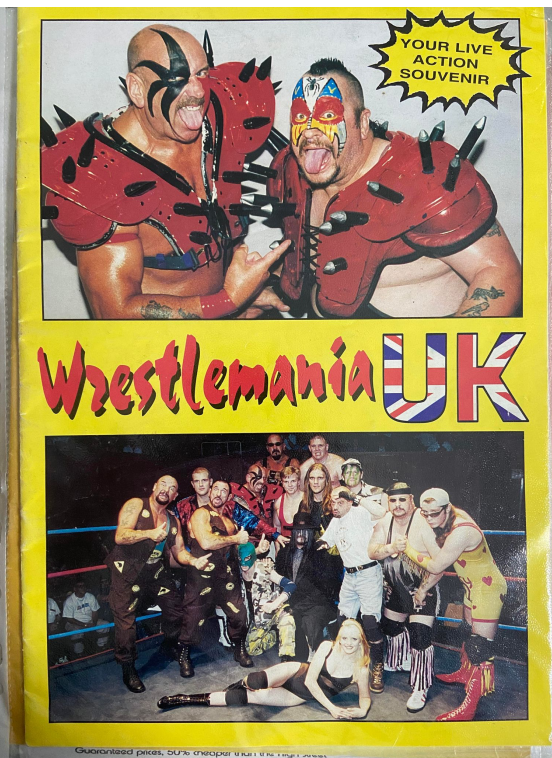


Figure 23: An All Star Wrestling event featuring characters inspired by WWE superstars 'Legion of Doom'

My own experiences with live professional wrestling in Britain began in this particular era and specifically at one of these defined 'tribute shows'. It was around the late 1990s, and as a young child I already had some knowledge of what wrestling was due to seeing flashes of WCW wrestling on ITV Saturday afternoons, completing various sticker books – as many children did in the 1990s – as well as having some toys bought from a boot

fair at an early age – namely the famous blue WWF ring with accompanying soundbox. Despite this, my fandom had not yet flourished into anything consistent until WWE (then WWF) made a deal with Channel 4 to broadcast its weekly syndicated catch-up show *Sunday Night Heat*, as well as a few of its annual pay-per-view products free to the public. As a 12-year-old at the time, the prospect of watching professional wrestling regularly from week to week was an exciting one, and I commenced viewing the product consistently, admiring the larger-than-life characters on display, the high production values and exciting use of camera tricks and special effects, as well as the action-packed quality of match content. *Royal Rumble 2000* was the very first wrestling pay-per-view I had watched, showcasing matches of various stipulations and championship contexts – such as the tag team championship table match between The Dudley Boys and The Hardy Boyz, as well as the fan-favourite street fight between Cactus Jack and Triple H. The main event and Rumble itself, as with every annual iteration of this specific event, consists of 30 competitors entering the ring individually every few minutes, and wrestlers may only be eliminated by being thrown over the top rope until both feet touch the floor. The last man in the ring would then receive a title shot later that year. This event was the perfect introduction for any fan to the mythos and attractiveness of American professional wrestling – showcasing the slew of larger-than-life characters, witnessing the reaction of the crowd to their entrance and determining whether that wrestler is deemed good or evil – as well as getting accustomed to their general aesthetic, style and move-set. I immediately found myself drawn to a character named ‘Kane’ – a seven-foot-tall masked man who did not speak, resorting to power moves such as the gorilla press slam, choke slam and other variations of highly performative and spectacular actions.

It was observable how this boom in WWF wrestling affected the youth of the country, as it wasn't long before almost everyone at my school, as well as people all across the country, were watching the product and buying its merchandise by way of toys, T shirts, and posters. I then noticed advertisements in the local newspapers that wrestling was coming to our local town hall – The Assembly Hall Theatre in Tunbridge Wells. When viewing the poster now, one can clearly see the exploitative manner it posits in its style and content, but it was more than enough to hook a young, unsuspecting wrestling fan, believing that they may have a chance to see one of their all-time favourites, even with the clear evidence of being swindled. Once taken by my father to attend the show it was evident there was nothing 'official' about the promotion as hoped for as none of the advertised WWF characters were there – no Kane present as I was so excited to see and expect from the poster advertised. There was a selection of local talent, a few indie imports from America with names suitably given to suggest links to popular stars such as upcomer Chad Collyer being presented as 'Chad Malenko' so as to provide familiarity with the much respected and highlighted cruiserweight 'Dean Malenko', but The UK Undertaker – a shorter, dated version of the popular WWF character, was billed to wrestle the actual Barbarian. Although this was still an exciting prospect for a young fan, the magic was somewhat dulled by the knowledge that the Barbarian had not actually wrestled for the WWF in a fair few years. Cullen remembers this period of British wrestling, but not in any fond fashion whatsoever. He defines this era of tribute as "a darker time than when there was no business", recalling memories of how the promoted venues during this time were usually highly populated due to the implied links with the WWE style and presentation. Cullen regales experiences of witnessing the disappointment shown by audiences at these events when being faced with the cheapened, copycat versions of their favoured WWE

characters. “The ‘Undertaker’ walks out and they’re like ‘that’s Kane from two matches ago, it’s the same guy...’. They [...] weren’t stupid. For some strange reason they kept coming and the promoters made a lot of money. It wasn’t my favourite time in the business.” (See appendix 13)

The much-debated concept of authenticity relates to both the experiences highlighted by Cullen in his disdain of what British wrestling had then become, as well as the lack of traditional British ‘catch’ wrestling and wholesale disruption from American wrestling via the WWE, as related in the video memoirs of Brookside. There have been many discussions in historical and contemporary discourse with regards to clearly defining and categorising the varying scopes and contexts of authenticity, but the consistent element running through these interpretations ultimately comes down to a sense of how authenticity “encapsulates what is genuine, real, and/or true,” although the dimensions of it can change depending on context (Beverland, Farrelly, 2010, p839). At a superficial glance, it may seem obvious to define authenticity in relation to the situation of 1990s British wrestling, as the immense popularity of WWE and American wrestling almost entirely displaced that of the traditional, British modes of presentation with ITV, and later satellite, choosing the cheaper, internationally syndicated option as the sole broadcasting option for wrestling content. Therefore the new generation of viewers – mostly teenagers and young people – would perhaps see American wrestling as simply just ‘wrestling’ without even knowing or desiring to know of prior eras on home turf. It is all they knew. This relates to the notion of what has been categorised as “type authenticity”, in which something posits as being true to its particular type or genre (Carroll, Wheaton, 2009, p255), whereby if it generally looks and plays like it does on television – it can be enough. Of course, these

tribute shows were a clear survival and exploitative stratagem used by a dwindling industry to stay in profit and enact the typical carnival 'swindle' professional wrestling was known for over a century prior – but these promotions often had at least something connected to the real, 'authentic' product in order to sell tickets and give enough of a “stamp, or seal of approval” for fans to engage (Van Leewen, 2001, p393). Linking to my earlier discussed experience, the mere inclusion of one authentic presence in the 'real' Barbarian, and an overall dedication to good performance and maintaining of character from the other performers, led me to forgive the obvious 'work' I had fallen for, and still enjoy the show vicariously through those fake-yet-convincing-enough characters in front of me.

This brings a further level of discussion in relation to Walter Benjamin's concept of authenticity of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. The issue of why authenticity matters here is in terms of the industry of British wrestling, Benjamin posits that the authenticity of an original work diminishes with mechanical reproduction (2008). Regarding American wrestling on British TV, the live events and unique World of Sport broadcasts lose their original aura when replaced by American productions. The displacement of British products by American wrestling, especially WWE, in the 1990s introduced a hyper-masculine and hyperbolic mediated spectacle. This shift altered the immediacy and authenticity of the live experience, deviating from the traditional British wrestling TV presentation. The question of whether American wrestling fulfilled British audience preferences in the 1990s hinges on authenticity concerns. While the mechanical reproduction lacked the authenticity of the original British product, the appeal of American wrestling to British audiences lies in a different authenticity shaped by global visibility, production values, and star power.

Ultimately, whether authenticity matters depends on the audience perspective. If British viewers sought the raw, unmediated authenticity of live events, the TV reproduction might be seen as a departure. However, if they were drawn to the broader appeal and larger-than-life characters of American wrestling, authenticity concerns might take a back seat to entertainment value.

However, in terms of the dwindling British wrestling circuit and more traditional modes of wrestling presentation available on a limited level, there was arguably enough of an engaged fanbase that it managed to survive on proverbial life support until further developments to the scene eventually occurred. When considering a statement made by Newman in which “at the broadest level, authenticity is a concept aimed at capturing dimensions of truth or verification” (Newman, 2019, p9), dedicated fans still saw value in the likes of the stars of yester-year remaining on the scene despite many venturing overseas to find better paying work. Athletes such as Marty Jones, Johnny Saint, and Frank Cullen would continue wrestling in the traditional style and insist on continuing as themselves as opposed to adopting a ‘gimmick’ or sensationalised sense of character commonly found in the Americanised format. This is arguably the main factor which held the now-marginalised British presentation of wrestling, both in terms of traditions, rules and practices, alive long enough to survive into the next generation of wrestling evolution. It is not at all surprising that a veteran of the British industry such as Cullen would frown upon such a situation, though, given that his prior successes were based upon his own persona and the simple case of showcasing skill in the sporting fashion of wrestling. However, regardless of the apparent marketing swindle and observable lack of investment in quality of presentation, my

experience of the tribute show was a great introduction to experiencing wrestling on a live and participatory basis as opposed to being a largely-disconnected fan watching on television from home and talking about results on the school playground the day following an event. In fact, the majority of the professional wrestlers, promoters, and fellow fans interviewed or spoken to as part of this research had a very similar introduction to professional wrestling as a phenomena in this way – as a single case, or combination, of going to these live tribute shows or viewing the WWF televised material via Sky and the Channel 4 syndications. For example, there were distinct similarities when discussing entry ways into becoming a fan of wrestling with Sam West – fellow academic and promoter of Resurgence Wrestling based in Leicester – as well as with Oisin Delaney – contemporary Irish-born wrestler and former trainer at the now permanently closed Knucklelocks wrestling school based in London. West recalls a very similar experience of having WWF Attitude-era television being his main entry point into becoming a fan, and the only real sense of a ‘British’ scene being through the likes of tribute shows and the holiday camp productions of Brian Dixon and ASW. Delaney also recalls this experience, despite not witnessing tribute shows, still having WWF and WCW television available in his youth growing up in Ireland, witnessing the back-and-forth ratings war between the companies and having that as his main entry point into both fandom and wanting to engage with the phenomena as a practitioner.

A New Generation: Relaxed 'Kayfabe', Training Camps and the Start of the Frontier Wrestling Alliance

A natural progression of this desperate period of British wrestling was the 'opening up' of the business via the proliferation of wrestling training camps – which slowly became a commercially successful way for experienced, veteran wrestlers to make a living training a new generation of grassroots talent. This would start a period of growth in the UK scene due to multiple independent promotions launching around the country to accommodate this new wave and plethora of fresh, young wrestling talent looking to ply their trade. As mentioned in the first chapter, the wrestling business in general, and not just in the United Kingdom, was a “closed-shop” in terms of breaking in as a participant. The only real ways one could become a professional wrestler, as supported by my discussions with Carl Stewart and others involved at the time, would be by getting approached or noticed from successful amateur exploits via boxing and other forms of martial arts, or to convince a friend or relative already in the business to make an introduction. As Stewart relates, “it was really a closed shop up until then. Hammerlock was the first place to start changing that. Other than that there was absolutely nowhere else, and that sounds incredible for today when training schools are ten-a-penny, but there really wasn't anywhere” (see appendix 1). Although the opening of training camps to the general public was a part of the natural evolution of the UK industry and a reaction to dire circumstances, this was not the first time the secrets and protected trade elements were made available to the public in the pre-digital era. One of the arguably biggest stars of classic British wrestling, Jackie Pallo, released his autobiography entitled 'You Grunt, I'll Groan: The Inside Story of Wrestling' all the way back in 1985 in light of *World of Sport* being cancelled from ITV's broadcast schedule. Pallo

outlines the preconceived nature of the sport, issuing comments such as “wrestling is a branch of showbusiness. And just as Jack never really hurts the giant at the top of the beanstalk, the goodies and baddies of wrestling – we call them ‘villains’ and ‘blue-eyes’ – seldom give each other pain, unless it is by accident” (1985, p9), alongside mentioning what he defines as the ‘commandments’ of wrestling observed dutifully by the practitioners in the trade:

“Thou shalt not talk to strangers about the game, or discuss it within their hearing, especially in pubs or cafes.

Thou shalt not invite, or allow, strangers to enter the dressing room, however important they may be.

Thou shalt not tell any member of the public what you earn for a fight. (This was because they didn’t want people to know our money was so pathetically poor.)

Thou shalt never reveal to punters the dates and places at which you are scheduled to appear. (This was because pros who fight each other regularly tend to stick to the same pattern when they are appearing in towns far apart, but promoters want the public to think wrestlers meet each other only infrequently. So it wouldn’t do if a keen bunch of punters got to know where you were due to fight , followed you from town to town, and realised the act was all the same.)

Thou shalt always protect the game.” (1985, P10)

The mentioning of these once closely protected, backstage elements of professional wrestling, otherwise known as the rules of 'Kayfabe' among international circles, was a controversial act from Pallo. This outright exposing of the business, regardless of its honesty and blunt truthfulness, would spark great disdain among Pallo's peers in the business, but as Mick McManus states, the book "actually had very little impact. The public are very strange. They only believe what they want to believe. People used to come up to me and say, 'Do you really get hurt or is it all fixed?' Some nights I'd say, 'It's all fixed, obviously.' And then they'd say 'No, no, of course it's not,'" (Garfield, 2008, P4) observing the nature of professional wrestling to provide intrigue, immersion, and suspension of disbelief despite constant media scrutiny of being fake or 'fixed'. Pallo even parallels this notion in noting "It's like asking a jockey does he ever have any bent races. They're *all* fucking bent!" (Garfield, 2008, p5), relating to the fact that even in most professional, 'real' sports there are always dubious and preordained tactics employed for profit or skewing and misdirecting for competitive gain – hence the blurring of reality being a very feasible and widely actioned process within professional wrestling, both past and present.

This controversy would not stop the interest of fans and interested parties wanting to become involved, though. In fact, Greg Lambert refers to statements made by fellow promoter and wrestling personality Alex Shane, noting "anyone who claimed wrestling was 100% real was insulting the fans' intelligence" and that in reaction to Shane's statements "many of British wrestling's 'old school' (veterans) would surely not approve. This older generation still wanted to hide wrestling's secrets, clinging to a past era of mystique like magicians refusing to reveal how their tricks are done" (2012, p3). It was eventual key

figures in the timeline of Britain's eventual revival, such as Lambert and Shane, that would benefit from the opening of the industry to the public via training schools and the formation of online fan communities. Due to the traditions of British wrestling being mostly side-lined or modernised to make way for the more popular Americanised formats, experienced wrestling figures would now adopt an 'open shop' approach of giving their experience and skills access to the general public in the hope of passing on the heritage of the nation's wrestling style and history to the next generation and keeping some semblance of the home industry alive. As stated before, Hammerlock gym would begin to accept attendees from the general public to train in wrestling in return for a fee. Despite this being a sore period for those with experience who no longer had the platform to perform as before, it provided a beginner's platform for those who never had access to such a deep connection to their fandom as before via the ability to become a practitioner, following in the footsteps of those they once admired as an outsider. I asked Stewart and Ayass about their passions during this period to find out what kept them involved in what was evidently a dying industry with few prospects, and they both reflected positively on their experiences. Ayass proudly notes the intrinsic factors of community and meaning for his engagement, saying "the fact we were doing shows and I could step in the ring and talk to an audience. I was an M.C. at this point. I could feedback on the matches, and it was a really close bonded team". Furthermore, such strong friendship bonds were made from shared passions and performances made in this period of Hammerlock wrestling school that Ayass confirms "we're still great friends in and out of wrestling. We had a really close bond, we all were a similar age and had similar big ambitions. we just wanted to get British wrestling back on its feet again as we loved it." (See appendix 8)

Dean's nostalgic recollection of his passions for wrestling and involvement during the early 1990s parallels the sense of community and togetherness that Brookside references as one of the few "compensations" for workers in this period (*Video Diaries*, 1993), and serves to show how this shift in attitude towards industry gatekeeping would unlock fresh passions, giving the industry a lifeline that it needed to survive and produce further generations to sustain itself. Despite this existing as one of the few positives in an era of decline and obscurity for British professional wrestling – namely fans being able to fully take part in a closer way than ever and help reshape the industry – the heritage of British wrestling as a stylistic institution and heritage was becoming almost entirely relegated. "Gone were the days of the five-minute headlock, the wrist lock and matches with only a few bumps. They were pretty much rejected" states Ayass, continuing to elaborate on the amalgam that the general stylistic output of British wrestling became all the way throughout the 1990s. Ayass notes Hammerlock would still try to carry on the legacy of the British style by opening shows with "blue-eye versus blue-eye" technical matches, 'blue-eye' being the British industry nomenclature for a wrestler with a 'good' or 'moral' character disposition, otherwise known as a 'babyface' in American circles. This dynamic was fairly common in classic British wrestling to showcase professional wrestling as more of a sporting presentation over the theatrical. Hammerlock, according to Ayass, would use these matches to warm the crowd up at the start of shows, but were not necessarily missed or sought after by late arrivals. Ayass continues his assessment, noting "The American style was creeping in but British wrestling was still trying to hold on to its identity but was confused", noting the exploitative nature of promoting not just stopping at the tribute shows – "You'd have All Star doing ladder matches between Rob Brookside and Doc Dean because they'd split up. In Hammerlock we were doing the odd ladder match – we had an ECW influence as I'd get the

tapes in and distribute them to the boys. We were trying to present something different and with different people than the established ones” (see appendix 8). The traditional, British style of wrestling would now play second-fiddle to the more action-packed, high-risk, and exaggerated form of the American promotions – including the aforementioned formats and ‘gimmick’ matches utilising ladders, chairs, and diving from areas outside of the ring.

However, the British wrestling scene would eventually start to move beyond the era of exploitation promotions and a lack of intrinsically ‘British content’ – with the cropping up of training camps such as Hammerlock still catering towards both traditional and modern audiences by promoting shows with varied match types, and attempts in passing on the experiences and skills showcased from prior generations as opposed to mimicking the American formats. British professional wrestling witnessed a resurgence in the new millennium with the likes of Alex Shane and the Frontier Wrestling Alliance (FWA), making efforts to bring the British wrestling scene into the 2000s with a fresh, modern approach and taking full advantage of fresh, terrestrial audiences being exposed to wrestling in general via the December 1999 acquisition of WWE products by Channel 4. Stewart, a journeyman wrestler with years of experience by this point, discussed this period in our interview, stating how the FWA and some other smaller promotions were springing up in response to the popularity of professional wrestling rising from WWE and WCW competing with each other. Stewart observes how it “brought different kinds of fans”, noting the influence of the emerging ‘Attitude Era’ of the WWE and popularity of the NWO (New World Order) group formed in WCW. Stewart further notes the change in audiences at UK shows as a response, saying “it was different. You had a mixture of audiences at the show, and I’m

sure the people turning up expecting to see a traditional show were probably completely bewildered by what they were seeing.” (See appendix 1)

These observed shifts are also relayed by Lambert (2012), who gives insight into this evolution, detailing the events leading to the British wrestling industry being modernised in terms of its creative output and mentality towards promotion and style. With a dedication to match quality and blending styles from other cultures, hybridisation between the technical British style and others would be witnessed, including the high-flying action of Lucha Libre and the hard-hitting ‘Strong Style’ typically found in Japanese promotions. With the internet in full-sway and providing fans with an easy means of being connected, as well as the popularity of wrestling booming from the introduction of terrestrial broadcasts of WWE syndication and a now thriving, albeit small, independent wrestling scene, the ways in which fans engaged with the sport and create meaning would evolve. Billy Wood, owner and promoter of Kent-based promotion Fight Nation Wrestling (FNW) and previously for IPW, discussed his memories of this shift in wrestling fandom. He notes how fan-based reports began being posted online, with the traditionally print-based Wrestling Observer newsletter following suit. This led to a unique relationship between fans and the American wrestling product due to time differences and broadcast dates not aligning with the ‘live’ American audience. “WWE’s Raw happened on a Monday and you wouldn’t see it in the UK until the Friday, so what you’d do is on the Tuesday you’d get the results of a website, read them all week and get excited until Friday to watch it.” (See appendix 2) This insight given by Woods relates to the evolving nature of wrestling fans heading into the full swing of the digital era, becoming ‘smart’ to the business side of wrestling through the wider availability of insider information, as well as the unique relationship British fans, as well as other global

ones, had with WWE wrestling in terms of knowing the results ahead of time and anticipating content pre-emptively.

This contemporary, 'smart' culture of wrestling fandom became defined as "would-be insiders" with an interest in the meta-awareness of the inner-workings and machinations of the sport (McBride and Bird 169), and as Wood eludes to, was a more specified case for British fans in the way that most would know the results ahead of time due to the broadcast date differential. Alongside this, promoters and wrestling industry personnel would acknowledge this loyal community as "a growing market of people who were prepared to spend money on wrestling" (Lambert, 2012, p13) – meaning there was clear potential for sustaining a fresh, grassroots movement to provide televised, original wrestling content made and distributed on home turf. This led to the efforts of Alex Shane and the formation of the Frontier Wrestling Alliance, using connections to the UK media such as Shane's status as a presenter for talkSPORT alongside fellow host Tommy Boyd – who owned his own production company and was willing to back the project. From its introduction in 1999, the promotion would rely on the import of known international stars in order to gain attendance for shows, but would promote a large selection of upcoming, young British talent as the bulk of their roster – such as Jody Fleisch, Jonny Storm, and Doug Williams.

This era included much cooperation with the American Ring of Honor promotion, providing opportunities for popular British wrestlers of the period to tour on the American stage and legitimise the new, modernised yet still perceivably British style of technical wrestling. This then led to a follow-up of ROH and FWA-cooperative British shows such as 'Frontiers of Honour' taking place in 2003 (see figure 24), featuring a presentation of British

and American wrestling in a parity of quality, giving a better sense that British wrestling exploits could go “toe to toe with its American counterparts” (Newman, 2016, p17). British audiences, and American audiences via DVD trading and digital sharing, experienced the likes of popular independent American talent including Samoa Joe, AJ Styles, Low Ki, and Christopher Daniels wrestle the likes of rising UK competitors including The Zebra Kid, Jody Fleish, Jonny Storm and Mikey Whiplash. Shane reflects on this choice in the documentary *Two Falls to a Finish* (Figure Four Films, 2012), discussing how the growing success of ROH as an entity in American wrestling and its appeal to the dedicated, ‘smart’ fanbase aligned with that of the FWA meant that any showcase of the quality of British talent on offer, win or lose, could only be a good thing. It reminded the fan community that British wrestling still had something to offer the international community, and was not to be overseen or missed.

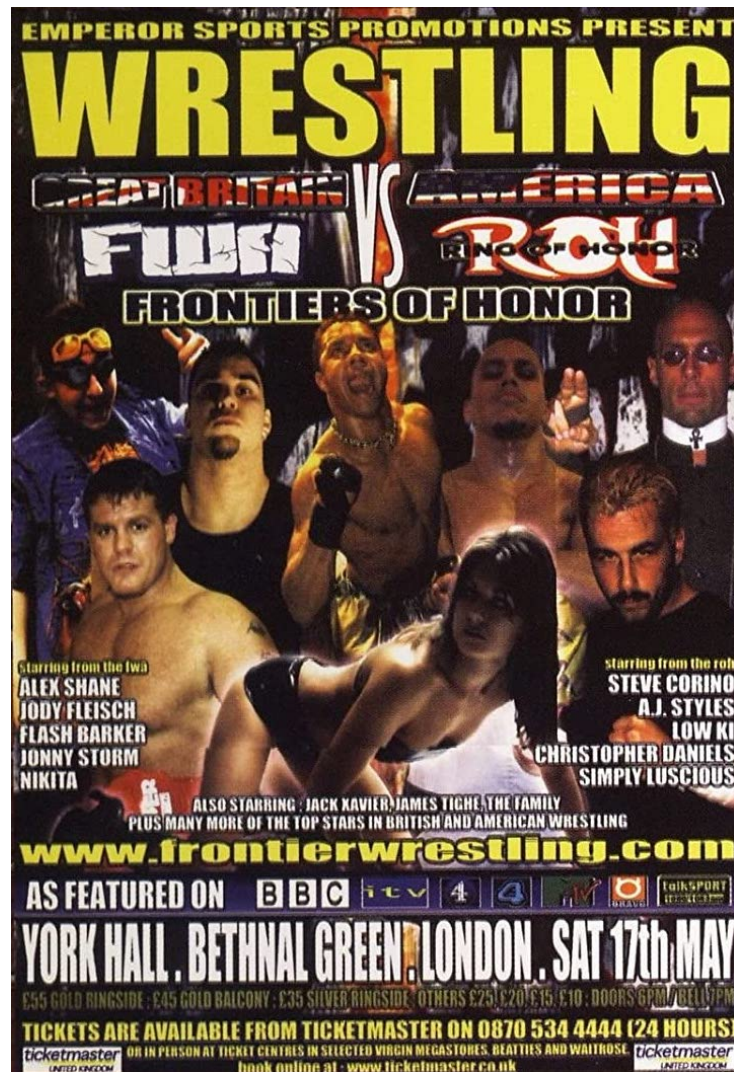


Figure 24: Poster for the 2003 FWA show 'Frontiers of Honour'

FWA engaged in a stint with the Bravo network for televised wrestling but did not find success. Eventually “The Wrestling Channel” started broadcasting as a narrow-casted output for wrestling content and chose the FWA as its exclusive provider for content. Despite a major advertising campaign, the shows did not fulfil expectations. As Lambert notes, they were having the biggest crowds they had at that point but it simply was not enough in terms of revenue to be justifiable. In the end, the company went into debt and

was no longer able to produce TV shows just after 12 months of broadcasting. Despite this, one positive of the FWA and its apparent failings is the experience endowed and development given to the new wave of young talent who went on to represent the next generation of British professional wrestling, taking the industry forward. As experienced wrestling promoter and current owner of RevPro Andy Quildan mentions, there were great ideas being showcased, but without the essential building blocks to make things viable as a business – there just wasn't enough to make British wrestling break through and be as successful as before (*Two Falls to a Finish*, 2012).

Eventually The Wrestling Channel (TWC) became financially troubled too, struggling to afford new content to show. This was, according to Shane, arguably due to dealing with broadcast fees as opposed to having a better chance to use a subscription model, financing itself from the dedicated fanbase its product was aimed at in the first place. Lister notes the most viewership the channel had was, ironically, the original *World of Sport* tapes – proving there was clearly still a taste for the original, technical and sports-based presentation of professional wrestling. As the above mentioned people in the documentary *Two Falls to a Finish* note, the new generation of wrestlers and fans alike would rediscover the original style of British professional wrestling – appreciating it for the timeless nature of its technical and sporting way of promotion and showcasing matches and characters. Even some of the stars of yester-year made a return to the scene to offer their experience in both training and wrestling the younger talent on shows, further reinstating the timeless nature and appeal the classic way could still bring in a modern age – including Mal 'Superstar' Sanders returning to wrestle Steve Grey in a 'World of Sport' match at FWA Carpe Diem in 2004, receiving a great response from the crowd at their display of wrestling in the traditional,

catch-based British way. One argument here could be that this was indicative of nostalgia rather than timelessness (Hodin, 1958), but as the documentary *Two Falls to a Finish* features, the fans engaged with the FWA were newer, younger audiences influenced by the contemporary offerings of the time, such as ECW, WCW, and WWE. The point here is the 'return to basics', traditional style of British and European wrestling still held up and drew positive crowd reactions in an age of heavily sensationalised and 'hardcore' wrestling. These fresh, younger audiences arguably had little to no exposure to classic eras of wrestling due to a large period of untelevised content, and therefore the reaction can be seen as natural and not a sense of nostalgic, "homesickness", or "sentimental longing" (Sedikides et al, 2008, pp304-305). Furthermore, this links to the mythic elements that Barthes suggested (1993) in that although culturally embedded aspects can make national iterations of wrestling unique, the central elements still exist collectively in terms of good versus evil dynamics, the performance of suffering, and the semiotic communication to audiences.

The FWA regularly featured Robbie Brookside in its promoted shows, which proved a natural fit due to the wrestler's work across both eras – experienced from the latter days of ITV wrestling but still young enough to keep up with the energy of the new generation in his continuing regular work with ASW. Lambert notes the experience of working with Brookside during this period of the FWA, including an evident clash in attitudes, and a foreshadowing of a divide seen further into the following decades:

"I noticed there was a bit of a real-life friendly tension between the lanky Liverpudlian [Robbie Brookside] and the chirpy Essex boy [Jonny Storm]. At one point, Robbie called out mockingly to Jonny: "You do all your roly polys",

son. I'll still be there for you at the finish of the match". I found it fascinating to see the contrast between the preparation of Brookside, one of the few remaining survivors from the TV era of British Wrestling, and the carefree new generation of daredevils represented by Fleisch and Storm. The 36-year-old Robbie, with all his experience of the job, certainly didn't feel the need to rehearse. He'd improvise most of his match in the ring as he went along"

(Lambert, 2012, p17)

The decision to include such classic wrestlers on these FWA shows and have them put on matches in the traditional style and ruleset was perhaps a measure to add a sense of 'authorisation' or bearing of a "genuine signature" (Van Leeuwen, 2001, p393) to authenticate the promised intrinsic 'Britishness' of promotion that the FWA prided itself on providing a grassroots movement for in its infancy. One issue FWA faced, connected to the earlier comments made by Brookside, was exploiting the popularity of the renegade ECW (Extreme Championship Wrestling) promotion and its tendency to rely heavily on edgier, more violent content than that of the industry leader of WWE. Although the wrestlers promoted at FWA shows were trained in the UK and were promoted as the next generation of British wrestling, the content offered saw consistent use of chairs as offensive weapons and a fascination for high-flying and sensationalised, high-speed sequences influenced by martial arts. The use of classic British wrestlers seemingly attempted to provide a break from such content and try to marry the fan community divided on the future of British wrestling being based on history, or being based on continuing to adopt international styles. Despite the efforts made by the FWA to revive the British wrestling scene, its content would eventually be pulled from a now financially struggling Wrestling Channel and the promotion

itself would begin to phase out due to being unable to hold a regular level of attendance and engagement from fans. Here it seems the 'noise' created in the Hebdigean sense by the FWA in redeploying ECW aesthetics to gain traction with modern fans of the time was not enough to sustain the brand. Furthermore, as Hebdige states, "If a style is really to catch on [...] it must say the right things in the right way at the right time." (2002, p122) This process gave FWA the edge it needed to gain the attention of fans, but it is arguable that without the core fundamentals that sustained professional wrestling through prior eras, the unsustainability of the brand would present itself. These fundamentals include such elements as the immersive, sporting base of athleticism being imbued within its diegesis more consistently, as well as a continued sense of both call backs to heritage of the industry and creating new, original identities going forward.

Despite the eventual fall of TWC, the British scene would continue very healthily as a network of small but successful independent promotions, making good use of the now-large community of talent and promoters learning from the mistakes from prior efforts.

Furthermore, fledgling American promotion Total Non-Stop Action Wrestling (TNA) would see a chance to improve their stake in the industry with their evident attempts to rival that of WWE by entering the British market. Already providing syndicated televised material to the Challenge channel, they would also undertake a reality-based talent show called *TNA: British Boot Camp* (2013-2014), in which upcoming talent in the country were picked in order to compete in a competition to acquire a contract to wrestle for the company. They would also receive mentorship in the challenge from veteran American wrestlers Hulk Hogan and Al Snow, as well as having legacy UK stars including the late Mark 'Rollerball' Rocco enter the fray for experienced support. The talent picked for the first season included

the likes of Marty Scurll and Rockstar Spud – both wrestlers that would end up being successful and well-known on the world wrestling stage. The partnership of TNA and the UK independent wrestling scene would act as a new incentive for the next generation of British talent, as there were now feasible pathways towards a full-time, larger-scale career for them to work towards.

With this new incentive, alongside a plentiful network of quality wrestling talent and promotional experience, the UK industry developed into a landscape which would become abundant with successful, regional promotions such as Progress, RevPro, and PCW (Preston City Wrestling), and Insane Championship Wrestling (ICW), all drawing their own loyal fanbases while still providing an avenue to experiencing their product by independently distributing their material online via digital video platforms. Lambert observes that, in the stages of the early to mid-2000s British wrestling resurgence, a shift in fan activity at live venues was notable, stating it “wasn’t the kind of crowd I was used to [...] with kids running around waving foam fingers while angry old grannies attacked the bad guys with their handbags”, but it resembled something more along the lines of a “football crowd” with the use of “primeval chanting”, “liberal use of bad language”, sporting branded T-Shirts of their favoured wrestling brand and consisting of mostly 18-30 year-olds (2012, p6). This shift is particularly noteworthy as it showcases the adaptability of British culture to a sporting or entertainment product in a time of convergence, globalisation, and technological advancement.

With companies such as the FWA being influenced by ECW (Extreme Championship Wrestling) in terms of both presentation, an anti-establishment mentality and dedicating itself to a more ‘smart’ wrestling crowd, the audiences also incorporated the participatory

culture set by the promotion in terms of the chants and loyal display of namedropping the promotion at high points during shows. However, due to the British scene becoming more subcultural than previous eras in its blending of different niche interests, catering to dedicated wrestling fans while creating “weak ties” (Granovetter, 1973, p41) to other forms of sports – such as local league football, historical theatrical interests including local theatre and pantomime, as well as local music club scenes being commonplace in the country – these audience and participatory cultures became incorporated as a result and a new, hybridised form of British wrestling audience was born. Alongside this, factors of the ‘opening up’ of the industry had an impact in shifting the industry to what once was a traditional, domestically working-class form of entertainment to one now open to all arenas of hybridisation with fellow subcultures, appealing to a much wider audience than ever before.

Inheriting successes and mistakes encountered during this period – as well as the modernisation of the British wrestling industry allowing training camps to birth a new wave of young, media-savvy and ‘smart’ talent, this generation would now enter and continue to impact the industry with an 18-35 demographic now being catered to more than ever before with edgier, more contemporary content. Wrestling in Britain would see a vast shift from the pre-Thatcher traditionalist, rigid form it once was to a more modern, open, progressive, and widely appealing one, allowing for subcultural aspects to influence its future. Despite some attempts to revive televised British wrestling with the rise and fall of The Wrestling Channel on British satellite television, the industry would still survive and grow through its new wave of talent and vastly expanded support network consisting of people from a multitude of backgrounds, classes, and cultures. It would now be fans, both

inside and outside of the ring, that would own and shape the future of British professional wrestling. With lessons learned from prior mistakes and assumptions made by the British wrestling revival movement attempted by the FWA, and with a generation of modern talent both interested in the heritage of British wrestling but holding contemporary attitudes, a new wave of successful promotions would spread influence across the UK.

With the advent of social media connecting audiences, providing an “intensified everydayness” to fan engagement (Hills, 2018, p495), this naturally led to independent wrestling circles becoming more aware and interconnected with contemporary culture. Alongside technological developments and convergence empowering fans to produce and narrowcast their own iterations of professional wrestling, the British industry saw a vast array of new promotions form and provide new generations of practitioners from the aforementioned training establishments informed by prior decades of experience, successes, and failures. Unlike the prior industry tied to traditional aspects of style, presentation, gatekeeping and protecting the business from invasive outsiders – this new modern era would allow fans to become more closely connected to their favoured form of entertainment. By becoming practitioners and producers themselves, as well as expressing various identities and progressive ideologies regarding creativity in their production and engaging with dedicated, micro-communities of engaged fans specifically tuned to their favoured promotions mode of presentation and creative drive. This leads to a connection to the concept of ‘craft’ production present in wrestling, in line with other movements involved with the term.

The conceptual framework of discussing modern British professional wrestling in terms of 'craft' was inspired by conversations with Resurgence Wrestling promoter Sam West (see appendix 3) while on the topic of contemporary identities and aesthetics of British professional wrestling being created, resulting in contrasts made with artisanal, 'craft' mentalities of producing content. West acknowledges the nature of professional wrestling to be mostly informed by history and tradition, and only on limited occasions has been "connected to a wider contemporary culture". He observes how modern British professional wrestling is "very good at reflecting the wider culture", making links to it being able to position itself alongside aspects involved with other industries such as music, the gig sector, as well as creating the same sense of authenticity and niche representation found in 'craft' businesses providing bespoke produce engaged by dedicated consumers. West sums up the passion in the modern British wrestling industry involving these 'craft' sensibilities, stating "that's what has made it appealing. It's niche, it knows it's niche, it's not trying to get on ITV" – connoting the sense that these modern promotions are potentially driven by fannish dedications and passions as opposed to purely capitalistic means (see appendix 3). With a democratised era of fans-as-producers, both engaging with their fandom on a more direct, collaborative, and authentic level – alongside creating fresh identities for the British, cultural context of professional wrestling – a wide array of identities in the industry have been formed, giving a varied, multi-layered understanding of what British wrestling might mean within the wider, global context. The following section discusses these concepts of 'craft' and the relations to wrestling more closely by examining the varying attitudes and identities formed on a creative and regional basis.

Craft-Brew: Developing Identities in Modern British Wrestling and the Return of Authenticity

In this evident boom of independent wrestling promotion in Britain, the national industry was no longer reliant on exploitative acts of 'tribute' towards the mainstream, successful style of the WWE and aimed to build up support from a grassroots position. It would make full use of the new generation of passionate, well-trained talent with intentions of inheriting past national forms and cultural heritage associated with wrestling style and approaches, again aiming to be original in a wrestling world dominated by homogeneity. A collective identity was indeed shared on this front in terms of catering to a regional sense of taste and demand, imbuing cultural originality and locality to event promotion and characterisations, as well as an overall spirit of taking British wrestling as a standalone creative concept into a new era of self-sufficiency. Despite this sense of collective identity, each promotion maintained their own original micro-ideologies in presentation of events, the demographics catered to, and the relationships formed between fan communities and labour. The obvious relationship these developments connect to are concepts of branding and originality within a contemporary marketplace, whereby the personality of a brand can be represented by the emotional characteristics of its management and presentation, and influenced by cultural and ideological values held by its producers (Shiva, 2005). By differentiating from other market players and representing what its long-term goals and achievements will materialise as, a brand can resonate more effectively with its intended customer base (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000). An equally relevant way of understanding this regional, grassroots form of brand development in Modern British professional wrestling is through the lens of 'craft' – a notion usually applied to that of artisan, physical

produce such as food and drink items, but with the added complexity of how the processes and reception of such produce relates to aspects of authenticity and shared identity with consumers as opposed to a mass-produced, pedestrian format. However, before making assertions on what the 'craft' nomenclature entails when applied to professional wrestling in Britain, it is first worth defining the overall concept and what it means within its native context of brewing.

The term 'Craft' has been subject of much attention in modern discourse, defined as embodying anti-mass production cultural values posited by producers usually associated with, but not limited to, microbrewery movements (Carroll and Swaminathan, 2000). As Pedeliento et al also observe, when referring to the emergence and popularity of 'craft' gin circles, the success of such activity depends on "sharply-defined authenticity claims to valorise their offerings and differentiate themselves from generalists" – referring to the offer of an artisanal, identifiable and 'quality' product which can be adapted to specialised tastes and representational, ideological demand in ways rigid, larger companies cannot.

The notion of 'Craft' and the relationship between producer and consumer acknowledges the intrinsic value of authenticity, or rather, more specifically, the notion of being understood and appreciated as authentic in relation to the larger, established industry leaders. Although craft brewing still resides within the neoliberal arena of global supply-and-demand and profit-seeking, Demetry defines this sought-after notion of consumer drive for the authentic as having idealised expectations by which audience members judge a producer or product's character, level of genuineness, credibility, and level of

appropriateness (2019). This, in turn, motivates consumers to pay higher prices for the above senses and understandings of product and producer being achieved successfully (Currid-Halkett (2017).

In terms of how independent wrestling promotions were perceived in comparison to that of the WWE and its derivative NXT products, companies such as ICW, Progress and other successful regional promotions were seen as the ‘home-grown’, ‘authentic’ British promotions aiming to create a fresh identity for British wrestling. This idea parallels observations made in relation to craft gin production, whereby upholding such a status depends on the clarity of authenticity claims to assign higher value to their output and differentiate themselves from generalist producers (Pedeliento, Andreini, 2019). Progress is a prime example of such a comparison, arguably representing a similar position of specialist producers in a wrestling context and embodying an approach considered to be anti-mass production, against the grain of popular production (Carroll, Swaminathian, 2000).

Beverland and Farrelly detail assertions on authenticity claims being based on both form and origin which aid in developing stronger relationships between consumer and producer. They note that “the process of authenticating an object or experience is contingent on the consumer’s goals” (2010, p838), and that the connections formed are viewed as truly authentic “only when they lead to genuineness, reality, and/or truth” (2010, p853). This is highly reminiscent of the fan-promotion relationship for Progress wrestling which, particularly from its infancy in 2011 to its most successful pre-WWE partnership period up to 2016 whereby they hosted WWE’s Cruiserweight championship qualifiers and established a professional relationship (Docking, 2016). Prior to this collaboration, Progress

held a more collaborative process of creative direction between its producers and fan community. Litherland et al explain this modern attitude to wrestling promotion and fan connection, stating how “political positions become part of the performance and are used to espouse or reaffirm shared ideological principles” (2020, p132). These portrayals of politics and beliefs were ingrained by fan demand and collaborative meaning-making, rather than the promotion capitalising on passing trends of cultural significance to portray to a much less media-literate and critical audience demographic. The latter behaviour can be witnessed at UK holiday camp, allegedly ‘family-friendly’ wrestling shows heavily reliant on stereotypes for characterisation and imbuing tabloidised understandings of the current socio-cultural zeitgeist in creative direction. Promotions such as LDN and All Star Wrestling have traditionally asserted a more rigid, traditionalist approach to their creative direction and exploited cultural tensions to inform presentation, most commonly relating to immigration and foreign policy matters and continuing the ‘WWE tribute’ creative mode. All Star Wrestling has had long traditions of portraying nationalism in their shows, including vilification of foreign countries and even concerns of anti-Islam sentiments in their encouragement of audiences to boo Muslim characters (Nagesh, 2016). LDN used Brexit as a way to garner an angry audience response by having one of their villain characters, KB Violence, insinuate British people were doomed to economic uncertainty (*LDN Wrestling*, 2019).

Progress, instead, connoted a Punk, anti-establishment aesthetic to its branding and general output, effectively providing a grassroots movement highlighting upcoming British talent, rejecting the consistent importing of overseas performers undertaken by other independent promoters to achieve a higher guarantee of ticket sales.

Although this section refers to the 'craft' nature of the UK wrestling scene residing within its geography of an entire united national environment, some sense and portrayal of regionality in modern British professional wrestling production can be observed by way of localised scenes and individual cultural practice of characterisation as well as engagement. An example of this sense of regional 'craft' in British professional wrestling is the characters and cultural essence of Scottishness portrayed by Glaswegian promotion Insane Championship Wrestling (ICW). Wrestlers such as 'The Bucky Boys' (see figure 25), represented by wrestlers Davey Blaze and Stevie Boy, were created and used as a regular fixture for the promotion to garner a likeness to what is referred to as 'Ned' culture. The term 'Ned' is a traditional Glaswegian term and abbreviation standing for 'non-educated delinquents' (Munchies, 2014), also understood to mean "a young layabout or thug" (Young, 2012, p1140) and is seemingly the Scottish equivalent of a common stereotype found in most cultures aimed at unemployed youths engaging in various activities such as binge drinking, drug taking, street violence, and even gang-related crime. The stereotype usually includes some form of fashion-related semiosis also, most commonly depicted wearing economy sportswear and baseball caps.



Figure 25: ICW's 'The Bucky Boys' comprised of Davey Blaze (Left) and Stevie Boy (Right)

Other examples similar to 'Neds' are the common stereotype of the 'Hoodie' or 'Chav' in the United Kingdom, or the Russian nomenclature 'Gopnik'. To add further likeness to this stereotype, the wrestling team's title 'The Bucky Boys' refers to a tonic wine-based drink named 'Buckfast' commonly associated with Ned culture. As 'Ned' culture garnered negative press and a general feeling of distaste from the Scottish general public, ICW incorporated this stereotype as the 'gimmick' for The Bucky Boys to create 'heat' – the industry term for developing reactionary distrust and disdain for a character in order to build interest in potential feuds with 'babyface' or 'blue-eye' wrestlers supported and celebrated as 'good guys' by the audience. Ironically, this eventually led to the tag team becoming popular to the point of fans establishing an emotional connection, and no longer

identifying them as heels. It is arguable that this shift in audience temperament was mostly due to straight-forward identification factors and notions of being defined as authentic as “the traditionally stigmatised Ned/Chav identity is now a readily accepted self-label adopted by a minority of young people” (Young, 2012, p1157). Of course, it would be crass to reductively assume that the audience of ICW mostly identify as Neds or automatically empathise to the point of active positive engagement with such a characterisation in their wrestling viewing, but it is certainly feasible given the damaging socio-economic and environmental effects neoliberal and capitalistic national practice has had on working-class communities over past decades – namely “the decimation of working-class neighbourhoods, entrenched unemployment, educational disadvantage and lack of skills and training, to name but a few” (Martin, 2009, p41). Considering professional wrestling in Britain can be understood both traditionally and somewhat contemporaneously as a working-class pastime for entertainment as evidenced by many practitioner diaries (Garfield 2007, Chandler, Regal 2005), and many modern generations of youth communities being marginalised and disillusioned from being “excluded from the formal economy of work or otherwise marginalised, and unable, quite literally, to afford to participate in mainstream leisure pursuits like their relatively privileged peers” (Martin, 2009, p141), it is unsurprising ICW encountered such a response from audiences. The positioning of gimmicks such as the ‘Bucky Boys’ arguably successfully appropriated real cultural identities, placing them within the sporting, combat-based diegesis of professional wrestling, creating an emotional connection between product and consumer.

The popular Scottish wrestler Grado (see figure 26) also embodies this ‘craft’ and regional sense of locality inherent with the values and aesthetic of ICW, renaming

commonly identifiable wrestling manoeuvres such as the ‘big boot’ to the ‘wee boot’, as well as reappropriating the move commonly known as the ‘rolling thunder’ into the ‘roll and slice’ – referring to a popular food item enjoyed by both Grado and many other Scottish people alike. With this comedic appropriation of regional nomenclature, alongside the general instilling of the ‘hometown hero’, empathy-inducing ‘underdog’ characterisation and overall manifestation of working-class Scottishness, Grado became an instantly successful character in ICW and eventually an arguable figurehead of the British industry for a time, achieving a heightened sense of national awareness from being featured as an entry-point figure in BBC’s documentary programmes (*Insane Fight Club*, 2015) chronicling the evident boom of British wrestling at the time of filming and release.



Figure 26: Popular Scottish wrestler and TV personality ‘Grado’

By developing this character for local Scottish consumers to identify with and live vicariously through as fans, the imbuing of regional cultural signifiers and catering to local modes of consumption via a nightclub, social drinking context of presentation, ICW achieved brand differentiation and a more creatively flexible relationship with consumers in the same way Craft producers aim for, and thusly catered towards a contemporary boom in British professional wrestling popularity – flexibly serving identities which large companies such as WWE are simply too rigid to cater for.

It is commonly accepted by wrestling fans and those in the industry that WWE live events, otherwise known as ‘house shows’ by fans, are catered towards the family audience and younger children in line with that of the holiday camp wrestling shows commonly found across the country in summer seasons, such as LDN, NGW (New Generation Wrestling) and Rumble Promotions. This has commonly been referred to by industry personalities as the ‘general audience’ or US wrestler Al Snow’s nomenclature of ‘Mr and Mrs Walmart’ (THE HANNIBAL TV, 2016), mostly referring to the moderate and casual consumers of the sport otherwise not consistently engaged in a dedicated, fan-like and ‘smart’ way.

In ways which correlate to the branding and ‘craft’ authenticity posited, there are parallels to be drawn between that of promotions such as Progress Wrestling and brewery companies like BrewDog in terms of overall goals of brand identity, aesthetic, and relationship with consumers. BrewDog was founded on the philosophy of anti-establishment sentiments, aiming to disrupt the industry with resistive mode of production and marketing. Creators James Watt and Martin Dickie stated their business philosophy, saying “we do not merely aspire to the proclaimed heady heights of conformity through

neutrality and blandness ...we are unique and individual ...A beacon of non-conformity in an increasingly monotone corporate desert. We are proud to be an intrepid David in a desperate ocean of insipid Goliaths” (Smith et al, 2010, p163), relating to the concept of mixing traditional brewing methods with the added twist of personality in their branding, and a drive towards progressive traits such as climate change prevention in tooling their production to reduce carbon footprint. Such utilisation of alternative branding and phrasing of product names further links to the resistive nature of the company goals, including literally dubbing their main line of beers ‘Punk’ IPA, as well as appealing to contemporary, aspirational classes of consumer in their aesthetic.

It is unfortunate that eventual controversies have tarnished these original drives and goals the brand established in its infancy, such as a marketing campaign for their equity sharing scheme being criticised as transphobic for representing trans women in a comedic, mocking frame (Hartley, 2015), as well as other controversies such as branding a product to protest Vladimir Putin’s anti-homosexual policies but backfiring due to receiving complaints of homophobia in its iteration of using ‘not for gays’ as a tagline (Ormesher, 2023). As Laine states, “to study something is not to celebrate it.” (2020, p121) While it is true that Brewdog has faced well-founded controversies and criticisms, the original intention behind comparing the ideas of 'craft' and progressive values with the wrestling brand 'Progress' remains a valuable point of analysis. Controversies surrounding a specific example should not overshadow the broader concept being explored. The comparison seeks to examine the intersection of business practices, branding, and ideology in both the craft beer and professional wrestling industries. By understanding how companies like Brewdog and

brands like 'Progress' navigate these complex dynamics, one can gain valuable insights into the interplay of craft, authenticity, and progressivism in the modern marketplace.

Progress Wrestling shows relationships of brand identity and implied values between producer and consumer, with a similar running aesthetic and ethos of resistance and progressive values. With the contemporary aspirational classes seeking to engage with producers which align with progressive values, whether it be environmental issues or attitudes to labour, health or safety, and willing to pay a premium rate for it (Currid-Halkett, 2017), Progress Wrestling sought to innovate the industry of professional wrestling by shaking up the stereotypes of it merely being a tribute act to overseas styles, seeking to provide a grassroots arena of expression for the new generation of young British wrestlers. As Litherland et al note, Progress served as a microcosm of the fannish, intersecting pathways of fandom present by way of anchoring Punk-Rock aesthetic and values of meaning to its output, with wrestlers using the genre for entrance music and, as well as fans, adopting vegan and straight-edge lifestyles which are commonly associated with contemporary Punk culture. Fans at events also sport tattoos, wear t-shirt designs based on their favourite bands and the company even marketed itself as 'Punk Rock Pro Wrestling' for a time (2020, pp125-126). The ethos of Progress Wrestling broke away from the traditional masculine ideals presented in prior eras of wrestling, promoting healthy and progressive ways of living and identification over a focus on size or outlandishness of character gimmick (Litherland et al, 2020, p128), as well as providing an inclusive community for fans to engage with the sport, as witnessed by T-shirt branding (see figure 27) further showing the progressive values held by the company and its naming).



Figure 27: T-Shirts offered by Progress via Pro Wrestling Tees featuring progressive, pro-LGBTQ values

It is arguable that there was always a sense of health and wellbeing present in historic British wrestling output, namely outside of the later, spectacular Americanised realm of Giant Haystacks versus Big Daddy and with the straightforward presentation of ordinary working-class athletes competing in the simulated realm of sporting combat – exemplified by the likes of Johnny Saint, Marty Jones, Steve Grey, and Chic Cullen. However, it is the resistive and collaborative mode of promotion which sets Progress apart from these eras, working alongside fan communities and creative labour to “espouse or reaffirm shared ideological principles” rather than merely capitalising and creatively exploiting current social issues (Litherland et al, 2020, p132). Progress works with its consumers as a cohort of supporters, rather than the hegemonic relationship of WWE defining terms of engagement for its fans and controlling notions of identity, such as taking ownership of its fan community by dubbing them the “WWE Universe” and instilling agreeability among them by ingraining a “best for business” motto consciously and unconsciously throughout its creative

output. Although the efforts made by Progress can be argued as merely a form of “hipster capitalism” (Scott, 2017, p72), whereby profit is still a motivating factor over all others, the main difference here is the argued balance between profit and providing a thriving scene of creative originality, opportunities for independent wrestling workers to express their craft, and the attempt to create a working scene outside of hegemonic, global influence of the WWE. Linking to a statement made by Wallace when relating to ‘craft’ beer companies, there is the value of Progress, as well as other independent British promotions “brewing ‘truth’ often in close proximity with other members of an ‘authentic’ cognoscenti” (2019, p961) – Progress reaffirms identities and practices set by the fans themselves, developing attitudes deemed more “democratic”, “radical” and “reformist” than the “reactionary” and “conservative” mode posited by the global market leader (Litherland et al, 2020, p135). This can be seen as a form of free creative labour capitalised upon by the promoters, but is actively engaged willingly by fans as a fulfilment of identity acknowledgement, presentation of ideas and material closer to their beliefs, and the notion of having their voices heard and encouraged within the live context – something they perhaps might not feel is catered for in the larger, globalised, and less flexible wrestling brands such as WWE.

This heavy reliance on Punk aesthetic allowed for the promotion to be seen as exclusive, signifying a sense of rebellion against the normal, commonly treaded processes observed in wrestling and provided a much needed sense of “expressive authenticity” whereby “true expression of an individual’s or a society’s values and beliefs” can be identified (Dutton, 2003, p259). Promotions such as Progress paved the way for new talent to have an outlet to hone their craft and represent the next wave of British professional wrestling in a world still dominated by the American and WWE mentality. Furthermore,

British fans now enjoyed a sense of ownership over a scene they could actively help shape and mould, leading to a modern sense and identity of how British wrestling could relate to international concerns and a fresh generation of fan cultural practices being established.

The following chapter will take a deeper examination into the British wrestling style in modern times and explore contemporary fan practices and participatory culture – namely in the unique cultural way in which British wrestling fans engage and form meaning at live events in relation to international counterparts. Concepts such as collaborative meaning making via cultural linguistic expressions will be explored regarding the important function of chanting, singing and heckling at live wrestling events in Britain. This will highlight aspects of transfandom in how British wrestling fans adapt culturally significant ways of engaging as an audience in Britain from contexts of football, theatre and general live entertainment to form collective meaning and express enjoyment. Problematic notions of controlled audiences and participation will be explored, showcasing strategies certain promotions utilise to direct fan engagement to create capitalistic opportunities in line with wider neoliberal corporate behaviour. By discussing this concept, the qualities brought from allowing autonomy and collaborative creative process between producer and audience will be exposed, further connoting the unique identity factors of British wrestling audiences to global ones.

CHAPTER THREE: “WHO ARE ‘YA!?’” FAN IDENTITY AND SUBCULTURAL PRACTICE IN MODERN BRITISH PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING

Football Chants, Anthems and Ultras: Audience Participation at Modern Live Wrestling Events in Britain

In contemporary times, British wrestling fandom has evolved into an entity of its own, sporting a cultural style entirely distinct from its international counterparts and involving a unique vocal and linguistic cultural approach that relates to other traditional British cultural communities of performance enjoyment. Namely, this is soccer (referred to natively as football in the United Kingdom), local theatre, and pantomime – redeploing the ritualistic nature of British fans at live sports events to appropriate popular music into new, phonetically functional and original chants. Both aid in shared meaning making across communities and can be exchanged with and adopted by other cultures for their own use and enjoyment. From a hybridisation of sporting chants, vocal participation seen at local theatre, music, and pantomime events and the carnivalesque nature for British crowds to willingly lose control from a typically reserved state – a uniquely British way of audiencing professional wrestling has been established. The following section will give insight into the enjoyment paradigm of British fans of professional wrestling by showcasing a selection of examples of chants and rituals employed, as well as their cultural significance and potential origins.

British audiences have come to be known as unique among worldwide wrestling communities due to how they participate and enjoy live wrestling events, particularly with

use of linguistic rituals by way of chants and the cultural approach in the way they are constructed and performed. To gain a better insight into the 'Britishness' behind wrestling fandom at live events in the United Kingdom, and a culture now observed to have arguably been exchanged and redeployed by international communities, it is important to discuss potential origins of their various social rituals and chanting with their already established and engrained existence within the national, sporting staple of soccer. Pieter Schoonderwoerd examines British football fans at live events and the chanting culture they have traditionally, and still contemporaneously, exhibit. He states, "chants do not mysteriously appear from out of the ether with no prior basis in existing culture or historical lineage accessible by participants" (2011, 124), meaning that chanting and rituals are an important process to consider when analysing fan behaviour at live events, in that they connect to a wider cultural and historical framework stemming from national identity factors. These include shared history and heritage, values and belief, as well as symbols and icons used. Within the framework of generic fan activity at live shows, participation is a key factor when identifying enjoyment and socio-cultural factors. Stephen Di Benedetto argues from the context of live theatrical shows, noting participation from the audience within a live context allows them to become transformed from "spectator" to "spect-actor", being able to become part of the show per se via vocal and linguistic performance aimed at either identifying their emotional stance within the contextual environment, to invoke a response, or to enact some form of effect on the performance itself (2016, pp29–30).

Another way of understanding the physical enjoyment at live entertainment shows via participation and social ritual is via the parallel association with Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque. He writes "the key to carnival culture involves the temporary

suspension of all hierarchical distinctions and barriers among men...and prohibitions of usual life" (1984, p15), linking to the notions of escapism and enjoyment in the necessary loss of self-control in carnival, large-scale, public and shared entertainment events. This can mostly be observed by the participation in group chants at live events, but more specifically within British sports fan communities with the propensity for UK soccer fans to use singing and music-based chants in their social ritual and participation at live events. Of course, there is a wide array of generic, non-musical chants employed commonly by British sports fans such as "the referee's a wanker!" and "who are ya!?", called in repetition and usually utilised as a form of resistance linguistics against either foul play or players and match staff found to be unfavourable. Furthermore, Ken McLeod links to this collective participation made possible by carnivalesque notions, noting "in the communal celebration of the spectacle such songs allow for a collective audience identification with the abilities and perceived power of the athletes, a carnivalesque masking of their true identities, in which all identities, including social prohibitions regarding sexual preference, appear to be momentarily suspended" (2006, p544). Fans partaking in group singing and chanting at live sporting events can be defined as enjoying a temporary loss of what would otherwise manifest as reserved self-control of emotion in the typical, carnivalesque sense, whereby external social positions become nullified and fans become truly collective in the context of shared, enjoyed experience.

More commonly though, and arguably the most exclusively British form of chanting, is that of communal singing and phonetically re-deployable, musically-based chants. Popular examples of this form of chanting are the use of the song 'Seven Nation Army' by the White Stripes, redeploying the rhythm of its main driving bass guitar riff and applying words to

match phonetically to create a rhythmic, repeatable chant for fan communities to employ. Simply singing a part of a song in its entirety to capture its emotional relevance in association with actions or narratives witnessed within the field of play is also a mainstay of British sports fandom. Musical accompaniment is an easy way to create structures of symbolic association and framing without having to endure any complicated sense of creative process, and to be accepted and redeployed within adjacent communities. This process can be likened to meme culture in how “idea, behaviour, or style [...] spreads from person to person within a culture” (Dawkins, 1976, p249-250) and act as “cultural transmissions that, like genes, replicate and mutate with each transmission between people and over generations” (Lamphere, 2018, p30). A classic example of popular music being adopted by British soccer is the song ‘You’ll Never Walk Alone’ popularised by Gerry and the Pacemakers in 1963, but originally from the musical *Carousel* (1945), becoming synonymous with Liverpool Football Club with its regular use in chants and singing at the club’s performances. Schoonderwoerd notes “it has become a marker of closed (or close) community at times of glory or tragedy” (2011, p127) and showcases a commonality in Liverpool fan identity. Due to the nature of its lyrical content, the song creates a sense of fighting through adversity and having hope for the future, which was arguably adopted and redeployed by Liverpool FC fans due to a strong belief in their club regardless of success or failure.

In terms of insight into the cultural origins of such chanting rituals at British sporting events, the influence may stem from the general cultural attitude displayed by British people. The statements made in a 2007 article in *The Guardian* by Simon Warner, senior teaching fellow in popular music at Leeds University at the time, go some way towards

outlining this mentality via describing the process of chants often being adopted after pub singalongs. Warner states “if you’ve got 20 people in a pub before a match singing a song, they’ll take it up again when they get into the ground”. However, Warner continues by explaining how the British, and especially the English, generally find public singing embarrassing, and that football manages to overcome this emotional barrier. “You think of mumbled hymns in church or at school,’ he states, ‘but something about the football terrace washes that embarrassment away. If you release a few thousand young men on to the terraces of Leeds or Manchester, they suddenly find their voice. It’s quite an interesting psychological hurdle”. (Simpson, 2007, para 5-7). Again, the carnivalesque sense of the sports arena as a zone for a willingness in loss of self-control is evident here in terms of how fans ‘let loose’ into an escapist idea of enjoyment and engagement in participatory culture where, in other areas of living, they perhaps would not partake due to the general idea of British reserved-ness that Warner aptly describes. When interviewing various figures from within the British wrestling circuit, past and present, some insightful links to the observations noted by Warner were discussed.

Former promoter of the longstanding yet recently disbanded International Pro Wrestling (IPW) based in the south-east of England Billy Wood, notes the distinct similarity between British wrestling fans to that of local soccer team supporters and the participatory cultures they exhibit at events. When discussing this notion, Wood stated distinct similarities between wrestling and football fans in Britain from an experienced position as CEO of Hastings United Football Club alongside promoting wrestling. He notes how “they love their club, so they travel all around the country to see their club on match days”, which is reminiscent of definitions made by Resurgent Wrestling promoter Sam West when

interviewed, dubbing these types as “travelling fans” (see appendix 3). “The same people turn up for Progress shows in Manchester will show up at the Electric Ballroom”, Wood states, indicating the cult-like following witnessed when promoting wrestling in Britain on the independent scale, likening it to being the “same as being part of a football club – you’re a part of it, you’re accepted [...] You follow the club, you wear the badge and so on.” (see appendix 2)

Wood’s statements go far in acknowledging the process of acceptance and being part of a group as the common ground that most British sporting and entertainment fan communities share, as well as how certain common fan activities have been hybridised with wrestling communities for them to be classified as typically ‘British’. Wood explains these common fan types between local football and professional wrestling, stating “the guys behind the goals – I call them ultras – they’re the ones singing with the drums, the whistles, having a laugh, drinking beer and having fun. They’re exactly the same as the wrestling fans”. Most importantly though is the notion that the common ‘British’ way of displaying such commonality is through the sharing of, and participation with, universally acknowledged and created chants and participatory elements. This can be linked to the processes which have been appropriated to wrestling audiences from other sporting outputs to the earlier discussed notion of carnivalesque escapism. These processes of social participation can be seen as “constructive and productive use of the body by those who, at other times, might well see their bodies subdued, subject to surveillance and suppressed.” (Armstrong, Young, 2009, p175) This suggests by watching wrestling we are not just experiencing a catharsis from witnessing the mythic triumph of good against evil as Barthes and historical wrestling academics focus on, but are actively allowed and encouraged in the

true carnivalesque sense to express emotion freely and use our language, vocal or physical, to express resistance or commonality with power structures in front of us. Or, simply, to lose ourselves in the high value of escapist enjoyment where it perhaps would not be ordinarily socially acceptable or warranted in everyday professional life.

Furthermore, former wrestler and promoter Carl Stewart, professionally known as Carl Conroy, has the same understanding of British culture as Warner and Woods, stating “as people we’re fairly reserved”, but also noting that “you find characters in sport, in football you find certain characters who cause controversy and you kind of identify with that”, moving on to say “that’s much more uniquely British, we love our eccentrics in this country, we love our characters”. This can further connote the link between the appeal of British wrestling to become hybridised with other national sporting communities due to being character-based, but also the British scene adds cultural flavour to wrestling gimmicks to provide that extra level of fan-to-wrestler connection. This is exemplified through characters such as Sha ‘The East-end Butcher’ Samuels (see figure 28) – seemingly drawing influence from the character Frank Butcher (Mike Reid), featured historically in the ever-popular British soap opera *EastEnders*, as well as with the use of a cover version of the track ‘Park Life’ by Blur to channel the cockney influence which both the song and his gimmick imply.



Figure 28: Sha Samuels competing for NXT UK

I first experienced Samuels as a wrestling performer when the *World of Sport* rebrand entitled *WOS Wrestling* was attempted on ITV in 2016 with a pilot episode aired on New Year's Eve. I was also aware of his presence on the British scene from seeing old episodes of *TNA: British Bootcamp*, originally aired on *Challenge* from 2013 to 2014, in which Samuels had entered the American-based promotion's competition for a chance of winning a contract to wrestle for them full-time, advancing to the finals. His strong sense of character was enough to pique my interest in seeking out more of his work, and from viewing his matches with companies such as ICW and RevPro throughout the following few years, I grew more and more fond of Samuel's work, both in terms of his characterisation of an East-end cockney tough-guy but also appreciating how much of a solid and consistent performer he was, and still is. Where many wrestlers on the UK independent wrestling scene tend to go for the more instantly gratifying style of high-risk manoeuvres, acrobatics, and aerial work, I was drawn to the way that Samuels would remain faithful to his character – making sure to engage with the audience via intense back-and-forths involving mockery

and insults – all the while maintaining a solid, simple-yet-efficient form of wrestling commonly found in traditional eras of British wrestling. When interviewing Samuels for the purposes of this study, he spoke quite enthusiastically about the importance of having a clearly discernible character in wrestling and the issues of having to adapt in a constantly-shifting culture. It is very important to Samuels to instil a sense of “British values in a British gimmick within British wrestling”, as he observes most fans are introduced to the concept of wrestling through predominantly American forms and sometimes that of Japanese promotions, which Samuels implies mostly stems from the context of an engaged fan transitioning to the role of trained performer. British wrestling no longer holds power as an entry point to the sport on a global scale as it did in earlier eras for upcoming British wrestling trainees, therefore “when [wrestlers] think of a character [they] don’t really think of a British gimmick, [they] relate [their] characters more to the American and Japanese stuff.” Samuels continued to note the culturally reflexive nature of how even a characterisation intended as British may still garner different reactions depending on regionality, and evolves over time. He states, referring to his stereotypical portrayal of a Londoner – “You still have to adapt and change – when I first started there was nothing comedic about it, but over the time I realised if, say, I’m going up north and they’ve got a different accent, they might find me funny sometimes.” This leads to an interchangeable understanding of Britishness, whereby a character like Samuels becomes hated in one area but loved in another based on a dialogic understanding of the static sense of nationality. “So you can become likeable. Instead of being that backwards thinking person, now you’re the person they want to have a drink with down the pub. It’s still the same core gimmick, though.” (See appendix 10)

Samuels observes the diverse, regional nature of the United Kingdom as a country with no singular, collective identity but that of multiple, reflexive ones which may create meaning or participate differently from one another – particularly in how they relate as audiences of professional wrestling. Within the world of British professional wrestling fandom, this sense of British cultural enjoyment of live sporting events parallels that of soccer with the appropriation of typical resistance chanting against unfavourable action, such as the carrying over of the aforementioned “the referee’s a wanker” and “who are ya!?” chants. Popular songs are also appropriated in the same sense that soccer “fans draw on existing popular culture where communal singing is a part of the experience (at concerts, for instance)” and “not only is popular culture a testing ground for communal singing, but it also supplies much of the materials (melodies) for the chants constructed” (Schoonderwoerd, 2011, p132). These types of chants at British wrestling events similar to those commonly witnessed at football matches, particularly those adopting regional stereotypes and tongue-in-cheek slurring, could also be identified as a contemporary echo of *Blaison Populaire*, as analysed by Luhrs (2007). This phenomena can be described as a form of cultural linguistic posturing which involves the use of stereotyping, and functions as “an expression of one group's outlook and self-image, often involving the implied simultaneous detraction and/or detriment of another (rival) group” (Green (now Luhrs) and Widdowson 2003 p.9). Tim Marshall points to this concept of tribal, cultural stereotyping particularly manifesting within live sports audiences, noting “the stadium is where the old rivalries, the stereotypes, the identities and the collective memories – some grounded in reality, some not – burn the brightest. Here, in a modern mass-culture, partially homogenised society, the tribes survive and revel in their differences.” (2014, p97). This behaviour can materialise as simply wearing one’s club colours to distinguish oneself from the rival team and its supporters, but mostly

formed as rhymes, chants or songs aimed at antagonising the out-group and cementing pride and solidarity amongst the in-group (Luhrs, 2007, p43). Luhrs further breaks down sub-categories of this folklorish phenomena, such as the more integrative form which focuses primarily on the in-group, praising either the team, management, a particular member or even themselves as fans – thus creating an integrative and collective bond via shared identity (2007, p95), as opposed to the strictly divisive output which, as earlier mentioned, aims to target the opposing force via the use of antagonistic language – often stereotypical in nature. One final connection to *Blaison Populaire* mentioned by Luhrs can be defined as ‘anthems’, whereby they “can be distinguished from other integrative chants in that they become unique to a particular club and construct their identity as unique from others.” (Luhrs, 2007, p99) This, when linked to the earlier notable discussions made by Warner and Schoonderwoerd, places chanting and singing at live sporting events, including professional wrestling, as a primary linguistic mode of self-identity, collective solidarity and a carnivalesque sense of willing loss of control for purposes of enjoyment.

In the case of wrestling, popular music choruses are often redeployed as chants and adapted to wrestlers names to express communal enjoyment and desire for participation within the wrestling show narrative – a culture most certainly borrowed from club scenes around the country where particular iconic chart songs and their repeatable chorus lines become commonplace among the enjoyment of British nightclub communities. Marshall refers to football fans in the UK being like “magpies” in terms of managing to take songs from anywhere and synthesise them into new chants. These chants can then be shared and adopted across the collective community, being “heard one week, copied the next, and within a few weeks [...] spread throughout the land.” (Marshall, 2014, p130) This is the same

within professional wrestling circles, most particularly in Britain due to such culture existing in soccer and other popular sports. This further reaffirms the central arguments of Morra whereby popular culture is a focal point for understanding cultural identity, as well as the means in which people may create meaning to inform it. Certain songs provide a base structure and emotional context with which to establish meaning and significance to a chant but may be improvised by a single person or small group, which then filters out to the majority or larger community if confirmed as worthy through creative succinctness and containing meaning broad enough for wider communities to easily understand, interpret, and deploy themselves. British wrestling fans tend to redeploy popular music associated with the specific emotional content and intended meaning to be produced by the chant, such as the joy and upbeat nature of the chorus rhythm to 'Give It Up' by KC and the Sunshine Band being used as a basis for fan chants in support of British wrestler Tyler Bate, notably experienced at the WWE United Kingdom Championship of 2016, singing the chorus of the song mostly from its original state but replacing the lyric "Give it up, baby give it up!" with "Tyler Bate, Tyler-Tyler Bate!".

A redeployment of the 'Seven Nation Army' rhythmic chant as noted within British soccer fandom use is also to be observed regularly at British wrestling events, exemplified most popularly in support of the British wrestling star Trent Seven. This chant comprises of the driving bass guitar rhythm of the song being sung to with the lyrics "Oh, Trent Seven army!" in repetition at moments of high energy in the match whereby fans are usually most vocal in supporting their favoured competitor. One more example of talent-centric chants and echoing elements of *Blaison Populaire* is a set of repeatable rhythmic chants aimed at the Liverpudlian wrestler Zack Gibson, including "Where's my car stereo!?" and "If you hate

Gibson, shoes off!” (see figure 29), both recently observable at the WWE-broadcasted event NXT UK: Takeover at the Royal Albert Hall in 2018. The former is sung in the rhythm of La Donna È Mobile (Rigoletto) by Luciano Pavarotti and references a problematic but comedic stereotype attached to the people of Liverpool in British culture. This cultural value placement, according to Marshall, arguably stems from negative public and media perceptions of Merseyside after the Toxteth Riots, as well as “Yosser ‘Gizza job’ Hughes from Alan Bleasdale’s TV series Boys from the Blackstuff became synonymous with Scousers.” (2014, p30) The latter chant is not rhythmically redeployed from a known song or piece of music but is performed as much as it is chanted with the physical removal of shoes by the audience to physically, as well as audibly, acknowledge the widespread, long-established villainous positioning of Gibson within the communal British wrestling industrial narrative.



Figure 29: Fans at the NXT UK Takeover event at Royal Albert Hall, participating in the 'Shoes Off' chant

Even WWE live tours of the United Kingdom have been witness to British chant culture, such as the rhythmic chant appropriated from the song 'Hey Jude' by The Beatles often aimed towards American WWE star Big Cass during house shows throughout 2017, involving the rhythm of the chorus being sung by the crowd, ending in the wrestler's name to finish each repeated cycle. Other chants similar to this include that aimed at WWE women's wrestler Bayley, singing the song "Hey Baby" by Bruce Channel but replacing the word "baby" with "Bayley" due to phonetic similarity, and the song 'No Limit' by 2 Unlimited (a popular dance music group throughout the 1990s in the UK), sung by the audience in a show of enjoyment towards the WWE tag team American Alpha, comprising of Chad Gable and Jason Jordan, and replacing the lyrics entirely with the wrestler's surnames in varying order. Wrestling fans at live events in Britain showcase the same 'Britishness' as commonly found within other popular national sporting staples such as soccer – drawing from a carnivalesque sense of the fan community becoming temporarily collective in the sense of willingly surrendering self-control and emotional reserved-ness to come together in enjoyment and participation in the presented narrative and live social economy. This leaves no space for prior constructs such as gender, race or class to hinder their place in such a context, as well as continuing a tendency for creating an adjacency and parallel of enjoyment with other forms of popular culture. This is achieved by adapting popular songs into original, contextual chants which aid in the meaning-making and emotional connection across not only the individual national British community of professional wrestling fans at live events, but potentially allowing for an exchange of such a process across multiple, international communities as well.

It is notable that chants and social rituals at live professional wrestling events may arguably be a unique form of cultural exchange, whereby one small community will experiment with various chants, some of which become popularised within that group. That chant is then spread across various promotions and fan communities across the country, bleeding into other areas before eventually becoming spread via mediated wrestling products to be adopted and redeployed by international fandom. This notion links the theory of how subculturalists interact and spread meaning and knowledge, otherwise known as the earlier noted concept of “weak ties” (Granovetter, 1973, pp1360-1380). J Patrick Williams explains this process by stating “members of subcultures do not interact exclusively with one another; they interact with people in their many networks and in doing so transmit (and receive) various bits of culture (from) here and there.” Through these weak ties, as well as help with media diffusion, this definition explains how knowledge is communicated from local networks and providing outsiders with knowledge of the other subculture, meaning that “the two-way movement of cultural knowledge brings about subcultural change as well as longevity” (Williams, 2011, pp41-42). Each national professional wrestling fan community tends to show their own social rituals and chant culture, such as the tradition of Japanese audiences showing a general respect for the athletes in the ring by observing a silence in concentration, and applause in admiration of the successful completion of moves and holds, American fans creating fan-led vocal participation structures via ECW audiences, as well as coining the “fight forever!” and “this is awesome!” chants, and, lastly, the British community adding the football-inspired chanting rituals of redeploying popular music into chants to inherit their phonetic value while adding to the sense of carnivalesque joy in escapism. In a world where most wrestling promotions mediate their products through digital platforms such as YouTube, personal

streaming websites such as Twitch, as well as cultural products being adopted and broadcasted by major promotions such as WWE with their NXT UK sub-promotion, it can be observed how these social subcultures in professional wrestling communities are spread so easily via the 'weak ties' of semi-connected worldwide fans on social media and media diffusion of major and minor broadcasts and digital online offerings. This contributes to the sense that cultural exchange is indeed taking place within the international wrestling fan community via the sharing of social ritual at live events.

An example of such exchange and adoption of multicultural fan rituals would be the origins of the "one fall!" chant now popularised among many modern wrestling promotions and fan communities. In discussions with fans about this subject, some have a strong belief that the chant originated with the promotion PCW (Preston Championship Wrestling) due to its longevity within the British scene since the FWA revival days of the early 00s. Although this could be true, one of earliest video recordings available of the chant can be observed with the popular Scottish promotion ICW at their 2014 event Shug's Hoose Party, whereby Simon Cassidy, the regular ring announcer for the promotion, would loudly exclaim a bout would be scheduled for one fall in dramatic fashion, followed by a pause to allow for fans to repeat the phrase (Insane Championship Wrestling, 0:00-0:04). This was arguably a fan culture long established before this event, however, as the regular attendees at ICW shows, as well as other nearby promotions such as the previously mentioned PCW – where many of the same talent and crew would travel to – would repeat the 'one fall' chant back to the announcer in sarcastic fashion due the repetitive nature of most standard matches assumedly being scheduled for the same victory conditions. The chant would then be spread across the nation's various wrestling communities via travelling fans or simply fans who

witnessed the chant via watching the ICW content online, and from there the chant would become shared internationally via the broadcast of the WWE UK Championship Tournament of 2017. The “One fall!” chant would then see regular use at NXT and ROH shows as well as most other American, ‘smart’ audiences at independent shows. Another example of this process would be the popular chant for WWE wrestler Enzo Amore consisting of his name being chanted phonetically to the tune of ‘Seven Nation Army’ by the White Stripes. This chant would see first use during the NXT tour of the UK in 2015 and would later become accepted and adopted by US audiences on WWE programming.

Conversely, the dynamic process of cultural exchange facilitated by fan chanting is not unidirectional; it can also be observed in reverse. An illustrative instance of this phenomenon can be found in the resurgence of British wrestling during the early 2000s. This resurgence, driven not only by endeavours to modernise the wrestling scene and pay homage to the traditional technical style historically associated with the nation's past wrestling output but also by the incorporation of hybrid elements from other national stylistic outputs and collaborations with international entities such as Ring of Honor and stars from Total Nonstop Action (TNA), including renowned American performers like Low Ki and AJ Styles participating in British promotions. This interplay vividly demonstrates the assimilation of well-established American chanting traditions into the fabric of the contemporary British wrestling scene. Examples are the generic chants to exclaim enjoyment including “This is awesome” and “Fight forever!”, as well as chants that show a meta-appreciation for talent effort and generosity such as “Both these guys!”

Although participatory behaviour in engaging at live British wrestling events is mostly collaborative in nature, there is also a more individual form of interacting – namely in the verbal abuse, often performative in nature as opposed to genuine and often found in live performance situations involving physical or verbal interaction with a crowd. This mostly refers to creative outputs such as stand-up comedy, but is particularly relevant to the field of live wrestling. Heckling is a considerable feature of British wrestling audience practice, further interconnecting with wider frameworks of national, cultural forms of participating at live events and signalling enjoyment, and is defined as an “isolated and individual attack that does not involve collective behaviour” (McIlvenny, 1996, p33). This leads to the discussion of the process of suspension of belief when viewing art or performance. The concept, originally conceived by Coleridge and connected to his notion of “poetic faith” (Coleridge, 1996) relates to “our acceptance in art of the most fantastic worlds whose premises, actions, or outcomes we would question or reject in reality.” (Tomko, 2015, p1) Ortega Rodriguez defines the manifestation of this process as “a capacity to experience what a fictional character would experience of himself if he could see himself somehow detached from his own self, as if witnessing his acts like any other sympathetic person would” (2003, p8), meaning that one may become invested in a story or character so much as to become immersed and emotionally connected to the world presents. However, Onyekuru states that “the elitist audience is more predisposed to critical thinking and analytical judgment than just viewing a play for the sake of mere enjoyment or entertainment” (2021, p389), and therefore the notion of unwilling emotional reaction, otherwise termed as suspension of disbelief, is questionable when considering how ‘die-hard’ audiences engaging in more of an ‘insider’ sense may view and enjoy with a fully knowing sense of self-awareness, engaging emotional reaction is a purely intentional and

willing exercise. In professional wrestling, it is arguable that suspension of disbelief may exist even in the most 'smart' of fans due to, as Phillips argues, "part of the pleasure of being part of a wrestling audience is giving oneself the opportunity to be willingly "taken in." (2018, p317) The nature of this statement relating to willingly giving in to the story presented and allowing for an emotional experience might seem paradoxical, but confirms the more collective element of wrestling enjoyment set by Barthes, stating that a viewer can "abandon itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees" (1972, p15). This means that a spectacle's power lies in its ability to captivate the audience's senses and emotions, temporarily suspending their critical thinking and intellectual reflection. In the same way we become engrossed in a good film plot or engrossing television show, we can also be immersed in the physical narrative of good versus evil in the wrestling performance, throwing aside the notion of any issue of it being staged, pre-conceived, or a 'work'.

Heckling at live events can be a way to exemplify and explore such a process and its variations within the realm of professional wrestling. In terms of discussions relating to heckling as a common practice in the realm of stand-up comedy, Shouse notes "while audience members heckle comedians for a variety of reasons—they want attention, they want to 'test' the comedian, or they hope to 'help' "(2020, p305), which bears a close connection to wrestling audiences in that they exist as 'spect-actors' in the sense of being an active part of the producer-audience relationship of creative meaning and performance (Di Benedetto, 2016). The difference here is that the "The comic frame enables stand-up comics to regularly get away with what in other contexts would be considered unacceptable behaviour", and that comedians are rarely physically attacked as a result of their

performance (Shouse, 2020, p303). This suggests that the framing of it being 'a joke' leads to the idea of heckling being an intentional, willing process rather than one born out of genuine reaction. Professional wrestling audiences certainly showcase this willing sense of participating in heckling exchanges to aid or influence creative direction, but genuine emotional response should not be discounted in this realm. There have been instances of wrestlers being attacked by fans due to reaching an intensified emotional state from achieving a sense of suspension of disbelief, such as the earlier mentioned experiences of William Regal experiencing elderly female fans throwing objects at and verbally abusing wrestlers at live shows, as well as Jake 'The Snake' Roberts being sliced by a boxcutter by an enraged fan (The Joe Rogan Experience, 2021). This relates to the complicated element of wrestling audiencing and the notion of perceived reality. Kroener notes "to some extent all wrestling performances are realistic because the athletic performances that lie at the core of the scripted wrestling matches are real", but this perception of reality is increased with the use of storylines and characters, within a match or across a period of a rivalry, that blur fiction and reality with their performances and highlighting the most realistic aspects of those matches such as 'street-fights' and using legitimate mixed martial arts moves in the presentation. (2019, p91) The following are some contexts experienced in relation to heckling behaviour at live wrestling events, both eluding to a sense of willing participation and arguably genuine emotional response from effective, 'heel' antagonisation.

When interviewing Cody Hall about his recent experiences touring the United Kingdom and performing for a variety of independent promotions, he indicated his experience of British audiences in relation to international audiences encountered, stating British fans are "very different than Japanese as in the sense they can be drunk and rude

[...]. Very vocal with talking shit or cheering or booing” (see appendix 4). When discussing this contrast with Japanese audiences, Hall is referring to the often respectful and quieter nature Japanese audiences of wrestling tend to present when attending live events. The arguments for this behaviour as distinct cultural practice are not clear, but can possibly link to traditional formats of sports spectatorship in the country such as Sumo, which is a long-standing, centuries-old staple of Japanese national identity and is underpinned by cultural tradition (Vice Asia, 2022). With professional wrestling also serving as a popular form of entertainment in Japan and appealing to tendencies of respect for tradition, similar audience practices are observable in the way respectful silence is observed during the process of a match, but with natural reactions in-line with organic highs and lows experienced. According to Hall’s statement, his experiences performing in front of both forms of cultural audience leads to his observations of contemporary fans tending to be more vocal, engaging in chants and singing, as well as commonly indulging in individual interactions expressed as heckling.

I gained experience of such behaviour while attending wrestling events during research, with the first example happening during a live wrestling match as part of the event *IPW: LA-Xtreme Measures* at Westgate Hall, Canterbury (2019), featuring the American wrestler Cody Hall (see figure 30) against local British favourite Gene Munny. Cody Hall is widely known among fans as the son of popular WWE legend Scott ‘Razor Ramone’ Hall, therefore it was expected as a regular attendee at UK wrestling events that Cody would most likely receive some level of heckling due to this. During the match, I witnessed a group of young males in the front row consistently trying to draw attention and rile Hall to react to them by verbally taunting with his father’s original popularised quotations, including the

Razor Ramone-coined “Hey Yo!”. By using this reference this group of hecklers were seemingly fully aware of Hall’s potential real life tensions to perform and succeed at the same level as his father, using them to create a reaction and enjoy a sense of their engagement having an effect on the creative flow of the event. The hecklers got what they wanted in that Cody, standing at nearly seven foot tall, threatened he would “get them” the next chance he could. After a swift sequence of wrestling manoeuvres with his opponent involving running either side across the ring, Cody turned and leaped over the top rope and intentionally crashed through the group of seated hecklers he had promised to get revenge on. With their clothes soaked from spilling their drinks and composing themselves upon return to their seats, the group seemed overjoyed at their apparent victory to gain a reaction from the performer, as well as create a moment for themselves within the creative dynamic of the live show. This interaction was entirely collaborative in nature, with a tacit understanding of participation, whether positive or negative in nature, informing the creative direction of the match and therefore integral to the overall process of performance, as well as the immersed enjoyment of audience members.



Figure 30: Cody Hall

Another example is witnessing a fan stand and argue with a villain wrestling manager at the *RevPro: Uprising* event at York Hall, London in 2019. The incident in question happened during a tag-team match between the fan-favourites and ‘good’ team Kings of the North (‘Bonesaw’ and Damien Corvin) against the ‘villain’ team of The Legion (‘Rampage’ Brown and The Great O Kharn) accompanied by their manager Gideon Grey (see figure 31). As customary for most matches involving a manager accompanying a villain tag team, the audience would observe multiple attempts by Grey to either climb the ring apron to capture the attention of the referee to distract from his team cheating, or taking advantage of an already distracted referee to commit cheating acts himself, such as grappling opponents feet from under the ropes or tossing an item to a team mate to hide and use later for advantage. Despite this meta-understanding by most highly engaged, ‘smart’ fans of these performative strategies used by practitioners to garner and cue certain reactions and behaviour from the audience, one member in the second row launched up from his seat, evidently fully immersed in the suspension of disbelief offered, shouting “Oi, you! Piss off! Yeah you, go on, piss off!” while pointing angrily at the cheating manager Gideon Grey. Grey

would continue to influence further reaction from the audience member by continuing to throw insults and gestures, clearly indulging in the collaborative process of performance, despite being engaged from a potentially genuine emotional reaction. These examples of heckling at live British professional wrestling events contribute towards the notion that fans in Britain engage and participate with their fandom on individual grounds as well as in the collective sense, but also reaffirming observations that, regardless of individual or collective context, the collaborative process of creative expression between fan and performer is paramount to professional wrestling in the way it immerses audiences within suspension of disbelief of its pre-determined nature, gives performers the means and stimulus for reactive creative opportunities during an event and in an overall sense aids in varied understandings and creations of meaning and aligned identities. As Goodwin states in relation to the values heckling brings to general acts of speaking, "recipients through their interaction with each other can offer competing frameworks for both interpretation and alignment which undercut those of the speaker" (1986, p283), meaning that interpretations of a story is not stable and can be given alternate meaning by audiences through the process of heckling. Therefore, with wrestling, by engrossing themselves in an individually pleasing sense, hecklers also contribute to alternate readings of alignments made between sections of audiences and performers, as well as aiding in active creative development of narratives presented.



Figure 31: 'The Legion' comprised of 'The Great O Kharn' (Left), Gideon Grey (Centre) and 'Rampage' Brown (Right) competing at RevPro Uprising 2019, York Hall in London

Concluding this discussion of chanting and singing at British wrestling events, and to quote the co-owner and promoter of Wrestling Resurgence, Sam West, “wrestling as a medium is a bit of a sponge”. When discussing the idea of British wrestling with West, a common notion was shared that professional wrestling tends to soak up and re-appropriate whatever cultural output surrounds it. In the context of the British circuit, wrestling audiences are simply an amalgam of enjoyment factors taken from varying, historically ingrained subcultures such as the discussed sporting, theatrical and musical factors. Although this essay does not aim to argue British people are merely predisposed to singing songs and chanting at live events from the womb, it does showcase how the cultural way in which British audiencing in wrestling is a sum of parts – those parts originating from uniquely British past-times, and educating a contemporary brand of wrestling fandom which

can be clearly identified against its international counterparts – one which should be celebrated and shared accordingly. This parallels the notion of ‘transfandom’ as explored by Matt Hills when interviewed by Clarice Greco in 2015, whereby fans shift laterally across different arenas of fandom but with simultaneous interest, simply put by Litherland and Warden by noting “we do not stop being hockey fans, trade unionists or food enthusiasts just because we are at a professional wrestling show” (2020, p123).

Thus far this section has analysed the key components of wrestling participation at British professional wrestling events, both connecting to wider nets of live sporting activity such as soccer and theatre and being reminiscent of folklorish linguistic identity factors associated with the phenomenon of *Blaison Populaire*. However, the examples used and areas focused on have mostly been based within promotions and content committed to by dedicated fans and popularised via web-based engagement, as opposed to the still-popular, traditional network of ‘family-friendly’ wrestling promotions which function on a simple touring mode of visiting towns and villages and promoting themselves via localised poster campaigns, relying on attendance of families and children. When discussing the audience base of these types of wrestling promotion in Britain, veteran wrestler originating from Belgium Robin Lekime gave an apt definition, stating “Brian Dixon, Ricky Knight and those kinds of promoters cater for the casual fans – such as the local guy in the pub, the mum in the supermarket with the kids. They want to be entertained for the night. You can see the high-flyers, the power guys, [...] the out-of-shape-freaks. There’s something for everyone” (see appendix 9). Regardless of Lekime’s normative understanding of audiences, his statements still connote the mass-appeal approach as opposed to a more crafted, artisanal form of production and promotion of wrestling. These types of promotion work in a

different way to that of the more fan-centric ones in that there are various issues which can be noted when regarding the agency of audience participation, the type of content offered and the different power structure existing between producer and audience.

The last section of this chapter will feature an exploration of where the prior traditionalist and working class values still lie within British professional wrestling audiences – namely the holiday camp and this ‘family-friendly’ circuit, including such promotions as All Star Wrestling and LDN. Notions of controlled fan participation and problematic nationalist presentations will be explored, which in turn, shall highlight the potential problematic notions implied by their application in contemporary society. This will also provide further stimulus to contrast why fans are particularly drawn to the more contemporary, progressive community of British professional wrestling and the ability for full autonomy, access and influence towards their favoured outlets of the sport.

British Holiday Camp Wrestling and the Issue of Controlled Participation

Another way of understanding the enjoyment British professional wrestling fans exhibit via participation rituals is to explore the nature of that which they tend to avoid or not exist within, namely the ‘family-friendly’ variety of wrestling promotions which are not sincerely aimed at professional wrestling fans as such, but more towards the carnival, casual audience who seek an afternoon or evening of family entertainment in the same vein as cheap theatre or pantomime. These contain simple, easily understandable action with no narrative extension which would require extra paratextual focus and effort to keep track of – all traits usually reserved for fans and subculturalists. In experience of attending these

types of events in researching this study, 'Rumble Wrestling' and 'LDN Wrestling' are examples of such promotions which tend to stray from any sincere connection to British wrestling fandom, showing highly simplistic, short matches performed by local talent utilising stereotypical and externalised gimmicks easily interpreted. They are to be seen more as a local theatre troupe providing a short and simply-packaged form of entertainment to artistically unconcerned non-fans as opposed to a sincere wrestling promotion aiming to position themselves within the wide network of British fan communities supporting the ongoing artistic and cultural development of the form.

Warden explores the long-held national institution of professional wrestling being held at Butlin's holiday camps, a tradition which the companies LDN and Rumble aim to mimic, marketed towards families with young children with content which can be directly compared to that of pantomime in its creative exaggeration of action and character. Warden applies her theories of location and venue dynamics to that of the Butlin's scene, claiming that "for in this delightful holiday camp space, wrestling exists in a vacuum, just as Butlin's exists in its own simulation. This marks it as distinct from other forms of professional wrestling, where storylines and characters are built up over weeks and even years" (2018, p870). Where Butlin's exists as a temporary space for carnivalesque escapism to be enjoyed by working class families on a budget, the same can be said of its wrestling productions – albeit to a varying degree in comparison to that of the sincere, more artful wrestling promotions marketed towards 'smart' and passionate fans of the sport such as Progress and ICW. The hero-villain dynamic is over-simplified to cater towards an audience mostly consisting of parents and children who may not even be introduced to wrestling and its dynamics prior to their holiday. Also, Redcoats (hired assistants named after their attire)

are utilised to direct the audience as to when they should boo and cheer and to incite certain chants depending on the actions of the in-ring competitors, as opposed to the standard form of wrestling presentation whereby the audience simply reacts autonomously to the action with the competitors and associated production members, acclimatising to the environment set and performing accordingly. In holiday camp, 'family-friendly' wrestling "there seems to be no dissent", and Redcoats are "entirely in charge" – observing the contrasting dynamic where 'kayfabe', referring to the historical process in wrestling to not expose inner-workings of the industry to outsiders, is held entirely, yet has no entry point for where true 'fans' can identify and become immersed within the presentation (Warden, 2018, p871).

This presents the very crux of why British wrestling fandom exhibits observable attitudes of enjoyment with artistically sincere, contemporary wrestling productions as there is space for participation and cooperation in overall meaning-making within and across communities, as well as the ability to be part of the shaping of what is produced via the acceptance and encouragement of genuine, participation by the producers themselves. Power in fans can be "productive and reproductive [...] It is in this display of power that the role of the body becomes crucial. For the exercise of power subjects bodies not simply to render them passive, but to render them active" (Armstrong, Young, 2009, p174) – using one's body as a means of vocally and physically rejecting assertions of power may eventually lead to a reversal of it. In the case of contemporary wrestling promotions produced for and attended by dedicated fans, audiences may apply their own standing and identity within the live, narrative space through use of chants, and it is then either accepted or quashed by the community at large depending on contextual factors – rather than the political standing and

agenda of a single producer or entity dictating the creative direction and fan reaction to a show. This latter notion is commonly observed in family-friendly promotions which mostly attract families on a budget due to ticket prices being very low on average and commonly feature at community halls, holiday camps, and leisure centres. In these promotions, producers tend to engineer situations in a show where children are encouraged to boo or cheer certain wrestlers depending on the narrative set by the producer and their preferences for audience participation. In other words, fans at contemporary British wrestling shows have the power simply to react and participate autonomously, as opposed to merely existing as passengers of an engineered, agenda-influenced, and heavily capitalistic product.

When attending an LDN show for the first time as someone who considers myself a dedicated fan, and engaging with contemporary wrestling productions, I was perplexed to find my participation being directed and suppressed by way of the promoter shouting into the microphone as a play-by-play ‘hype man’, directing the crowd to chant the name of the ‘babyface’ wrestler at the ‘comeback’ spots where they are attempting to escape from a particularly tough hold or submission held by the ‘heel’. The audience were also encouraged to boo the ‘heel’, with chants instigated by the announcer, often providing them with a particular moniker to use, such as “Scum!”. Clearly these shows are intended for less media-literate spectators, as well as families with children looking for uncomplicated, simplistic entertainment in the same vein as village pantomime productions, and the way of controlling said participation and limiting channels of vocal dissent among the audience is a tactic to aid casual engagers, perhaps new to watching wrestling or entirely disconnected to the larger fan-base, industry developments and different ways of doing to enjoy the show in

the most effective and introductory way. This links to the “performative Gordian knot in professional wrestling” which Warden argues as “intertwining, interrupting and interweaving to create a palimpsestic aural and visual experience for audience and performer alike” (Warden, 2017, p24). This take, however, can be viewed as only representing ideal circumstances, as realists will point to how these smaller outfits rely on repeat custom due to limited profits made on the smaller shows they tend to present – therefore a pre-packaged, overly-simplified show of wrestling and avenues for participation must be observed. In these particular wrestling circles, silence is seen as a sign of failure from the performers to effectively entertain and ‘wow’ their audience, therefore it is vital for them to provide at least the illusion of enjoyment, regardless of the quality of wrestling on show, via means of linguistic manipulation. This level of controlled, pseudo-fandom and engineered space for enjoyment is arguably the reason why ‘smart’, ‘true’ fans simply cannot be found at such family-friendly events. Perhaps this is due to the shows’ very nature of providing an overly simplistic, reductive experience of wrestling which both side-steps the creation of connected narratives to sustain fan audiences, and provides no space for improvised, fan-created participation and social ritual, actively dictating audience response triggers and content of such response – leading to a pre-ordained, homogenised product that modern ‘smart’ fans tend to avoid.

Returning to the idea of ‘silence’ at a professional wrestling match, this does not necessarily hold negative connotations all of the time – an example being the aforementioned common practice in Japanese wrestling audiences to observe silence during matches as a sign of respect for the competitors in action. The way this is understood as respect is simply due to the fact that when successful ‘spots’ or holds are employed, or a

particularly eventful or exciting moment occurs during a match, a round of applause usually occurs. This arguably stems from the traditions of Sumo wrestling as those audience communities exhibit similar behaviours and signs of respect to the engaging competitors. The point here extends to the notions previously applied to the power structures in contemporary British wrestling in that silence can both be construed as either a sign of boredom or apathy from the audience, further received by performers as them being ineffective, or that silence itself in a contemporary and dedicated fan context can be very powerful (Warden, 2017, p22). Silence can also be a sign of protest, or an intentional use of power exhibited by wrestling fans to either show disdain for a particular match that is undesired, a performer not well-liked due to real-world social actions or political assertions being rejected, and so on. In contrast to this, it is suspected that in contemporaneous times the WWE have resorted to editing tactics to avoid such situations with the piping in of crowd noise taken from prior events to give the illusion of fan, arguably in the hope this will spread to those watching from home (Lutete, 2021). This method evolved recently primarily due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as professional wrestling shows were no longer being performed live. WWE introduced the concept of the 'Thunderdome', where wrestling shows were filmed with audiences showing attendance via screens placed within the studio, as well as crowd noise being edited in. However, there have been notable uses of such strategies prior to the pandemic, as WWE has witnessed many a 'fan hijacking' of live events, filmed or otherwise, with attending fans asserting their power with audible and physical participation to interrupt a live show due to either disliking creative decision-making, having a universal disdain for a particular 'push' of a character (the way they have been narratively placed by the writers or people in power), or engaging in other sub-activities in a show of boredom or playful resistance. Examples of this would be the

consistent booing of the character Roman Reigns despite the company showing a clear interest and effort to promote the wrestler as a 'babyface' and one to be cheered and supported, or chanting "fire JBL!" in reference to the disdain for the now-retired ex-WWE commentator and wrestler being outed as a backstage bully by other industry players (THE HANNIBAL TV, 2020). Playful resistance and sub-activity can be exemplified by witnessing fans throwing beach balls or other items around the arena in order to garner attention away from the action being presented. This realisation by wrestling fans that they have a certain amount of power within the live show dynamic parallels the notion presented by Armstrong and Young in that "when [...] this is allied with the omnipresent potential of carnival to dislodge social norms, we can begin to see why chanting fandom always threatens the forces of social control" (1999, p174). Irrespective of the specific assertions of power or political undertones being conveyed to the audience, the utilization of chanting, singing, and even moments of deliberate silence emerges as a potent and influential tool. This holds particularly true within the realm of the 'spin' and the emotionally charged 'work' characteristic of professional wrestling (Moon, 2020). Audiences leverage these expressive forms not only to articulate their identity on an individual or collective level but also as a means to counteract hegemonic attempts at manipulation. In doing so, they resist the orchestrated efforts to fabricate a predetermined sense of cooperation from the audience.

In a more localised form but equally as critical, these discussions of power, both in terms of the promoters' attitudes and beliefs being presented through their product and the ability for audiences to utilise vocality and expression to resist them, lead back to earlier discussed issues to be considered when contemplating the British holiday camp, so-called 'family-friendly' shows such as All Star Wrestling and LDN. These promotions tend to exhibit

a certain level of similarity of ideology to the likes of WWE in the desire to control the audience response to engineer a more co-operative producer-spectator relationship, as well as suppress tensions for purposes of maintaining reputation in light of guaranteeing potential revenue streams. When considering that these type of events are catered towards and are mostly populated by children, as well as containing the problematic concepts of heavily-stereotypical characters, narratives and controlled engagement, it is easier to understand why these 'family-friendly' shows are usually avoided by contemporaneous, dedicated professional wrestling fans. Recent controversies have occurred within Butlin's and family-friendly wrestling in Britain, such as the instance of a father making a "high-profile complaint" and reaching the British news media with the detail of his son being encouraged to boo a character for his obviously presented Islamic beliefs when "the decidedly English-sounding Tony Spitfire took on clearly Muslim Hakim" (Warden, 2018, p872). Another father at the same show reported that it was like "a Britain First rally" (Nagesh, 2016, para 1), referring to a niche political group known for nationalistic views and an anti-immigration stance. Considering this, it is an important question to ask as to the importance of 'smart' and contemporary fandom in a modern age of political spin and media bias which help shape the opinions and mindset of less media-literate people. With a fan environment that is allowed a full, unrestrained, and celebrated level of improvised participation, fans can both fulfil their enjoyment of the event on a carnivalesque, egotistical level, and on a political level – resisting content generally considered unfavourable, supporting content and talent deemed worthy, and contributing to a sense of meaning-making across the entire community to assimilate and disseminate accordingly.

British fandom has evolved greatly since previous eras of its national professional wrestling output, from mostly comprising of grandmothers, children, and working-class people attending wrestling shows as a staple form of cultural entertainment – to a modern, mixed community of people from varying subcultural influences in a globalised and converged world. As modern wrestling has adapted itself to a ‘smarter’ audience, although still enjoyed by previous demographics in some circles, audiences have actively redeployed traditionally British forms of enjoyment of live sports events, nightclub, and pantomime shows through the use of group chanting, singing and an appropriation of popular music and their emotional contexts. Those behaviours have become ingrained within the national professional wrestling fan community so much that the ‘Britishness’ behind this national, sub-culturally blended approach of fan participation and mentality has become unique. There have been efforts to help transform and reshape a rejuvenated, collaborative British fan community with cultural rituals that now supports a fresh, contemporary British professional wrestling scene that can not only thrive once more as it did in previous eras, but can exist as a unique perspective and approach to fandom that may be shared and exchanged with international communities to adopt and enjoy. When referring to British football, Schoonderwoerd notes “as football extends internationally (and this may be true for other sports ‘going global’), and the forms of its representation migrate across clubs, states and cultures, chants, as a way of realising one’s fandom, are culturally infused and should be treated as such”, continuing on to state “only then can one appreciate chants like ‘U-S-A, U-S-A’ alongside ‘You’ll Never Walk Alone’ or ‘We are the Busby Boys’. They are just us being fans” (2011, p137). The same may be said for that of professional wrestling fans, as one should not expect different cultures to have the same approach to representing their fandom and those differences should be respected and celebrated, finding those “fuzzy

boundaries” (Hills, 2017, p878) that define individuals and subcultural communities so that the study of fandom is not merely mapping its world, but finding potential shades of truth towards any sense of wider identity. As Hills observes here, there are not always clear and rigid lines that define individual identities and subcultural communities within the realm of fandom. Instead, there are nuanced and overlapping aspects that contribute to a person's sense of identity and belonging within their chosen fan community. By highlighting these aspects, further understanding of how professional wrestling can both exhibit the mythic elements of symbolic gesture and “full signification” (Barthes, 1972, p29) between performer and audience, but gain further understanding of unique, culturally embedded manifestations of them across different national interpretations (Glenday, 2013).

As the WWE has realised, as well as the semi-recent, large-scale promotion start-up All Elite Wrestling (AEW) is bound to experience if developing a regular presence in different nations, touring different countries and promoting wrestling is “exciting but tricky; audiences respond differently to the spectacle in different parts of the country (and now the world) and particular reactions cannot be easily guaranteed” (Warden, 866). Different areas receive different reactions, meaning locality and regional culture are important when considering the production and reception of wrestling. This section has showcased the existing audiencing factors unique to the British cultural enjoyment of professional wrestling, showing their role and function audiences have in collaborating with producers and performed to create a shared sense of meaning and creative direction – utilising and redeploying understood cultural practices of enjoyment and expression from areas such as football, theatre and live entertainment. In doing so, British wrestling fans contribute to both an understanding of shared cultures of engagement found within global circles of

wrestling fandom, but also expose the unique factors present which allows for a British wrestling fan identity to be justified. By exploring this behaviour, the intrinsic value autonomous audiences bring to British wrestling within a cultural mode of engagement has been highlighted, showing that collaborative practice between producer and audience is a vital process in establishing a sense of collective identity and meaning – opposing the problematic, culturally displacing behaviour of controlling participation as seen in both WWE products and smaller ‘family-friendly’ promotions seeking to exploit their popularly understood and successful aesthetic for capitalistic opportunities. Of course, collaborative meaning and identity via chanting is commonplace regardless of culture and nation, but this chapter has showcased the practices unique to British audiences by way of culturally generated notions of *blaison populaire*, redeploying popular music as chants to express carnivalesque, collective enjoyment as well as individual ways of engaging via heckling.

CHAPTER FOUR: (RE)ENTER WWE: NEOLIBERALISM, ACQUISITION AND COMMODIFICATION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY IN MODERN BRITISH PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING

The main drive of this section is an exploration of a potentially negative repetition of history happening British wrestling circles, as well as the continuance of a toxic, unsustainable neoliberal mentality (Jansen, 2018a) towards both the labour and fandom of professional wrestling in the United Kingdom. As the prior testimonials from fans, wrestlers, and promoters alike have made clear – there are certainly positives to be derived from the presence of WWE establishing a wrestling brand here, namely in the opportunities for wrestlers to make a decent, full-time income doing what they love, as well as having access to facilities and veteran members of the international wrestling community to learn from and better themselves with. However, with the expansion of such a large, rigid, capitalist entity into a close, regional community such as Britain comes all the issues and concerns associated with prior examples in history. A prime example being the downfall of the territory era of American wrestling, the rise of contracts and expectations of obsequious company dedication, as well as a wholesale redefinition and homogenising of what once was a successful network of regional, original and highly reflexive outputs of wrestling community.

Over the decades, WWE have capitalised on the apparent hunger for professional wrestling in the UK and has seen success with many sold out or highly-attended stadium and big arena shows promoted here, including Summerslam 1992 held at Wembley Stadium to an attendance of over 80000 fans, as well as yearly tours across the country performing

'House Shows' – a nomenclature referring to untelevised live events. It is known by WWE and its talent how successful shows can be in Britain due to the positivity and participation the fans tend to enjoy culturally – as explored in prior chapters of this study. In an interview with TalkSport in 2020, WWE wrestler and prior Executive Vice President Triple H (Paul Levesque) positively recalls this phenomena of British fans and wrestling by stating “the UK crowds are extremely vocal, and I think that has to do with football. The songs they sing and the chanting they do is very unique”. Levesque aptly makes the connection between the relations of cultural enjoyment of live sporting events in the UK, and then moves on to relate that this phenomena has even travelled worldwide to other national fan communities while remaining as something intrinsically and identifiably British. He states “It's something that's very unique, [...] it's very individualised to the talent [the wrestlers], they make up words to the songs and it's awesome to see”, observing the creativity of British fans at live events (Moore, J, 2020). As mentioned in prior chapters, chanting at live events is a popular past time for British sports fans, not just in professional wrestling but in the wider sense of national sporting outputs such as Football and Rugby. The way this particular audience culture manifests in professional wrestling circles – the visceral expression of enjoyment, community and willingness to participate – is an inviting prospect of which Levesque, and WWE overall has observed and sought to capitalise on. The consistent yearly house show tours and occasional live television tapings are testament to this, but could also be seen to demonstrate WWE's bid to compete with the threat of any potential independent bids for re-establishing a domestic televised wrestling market, and most particularly with the eventual attempted ITV rebrand of *World of Sport* from 2016 to 2018.

Before discussing the rise of the WWE UK Championship tournament and the NXT UK brand created in answer to the attempted ITV rebrand of *World of Sport* on national broadcast terrestrial television, it is first worth exploring the apparent boom and success of UK independent promotions prior to, and arguably influencing, this contemporary period of British wrestling industry development. Successful promotions such as ICW, Progress, and RevPro would regularly sell out their venues with paying fans across the country within their own regions and create an effective awareness of their brands through various aspects including merchandising and social media engagement. This granted these promotions enough momentum to begin producing and distributing their own recorded content to fans worldwide via the introduction of on-demand, digital video platforms.

Narrowcasting, On-Demand, and the Success of Modern British Wrestling

Promotions

In the modern digital era, British wrestling promotions have found success and longevity in the way they both engage with fans and retain their support via the use of social media, the creation and distribution of content via the advantage of a contemporary, democratised system of online broadcasting, as well as the development of a diverse stream of revenue via the combination of live event draws, on-demand service subscriptions, and selling merchandise from effective branding decisions.

Narrowcasting is a dominant factor which has informed the continued accessibility and sustainability of content within the smaller, independent level of contemporary media production and distribution in professional wrestling. Despite this, narrowcasting is not a particularly recent innovation and arose as a result of satellite and digital television becoming widely available and integrated since the mid-to-late 1980s. Smith-Shomade observes that this move towards a more democratic form of media production and distribution allows a space for specific, niche groups and their interests to be represented, not to mention profited from – dubbing it “an elixir for the dearth in marginalised representation” (2004, p74).

As much of a positive effect as narrowcasting and the democratisation of media production and distribution has had on the sustenance and survivability of modern, niche fandoms – particularly that of British professional wrestling – there are elements of national broadcasting which simply cannot be achieved within this new mediated arena. In fact, one of the main arguable reasons for the historical success of professional wrestling in Britain as a regularly consumed legacy media product in a pre-narrowcasted era of general broadcasting is due to its position within the public domain of working-class identity and appeal. As Zoglin warned, “as the mass audience disperses, there will be fewer cultural points, less common ground” (1992, p. 70), meaning a widened, compartmentalised form of media and distribution could potentially lead to a lack of centralised understanding and informing of cultural developments. Scannell discusses this concept further, noting how “we entirely fail to understand the significance of broadcasting if we do not recognise the structurally different public that it created: the general public” (2005, p138). This notion of national broadcasting creating and sustaining an altogether more connected audience and

mostly mutually-aware public sphere can be argued as just as democratic as the later eras of narrowcasted, multi-representational content due to keeping the general public informed. This may also serve as an explanation as to the widespread success of televised and live professional wrestling in Britain in this pre-digital, pure broadcast state of media production. Scannel further explores the value of broadcast media as opposed to narrowcast, using soccer as a prime example of viewing habits. He explains that just by enjoying the occasional viewing of soccer or rugby does not mean he is necessarily a fan of either, and defines aspects of both fandoms as having “particular community of interest who follow the game (more exactly, their club) week in, week out. They are prepared to pay for access to Sky’s premium sports channels to follow their passion.” The general interest in international sport continues to be protected by the listed events in broadcasting acts that grant a right of access to them on behalf of the free-to-air terrestrial broadcasters and the general public whom they serve. It is designed to prevent the removal of such events from the common public domain and their privatisation for particular paying interest publics” (Scannell, 2005, p139).

This era of public broadcast and wide availability and access to general interests perfectly situated professional wrestling at the forefront of popular demand mostly due to the sport already being a national pastime and a product of enjoyment predating television itself, as explored by prior theorists and industry historians. Conversely, Kant compares benefits of modern narrowcasted digital content and providers to that of traditional broadcasting sentiment while acknowledging a viewers-as-user dynamic, noting that “Social networks like Facebook are actually delivering to viewers ideals comparable to the ethics of commonality and universality adhered to by PSB” (2014, p383). If commonality is the core

arguable concept for the power of traditional broadcasting, narrowcasting still serves to provide commonality through the collaborative and democratic process of allowing for all groups to contribute to that shared understanding, as well as conserve plurality of those individual segments of the overall community.

The modern era of professional wrestling, and the British industry in context, in its availability and provision of vast amounts of niché, multi-representational content has been made possible by creating a “viewer” (Harries, 2002) and “prosumer” (Van Dijck, 2009) culture as a result of the “five hundred channel environment” (Smith-Shomade, 2004, p71). With a growth in technological convergence in a digital era, the lines between consumer and producer are blurred with the opportunities to create content and distribute it independently in such a heavily democratised media era, leading to more collaborative opportunities of engagement not seen to the same effect in prior eras of broadcasting. Fans can cater to their own communities with individual styles of approach and can directly engage with their favoured associated processes due to such forces of democratised forms of digital broadcasting, technological advancements with convergence, as well as an overall more collaborative and communally-engaged fan base via the rise of social media. This process is highly reminiscent of the ‘backyard’ movement of professional wrestling whereby fans in the modern era tended to express their fandom in a more involved, physical way due to traditional barriers to entry and gatekeeping no longer being an issue, as well as the aforementioned liberalisation of distribution concerns (McBride and Bird, 2007). Companies such as Progress, ICW, Revolution Pro and IPW were all made possible due to this modern shift – starting from a position of small, fan creations of enjoyment to stable, independent companies distributing their own brands of wrestling to dedicated fan communities through

online, on-demand video services via services such as Pivotshare and YouTube. Examples include Demand Progress, RPW On Demand and IPW content being made available through centralised fan hubs such as the Highspots Wrestling Network.

When contemplating the future state of independent British wrestling content, a point raised by Scannell regarding the challenges of the post-narrowcast mediated world becomes especially relevant. Scannell warns “audiences defined as consumers will naturally be considered in terms of their particular interests and for which they are willing to pay” (2005, p140), referring to the notion that a simplistic supply-and-demand ideology will take precedent over the widening of representation that more optimistic definitions propose a democratised form of media production and distribution would yield. With the vast variety of promotions on offer within the contemporary British wrestling circuit, catering to their own particular fan community of specified taste and interests, it leaves a largely fragmented and individualised scene arguably lacking in a unified sense of identity on the grander global scale. There are many examples of this individualised approach to wrestling identity in terms of content provision, firstly in ICW mostly catering to modern tastes of wrestling associated with WWE ‘Attitude Era’ and ECW ‘hardcore’ presentation and in-ring styles, as well as regional, Scottish tastes in characterisation and event presentation. Riptide Wrestling, based in Brighton, directed content towards fans who appreciate an artistic, cinematic level of presenting wrestling shows for distribution – using a background of film studies academia and film industry techniques to do so. PCW supplied content in-line with the common demand of their Preston-based community of fans in a more comedic style of presentation and performance, and other examples such as Revolution Pro which particularly cater towards a cross-section of British fans engaged and intertwined with Japanese promotions

and styles of wrestling, driven by the company's tendency of cross-promotion and interchanging of talent overseas. With all of these segregated, individualised forms and ideological approaches to wrestling in Britain, it would potentially allow for an opening for hegemonic structures with access to higher levels of resources to enter the market, take full advantage of the newfound growth of the industry and reshape it to its own ends.

Sha Samuels expresses frustration regarding these independent British wrestling promotions not working together to make the national industry more sustainable and stronger against global market forces, and eventually concede full autonomy of practice by agreeing a partnership with WWE. Samuels states "there's a reason those two promotions were interested in by WWE – because they were doing so well without them", using the examples of both promotions independently gaining popularity to the extent of filling arenas with paying wrestling fans to the extent not seen in many years. This includes multiple sell-outs of the SSE Hydro arena by ICW (Paterson, 2016) and Progress holding a sold-out show at the Brixton Academy (Chudy, 2016). Samuels relates disappointment in how the evident success and traction gained by these companies on their own terms did not lead to any form of co-operation in establishing a more unified and resourced national industry, and arguably competing for a sense of status in pioneering this new wave. Samuels completes this point with an element of resigned sadness, stating "that's frustrating – the ego of promoters. I love them both, and long may they continue, but I reckon it's cutting off your nose to spite your face. [...] Even bigger things could have happened" (see appendix 10). Samuels observes similar issues earlier posited by Zoglin whereby less common ground can be reached when media distribution in a particular field becomes so segregated and individualised – lessening the benefits of a connected, engaged mass-audience. Samuels

relates these individualisations as an egotistical ploy by promoters in order to exert claims of ownership of making modern wrestling succeed in the UK independently of global intervention from the likes of WWE, as well as calling for shared efforts of promotion and creative output.

Conversely, UTTRob discussed this issue when interviewed but asserted the complications arising from trying to co-operate in such a crowded independent wrestling scene populated with creative players expressing their varying ideologies and practices. He first noted that although prior successful relationships of co-operative creative practice have been present in the industry, such as the efforts of the NWA (National Wrestling Alliance) in the American territorial era and Joint Promotions universalising the British industry throughout the first half of the twentieth century, keeping each individual creative force equally satisfied is a tricky process to manage. Referring to this convoluted creative process, he states: “It always seems to be where one company ‘invades’ another and all the stories will float around that and they just end up combining rosters [...]. You’re diluting two talent pools. One of the problems is even if you had fifty percent of the best from both sides – someone has to lose and then they look like the worst guys” (see appendix 5). Although agreeing that it would be favourable for promotions to share resources, combine audiences to create larger attended events and fuel the visibility of industry and its apparent boom, UTTRob highlights how the ‘fixed’ nature of professional wrestling stands in the way of such relationships being sustained on the creative level – whereby it is difficult to maintain equal levels of perceived success for all included brands and associated performers when negotiating win and loss factors. Despite these points made by Samuels and UTTRob, the apparent success of these independent promotions with their proven ability to fill large

arenas with paying fans, a concept not heard of since the televised era of British wrestling, drew the attention of the British national broadcaster ITV and arguably influenced discussions for the potential of rebranding the once-staple broadcasted British sports programme *World of Sport* and returning the concept of broadcasting exclusively British-produced wrestling to the mass-audience. The following section aims to chronicle and reflect upon the successes and eventual failures of *WOS Wrestling* on ITV with its pilot show airing in 2016 to the eventual full series aired in 2018, factors leading to issues of authenticity and audience perception, issues relating to hegemonic values of creative influence, and the eventual intervention by WWE as an aggressive, expansionist neoliberal force repeating its own history of displacing regional, cultural creative development for goals of profit and sustaining hegemonic and monopolistic control.

The Return to National Television: The *World of Sport* Rebrand, and the Beginnings of NXT UK

After a period of growth in British professional wrestling and an apparent boom in promoting the sport independently from larger international companies, the increasing popularity and drawing power of Progress, Revolution Pro, and Insane Championship Wrestling drew enough positive attention for ITV to try its luck once again at broadcasting an original wrestling product to the British masses for the first time in decades. New Year's Eve, 2016, saw the pilot episode of 'WOS Wrestling', promoted as a return of the once much-loved *World of Sport* wrestling product watched by millions in the decades leading up to and including the 1980s, but rebranded as the acronym 'WOS'. This was arguably not only

to pay homage to the origins of *World of Sport* but acknowledge the new version of the brand as an individual entity (rather than part of a larger schedule of programming that *World of Sport* existed as), but also mimic the abbreviated branding style of more popularly known promotions such as WWE, WCW and TNA. The roster would include known veteran wrestlers of the independent UK wrestling scene such as Dave Mastiff, Sha Samuels and consistent ICW alumni including Joe Coffey, Kaylee Ray, BT Gunn, Kasey Owens and the very popular Grado (Graeme Stevely) – the focus point of prior BBC documentaries who eventually found adjacent fame in UK television and media products such as a regular character ‘PC Hugh McKirdy’ in popular BBC Scotland Mockumentary series *Scot Squad* (2014), as well as parts in successful contemporary British Drama series such as *Endeavour* (2012-2022). WOS also took full advantage of nostalgia and fan memory by booking Davey Boy Smith Jr as a surprise main event player – the son of famous wrestler ‘British Bulldog’ who saw much fame in multiple stints in WWE, WCW and, alongside wrestlers such as Dynamite Kid and William Regal, represented the success of British wrestling reaching an international audience. On top of this, ITV also cast Jim Ross as lead commentator for the pilot episode – drawing on fan memory and nostalgia of WWE television in its heyday and Ross’s iconic voice for calling wrestling action.

The pilot episode had some level of success with drawing a reasonable audience of 1.25 million viewers (ITVWrestling.co.uk), but not seemingly quite enough to make the full impact arguably desired by ITV to continue with until two years later. Eventually, British audiences experienced ITV’s attempt to continue *WOS Wrestling* by commissioning a ten-part series in 2018, but this would still not see the desired level of success – losing viewers week-by-week as the series ran on to completion, with a beginning viewership marked at

937,000 viewers for the opening episode falling all the way to 200,000 for the finale (ITVWrestling.co.uk). Despite this apparent failure for *WOS Wrestling* to maintain an audience in the UK, there have been many suggestions and criticisms by both fans and wrestlers, as well as even promoters – all suggesting there were key faults that could have been averted and core fundamental principles that make most wrestling shows successful that ITV, unintentionally or otherwise, decided not to employ. From interviews conducted, there were consistent issues and criticisms made about how the show was handled – mostly involved with the notion that without the right form of editing, atmosphere, use of fan participation and talent creativity, the ability to identify with an audience, either wrestling-centric or in general, becomes very difficult. The handling of *WOS Wrestling* by ITV was a topic of close discussion with UTTRob, who claims the show was doomed from the start by stating “part of the problem was it was a very ‘ITV show’, so it went straight on after *Ninja Warrior* and was produced in the same way as ITV shows like that and *The X Factor*”, indicating the heavily edited and sensationalised nature the channel’s programming tends to entail. By not editing the show to depict the natural development of a match, as well as consistent cuts to audiences and an evidently small, under-dressed studio used to film the show, UTTRob argues it “looked awful by comparison” to the programmes it was in association with via timeslot and aesthetic – and perhaps would have benefitted from a different scheduling and given its own authentic sense of production contextual to wrestling (See appendix 5).

Alongside the comments made by UTTRob about wrestling broadcasting fundamentals being misunderstood by ITV, Dean Ayass – long-standing member of the British wrestling community as a promoter, manager, writer, and commentator – makes a

very insightful connection to ITV's other entertainment programming and showcases the established issue of *WOS Wrestling* failing to identify with its viewership. "What surprised me was that this was ITV" states Ayass, using the example of his experience at attending tapings for ITV's popular talent show *The X Factor* to indicate how the broadcaster already utilises strategies appropriate for wrestling. "They interview some of the auditionees before they even auditioned them. Lo and behold they were put through and that interview I saw recorded was put on the show. [...] ITV know how to push a storyline and get the emotional connection with the audience." (See appendix 8) This point made by Ayass is particularly insightful as it establishes the notion that most entertainment products are predetermined in arguably the same way wrestling is in that they are produced to create an emotional connection – and ITV is particularly knowledgeable of this process due to the success of such programming as *The X Factor* and other talent shows. However, to broadcast wrestling means a particular level of effort arguably needs to be placed to inform the same casual audience of a meta-level understanding of what they are watching, and why they should watch. This links to the other argued reasonings for the *WOS Wrestling* failure in establishing the very important connection between wrestler and audience. Ayass observes the show's use of Will Ospreay as a main event talent to be excited for by the audience. Ospreay is well-known and popular among the global wrestling fan community due to holding immense skill at technical and exciting high-flying wrestling styles, as well as being a featured wrestler for top Japanese promotion NJPW. However, Ayass notes that "Fred Bloggs watching the wrestling before Ant and Dec come on doesn't know who that is", and that without an introductory edited video package highlighting his prior success, wrestling style, and educating viewers of his importance, ordinary viewers and casual fans would not necessarily understand the gravity of him being booked on the show. Furthermore, Ayass

expresses the level of the camerawork and editing of the show not properly representing the excitement and important aspects to consider in a wrestling presentation, and foregoing established norms of production within traditional wrestling contexts from an argued position of naivety. “I remember seeing a woman in a headlock and they were focusing on the woman grimacing putting on the headlock rather than the person actually in the move, too many crowd shots and too many cuts.” Ayass finished this thought by admitting “I didn’t bother watching the last episode, so if I’m not watching then the casual fans definitely wouldn’t come back.” (See appendix 8)

These points made about casual viewers and fans are reminiscent of discussions made in sports audience discourse. Although arguably considered a dated form of fan theory discussion, the works of Wann and Branscombe and the concept of ‘Basking in Reflected Glory’ (BIRGing) hold true to this concept of applying a link between performer and audience – particularly that of casual or those that could be identified as ‘fairweather fans’ (1991, p111). Ospreay drew the attention of the hardcore wrestling fanbase to the opening episode of the *WOS Wrestling* series due to having an already established following of his own, as well as a level of fame with his work in New Japan Pro Wrestling – Japan’s largest wrestling promotion and one of the top world stakeholders in the industry besides the WWE. The way in which the decisions made in *WOS Wrestling* with regards to the use of a wrestler well-known and popular within international fan circles backfired, not just in the lack of identity and connection between the casual audience and establishing their viewing relationship, but with the current association between the wrestler and his dedicated fan-base. *WOS Wrestling* clearly wished to capitalise on the success of Will Ospreay to draw the attention of current wrestling fans BIRGing in the following of his

successful career and carrying British identity in wrestling globally across multiple international promotions, and utilise his experience and particularly theatrical and acrobatic style to wow newcoming viewers. However, on top of the aforementioned issue of failing to secure a connection with those newcomers, they also failed to redeem dedicated fan expectations for Ospreay as a pivotal figure of British talent on an international scale through the general underuse of him as a performer throughout the series, as well as not giving sufficient opposition in order to create the 'dream match' scenarios the wrestler is consistently known for. Fans follow wrestlers specifically in their actions and careers regardless of the companies they work for, and therefore if a promotion utilises a currently popular talent consistently well, it can boost the viewership of their programming. For example, Brown et al observe the similar process in the sport of Golf, noting "the fact that Tiger Woods typically doubles the rating for golf tournaments in which he is in contention bolsters the notion that there are additional people who watch not because of their love for golf as a whole but rather because of their interest (positive or negative) in this individual golfer's performance" (2013, p20). This links to the overall argument made by Yang and Shi (2011) who note that contemporary sport has opened up the scope for athletes as stars, allowing for fans to be motivated more by their fandom and following of particular athletes as opposed to the leagues or companies they compete under.

When speaking to Samuels about his participation in the series, the disappointment was visibly and audibly obvious in his demeanour. "Heart-breaking, really heart-breaking...", says Samuels while shaking his head, before recounting the passions that brought him and many of the other members of the roster to the project. He expressed the excitement of how the exposure gained by the British independent wrestling community attracted such a

huge opportunity for the return of the national terrestrial broadcast of professional wrestling, and stresses the passionate, hard-work everyone was committed to. After expressing pride in their efforts, particularly in how they achieved ten weeks of material in just three days, Samuels switches to disappointment in indicating the frustrations of dealing with ITV officials. He details how they seemed unwilling to learn or even acknowledge the unique and important aspects of production professional wrestling requires over standard modes, such as particular ways of editing, camera work, and overall presentation.

“Unfortunately, who were we to say to TV people who have worked for ITV and been in charge of popular mainstream TV shows – who am I to say “This isn’t what is done in wrestling?” They know TV, but they don’t know wrestling.” It was for British wrestling, and we were willing to work hard for it”, recalls Samuels, acknowledging the efforts made by the production team but the amount of knowledge and experience from wrestling industry figures being undervalued. With an evident naivety highlighted by wrestling practitioners of the complexities involved with producing and showcasing wrestling content effectively, this lack of attention was superseded by ITV’s long-established broadcasting position informing an assumption of success without the need to creatively cooperate with experienced personnel within the industry of wrestling. Samuels sums up this evident relationship between ITV producers and wrestling talent, saying it was “a shame they were TV people with their own views and not listening to us silly old wrestlers.” (See appendix 10)

Others with prior wrestling experience involved with ITV’s re-entry into wrestling broadcasting were also interviewed for this study. Dante Richardson is an ex-wrestler, promoter and current editor for the popular wrestling publication *Inside the Ropes*, and served as a consultant backstage for the *WOS Wrestling* production. I managed to interview

Dante about his opinions on the decisions made with WOS and discovered things were a lot more political and difficult than they would appear from just a spectator positionality. When asked about his thoughts on the *WOS Wrestling* rebrand and his take on its apparent failure to maintain an audience, he made the following comments reminiscent of the perspectives given by his fellow wrestling peers. Richardson served as a producer on the show and conveys also having the position similar to what is known in the wrestling industry as ‘road agent’, which refers to someone with experience employed as liaison between talent and management, helping plan and organise matches. He admits that “the shows we filmed and the show you saw were different”, indicating frustration at ITV personnel seemingly desiring a gameshow format of production incongruous to presentations usually required for televised wrestling. Richard expresses sincere disappointment in the failure for ITV management to acknowledge and take advantage of the positivity and eagerness to create by a whole generation of new-wave British wrestling talent, stating “I’ve never seen a wrestling locker room with that much camaraderie and good will, with everyone working together with the common goal of making it a success. [...] It could have been the answer, it really could have been.” (See appendix 12)

The reasons for the failure of the *WOS Wrestling* relaunch hold a stark connection to that of its original, historical form. As these accounts are detailing, on top of linking to previously explored memoirs of important figures in British wrestling such as William Regal and Frank ‘Chic’ Cullen, the original long-standing success of wrestling on British television screens is most observably connected to the notion of identifying with the audience and understanding the intricacies and subcultural values that attracted people to the product in the first place. Despite decades having passed,

technology advancing considerably, and fan dialogue transferring its social spheres to online circles, wrestling is still very much in-demand in Britain despite being relegated to a subcultural position away from the mainstream, mostly due to political factors from broadcasting heavy-hitters.

One way of supporting this notion of identification factors affecting the success of professional wrestling production are simply the accounts of the *WOS wrestling* live tours which proceeded during and beyond the series cancellation – and saw great success by acknowledging the UK fanbase and their needs, promoting shows in the popular wrestling venues across the UK including the famous Blackpool Tower, where countless historical wrestling events have been enjoyed for many decades. Without any invasive politics of a director, editor, or broadcasting head, accounts tend to confirm that these shows contained much of the content that was omitted from the televised showings – including genuine fan participation and a focus on in-ring wrestling action. UTTRob recounts his experience of these live shows as immensely positive, saying “We went to the live show at the Tower Ballroom and it was absolutely rocking! The people there loved it, and this was after the TV show had ended – which proves there was a market for it”. Sha Samuels confirmed this successful and positive audience reception for the *WOS Wrestling* live events due to regularly performing on the shows against common rival Grado, enthusiastically relating personal enjoyment in engaging with audiences without the pressure of TV production. Samuels states “We had no TV people there, I think the Blackpool show they were there, as it was their big one and it was great, but I remember we would wrestle anywhere. That’s why the show was so good” (see appendix 10). Without the

stop-and-start culture of TV production and politics evident in creative decision making observed by Samuels and Richardson, the main takeaway of success is arguably how, when left to traditional processes unfettered by corporate naivety, British wrestling thrives when creative talent of performers is unhindered, as well as when autonomous audience participation is actively encouraged and acknowledged.

With these sentiments, as well as all of the above experiences conveyed by various industry personnel and fans associated with British wrestling – the notion of authenticity and the process for spectators to become immersed and incentivised to continue their focus engagement and fannish support is clear. As Van Leewen theorises, the term authenticity may also be understood to mean something can become “authorised”, “bearing a genuine signature, or stamp, or seal of approval”, as well as noting “in the end, something is authentic because it is declared authentic by an authority” (2001, p393). The televised content produced and broadcasted by ITV for *WOS Wrestling* arguably lost its viewership and failed to gain traction, as observed by the aforementioned views and experiences of interviewees, due to not being considered authentic or “authorised” by the fan community of wrestling in the UK. This could be a reaction to the Americanised, mythic representations of the sport being appropriated rather than the tested formulas of production and creative decision-making authored by independent, grassroots promotions, which arguably influenced ITV’s move to exploit their apparent success and visibility. By taking a hard-line broadcasting approach in targeting mass-audiences (Scannel, 2005) and adopting practices only associated via hegemonic values unconsciously dictated by WWE and market leaders, emotional connections with both highly engaged fans and casual British viewers were not achieved. With Grayson and Martinec’s theories of “indexical” authenticity (2004) relating

to the concept of linking a product to values of a certain point in time, this symbolic relationship aids further understanding of why prior eras of televised wrestling consistently succeeded to maintain audience and fan support throughout its broadcasting tenure, much to the chagrin of popular sceptics, and arguably why contemporary efforts via *WOS Wrestling* could not garner traction. Without understanding factors of contextual identity and collaborating with practices and cultures generated by engaged communities, the wrestling output created by ITV in 2016 and 2018 were arguably deemed inauthentic and thus unworthy of continued consumption.

When the original announcements for *World of Sport* to be relaunched on ITV were made, WWE would immediately promote the first of an eventual set of tournaments held in the UK – the first of which held in December 2016 at a similar time to ITV announcing their pilot episode of the *World of Sport* relaunch which eventually aired on New Year's Eve that same year (Hausman, 2016). It could be argued here that WWE may have seen this as both a potential threat to its ongoing presence in the UK market, as well as a potential opening for further broadcasting opportunities on top of its already syndicated, American-based content. Despite the failure of *WOS* wrestling, WWE pressed on with embedding its presence within the growing British wrestling scene by introducing a new brand under its broadcasting banner entitled "NXT UK" – a British counterpart to their successful and critically acclaimed 'NXT' brand aimed at the more 'hardcore' and dedicated fanbase as opposed to the much wider, family-based audience which *Raw* and *Smackdown* generally tend to market towards. With the success of the British tournaments held in Blackpool, WWE engaged in signing up the UK's most popular and talented wrestlers to contractual obligations, such as Wolfgang, the Coffey brothers, Kaylee Ray, Jinny and other regionally

enjoyed personnel. The WWE eventually developed “working relationships” (Currier, 2017) with key British promotions ICW and Progress, allowing for its contracted talent to appear at independent shows in return for those promotions to act as a form of developmental brand to foster fresh talent for eventual WWE use. Mark Dallas, owner of ICW, explains this in an interview by stating “it’s [...] a working relationship we’ve got just now. It’s just the sort of thing where we [...] keep contact with each other and if they need talent [...], they know that we’re a great place to cultivate talent to eventually go to WWE or NXT UK” (Cassidy, 2019). WWE would benefit greatly from this relationship by allowing popular British talent recently acquired, such as Pete Dunne and Tyler Bate, to perform at shows for these brands alongside their WWE work, and even defend WWE titles such as the newly created UK championship. Even Paul ‘HHH’ Levesque appeared at an ICW show taping, garnering a sense of positivity about the British wrestling scene going forward (Insane Championship Wrestling, 2017). Key Producers from these promotions were eventually enticed over to the WWE as contracted employees to help with writing storylines and developing characters, including the co-founder of Progress Jim Smallman who ended up working for NXT UK as Creative Director.

The response to this expansionist venture made by WWE consisted of different sides – those that know their history of WWE’s success through the use of aggressive neoliberal business tactics and the issues caused, and those that acknowledge the resurgence of wrestling interest in Britain stemming from WWE broadcasting on British television from the late 90s, as well as the qualities and opportunities a large company can bring to the talent currently on the UK scene struggling to make a full-time income. Regardless, the timing of the introduction of the WWE British Championship tournaments, and later NXT UK, were

very close to WOS wrestling first being broadcast on British terrestrial television and potentially posing a threat to WWE's interests in the country. Unfortunately, due to criticisms by audiences and the production issues earlier mentioned, the *World of Sport* rebrand failed to gain traction until its eventual cancellation, and WWE continued its presence in Britain, promoting shows and acquiring talent where it could to continue building the NXT UK brand as the main source for televised British professional wrestling. Through a continuation of tried-and-tested expansionist, neoliberal tendencies observed in prior eras of wrestling, Vince McMahon and the WWE are arguably aiming for the acquisition of UK creative wrestling talent and support of its fan communities to suppress resurgence of a successful, national wrestling scene which can function profitably and concurrently with fan desires, identities and authentication. Furthermore, these efforts contribute to overall business goals of achieving "global localisation" (WWE, 2022), re-establishing the company's long-held monopoly over the sport of professional wrestling by dominating a worldwide, WWE-managed territorial system of wrestling products. (see figure 32) As Jeffries and Kannegiesser note, these international, cultural scenes of professional wrestling built up over time act as "nodal points within an ever expanding WWE Universe, as individualised territorial identities are repurposed into homogenous sites of neoliberal consumption" (2019, p69) WWE, through its intensive expansion and globalisation of its product and assertion of its market dominance, obtain these regional, cultural elements of wrestling and either adopt, strip, or redeploy them to suit their needs. This then blurs original features and meanings created from those origins and establishes new understandings based on WWE preferences and achieved through its "cultural and financial capital" asserted from its media dominance. In this regard, WWE has "extended itself in

both time and space, condensing half a century of content and history into a manageable platform for on-demand consumption.” (Jeffries, Kannegiesser, 2019, p73-75)

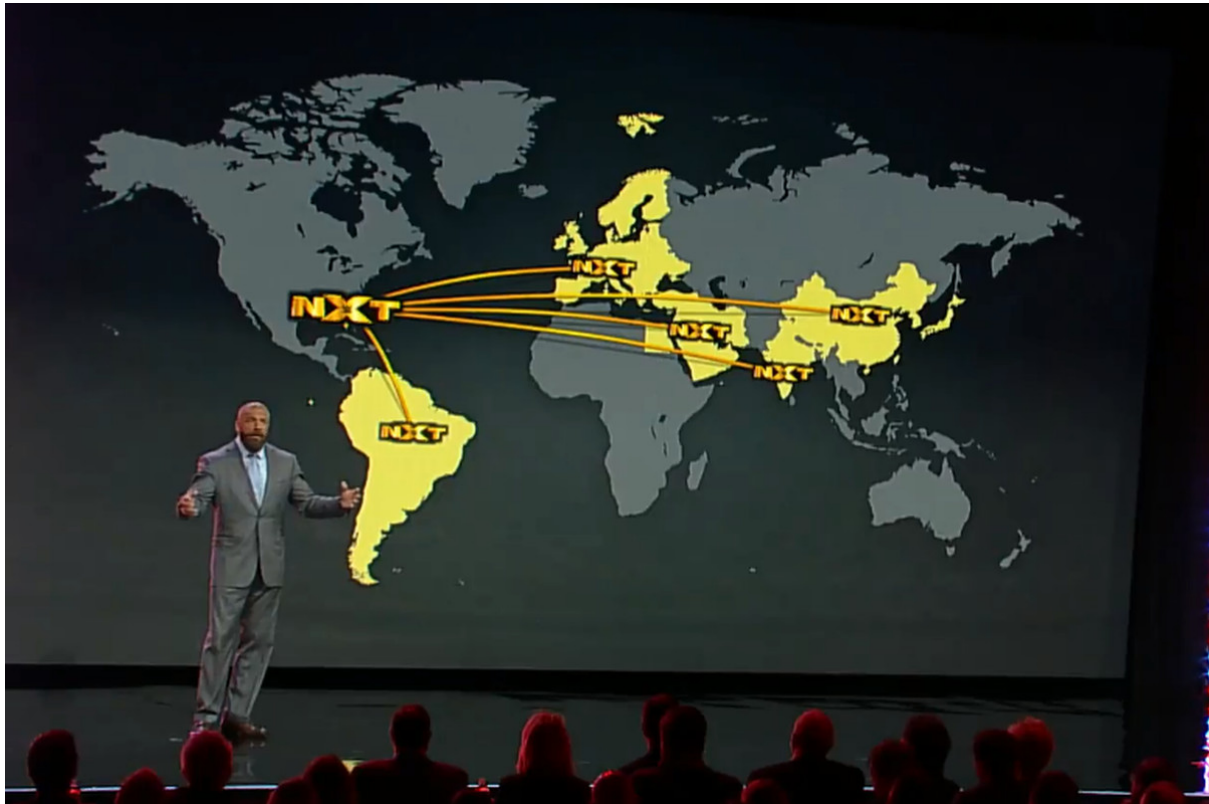


Figure 32: Paul 'Triple H' Levesque discussing 'Global Localisation' at a WWE conference

This sense of argued historical repetition through the acquisition and appropriation of regional, localised talent and output by WWE in its relationship with the British wrestling industry leads to further assertions that this hegemonic power structure leads to a problematic stifling of organic creative growth and blurring of identities formed through displacement factors. To supplement this argument that WWE and its expansionist business practices has a potential damaging effect to the UK industry, including labour and identity factors, a brief history of WWE's origins and eventual climb to industry leader status must

be explored, which heavily involves what is known as the ‘territorial’ era of American wrestling. As Jeffries and Kannegiesser state, “the previous century saw wrestling transform from a carnival novelty into a worldwide media phenomenon, and it is now our task in the present to grapple with the cultural, ideological, and geographical consequences of this transformation” (2019, p79). Such exploration of WWE’s historical effect on the industry from its practices are important to understand current power relations and informed standards instilled in today’s professional wrestling communities.

The American Territorial System of Professional Wrestling and the Neoliberal, Monopolistic Rise of the WWE

American wrestling history tends to differ from that of the development of the British side of things. Where British wrestling organised itself fairly early on to become a mainstay of national television and cultural importance, the USA’s wrestling output did not become a centralised, internationally significant and large-scale product until later in its life span. Despite this, it was still a consistent, regional past-time from state-to-state predating its eventual boom into centralised, mainstream and global circles in the 1980s. Originally, the American wrestling industry was known to work under what is now referred to as a ‘territorial’ system, whereby each state or major city would usually have its own wrestling output, fan community, local television contracts and a distinct touring schedule of particular buildings they regularly toured or had professional relationships with. These ‘territories’ would all function independently of one another in terms of setting their own champions, forming their own pools of talent and would often work in a tacit state of cooperation, whereby certain wrestlers would be temporarily exchanged in order to

maintain longevity with fans and maintain attendance at shows due to keeping shows fresh. Andre the Giant was a popular talent to be traded around to other territories from the then World-Wide Wrestling Federation (WWWF) due to his immense popularity with fans and ability to instantly fill arenas with paying viewers through fascination of his larger-than-life gigantic persona and physique. Wrestlers were not necessarily contracted as they are in contemporary times, and would often travel from state-to-state as independent agents – relying on their own talent, experience and drawing-power to create opportunities across the country. Sometimes a wrestler would ‘homestead’, referring to where a particular territory location was suitable for long-term engagement, so would therefore reside there permanently. Either way, if their time in a territory was becoming stagnant, with audiences perhaps growing tired of their character or ‘gimmick’, or even simply creative direction for their character drawing short, they would simply pack up and move to a new territory.

As Shoemaker states, “Many of these regional promoters were industry power brokers unto themselves. They were putting on fully independent pro wrestling shows, developing local talent, and above all, making good money” (2013, p35), establishing the notion that these individual territories, no matter how small or regional they were, showed much success in their own right, satisfying regional demand and tastes successfully by consistently filling arenas with paying fans to watch wrestling on a weekly basis, as well as producing their own successful local television outputs to provide a ‘shop window’ to advertise and promote upcoming events. It is a common misunderstanding that the inherent success of professional wrestling in America stemmed from the popularity of WWE in response to the large-scale boom of Wrestlemania, Hulk Hogan and the ongoing format of widespread syndication and pay-per-view sales achieved by Vince McMahon – the territorial

system already had the benefit of selling out arenas and stadiums across the country prior to this, as well as popular televisual output. Reynolds and Baer note “although McMahon would claim in later years that his predecessors only ran wrestling shows in “smoky bars and bingo parlours,” this was not the case. Pro wrestling regularly sold out such venues as Madison Square Garden long before Hulk Hogan took to the national stage” (Reynolds, Baer, 2003, p30), referring to the likes of Bruno Summation, Buddy Rogers and ‘Superstar’ Billy Graham filling out the iconic New York high-capacity venue regularly and way before Vincent Kennedy McMahon would eventually purchase the company and transform its business ethics and overall goals in the professional wrestling landscape.

Vincent K McMahon eventually purchased the WWWF promotion from his father for one million US dollars (New York Post, 2023), and decided upon a strategy to achieve national expansion with the company and compete against his fellow territories. This would completely go against the established ethics and tacit rules of promoter relations which encouraged different regions to coincide and cooperate as opposed to directly compete. McMahon signed as many of the top talents across the continent to “long-term, exclusive contracts” which was a very rarely utilised concept in the territorial system of American professional wrestling at that time (p45), and continued to use his personal wealth, as well as the company’s financial power, to acquire many of the smaller or failing territories unable to compete or simply willing to sell – thusly acquiring more power to broadcast without competition and expand his promotion exponentially. Although these led to great success for the WWE and arguably bring wrestling to a more centralised and popular state worldwide, the aggressive neoliberal, free-market mentality of competition was “an affront to the ethos of the territorial system” (Shoemaker, 2013, p118) and would cause long-term

damage to the creative diversity and flexibility of the sport for years to come due to the forced acceptance and adherence to the WWE's dominant, rigidly capitalist mode of wrestling output.

With McMahon's aspirations of dominating what was once a territorial, cooperative industry of wrestling, engaging in competitive business tactics in-line with neoliberal, free-market ideology, he would attempt to purchase some of the popular southern territories in order to gain control of their successful television time slots, such as Georgia Championship Wrestling and its "coveted Saturday and Sunday 6.05pm timeslots on TBS where his plan, obviously, was to replace tapes of the Georgia wrestlers with tapes of his WWF superstars" (Reynolds, Alvarez. 2005). When the new WWF tapes were broadcast, the regular viewers did not take kindly to the new style of wrestling being presented to them and over 1000 complaints were processed by the TV station – deeming it much less captivating than the original GCW content. It appeared that the mentality of steering wrestling away from a sporting context to a more exaggerated, cartoonish format to appeal to the younger market would not work in these regions as it had in New York (Shoemaker, 2013, p31). On top of this, McMahon had promised original material to be broadcast, yet only offered mostly highlights and recaps from various live events with the majority of those being 'squash' matches – a nomenclature in wrestling referring to matches ending in an abrupt, early finish. With this leading to a ratings disaster, McMahon was forced to withdraw due to major losses, sell up to Jim Crockett Promotions and return to the USA network, souring his relationship with Ted Turner and TBS in the meantime (Mahmood, M 2021). Despite this setback, McMahon continued to use aggressive tactics in-line with taking a deregulated economy for granted, such as intentionally paying regional broadcasters more to schedule

WWF tapes so as to make it impossible for the smaller, struggling promotions to undercut his offers and essentially block them from being able to effectively market their events. Later, McMahon heavily invested in the first *Wrestlemania* event at Madison Square Garden, New York – heavily influenced by and made to counter the efforts of rival promoter Jim Crockett Promotions and its popular annual *Starrcade* events – making history by grossing four million dollars with the first *Wrestlemania* – a feat not thought possible up until that point in the industry for a single wrestling event (Assail and Mooneyham, 2002). With subsequent successful years of growth and the eventual decline of the remaining territories, the then-WWF eventually purchased its last long-standing rival WCW to achieve near-full monopoly of the American and global professional wrestling industry. This was made possible due to a rolling sequence of events, first by media giant and long-time supporter of the rival promotion Ted Turner losing influence and being ousted from control after instigating a merger between Time Warner, of which he was a large stakeholder, and AOL – unaware the new owners wanted him gone. With a new set of owners inexperienced and unenthused by the dwindling popularity and ratings figures of WCW, alongside a crisis of creative misdirection of the company due to clashes between recent acquisition and ex-WWF producer Vince Russo and Eric Bischoff returning from hiatus, the company continued to lose millions of dollars of investment, allegedly 80 million dollars in one year, eventually purchased and dissolved by Vince McMahon and the WWE (Assail S and Mooneyham M, 2002, pp250-251.)

A consistent theme throughout the history of Vince McMahon's WWF is the notion of aggressive, capitalist tactics within an ongoing era of deregulation and neoliberal attitudes to business competitiveness, using purchasing power to put pressure on viable

competitors, buying out competition outright as well as tying successful and popular performers to long-term, exclusive contracts to give much less opportunity for potential rivals to promote profitably. Roddy Piper (see figure 33), most popularly known as a wrestler of the pre and post-territorial American wrestling scene, as well as Hollywood actor starring in his most iconic film role as Nada in the John Carpenter directed dystopia *They Live* (1988), offers insight into the expansionism of WWE. From experiences of working multiple stints for WWF and WWE throughout his career, he notes in his biography that McMahon's desires were to corner the market by hiring the best the whole business had to offer and pinning them down to contracts – made possible by the evident scarcity of working territories outside of the WWF umbrella



Figure 33: Roddy Piper entering the ring at a WWE event

After signing a contract due to having “no other choice”, Piper notes from his experience of the time that McMahon was trying to “establish a brand – a federation that

was bigger than the individual stars who wrestled in it". Piper observes that the traditional strategy to advertise a wrestling event would be to place the names of the wrestlers on the marquee and billboards outside the venue, which in turn would attract ticket-buyers. McMahon and the WWF would shift this strategy to eventually just mention the WWF branding without wrestler names, so as to make it arguably "look like it was the WWF name and not the wrestlers that was bringing in the fans" (Piper and Pocatello, 2002, pp134-135). This strategy employed by McMahon was arguably a way to diminish the individual control of professional wrestlers, still employed as independent contractors but under strict, WWF-exclusive obligations. Wrestlers, acting as independent entities, can be considered as brand identities in and of themselves due to the idea of capturing notions of "reputation observed, reputation valued and reputation managed" (Anhalt, 2010, p. 20). In the context of wrestling and a motivating factor of consumption being associated with catharsis, this reputation does not need to be particularly favourable in the consumer's mind as general brand theory suggests (Moline & Rainiest, 2009), as 'heel' wrestlers can generate interest for consumption via their abilities to agitate audiences to the point of incentivising purchase to see them bested by their 'babyface' rival, gaining cathartic satisfaction in witnessing the rivalry coming to fruition in a potentially favourable manner. This is a similar process used in modern, 'real' fighting sports such as boxing and mixed martial arts, whereby audiences witness mediated representations of rivalries between competitors leading up to a match such as press events, edited promotional packages, and interviews. Furthermore, these presentations verge on the spectacular in their intended value and reception, all in-line with Guy Debora's concepts of spectacles reducing reality to a fetishised means of commodification (1994). Debora's notion of the spectacle aligns with this phenomenon, as in both professional wrestling and combat sports, the creation of rivalries and the

transformation of fights into spectacles serve as powerful tools for attracting audiences and generating revenue. By presenting these events as more than just competitions but as must-see spectacles, the organisers emphasise their marketable and commodified nature, ultimately driving ticket sales and commercial success. Alongside the notion of “celebrity fighters” (Robbins and Zemanek, 2017) and their often dramatized and hyperbolised rivalries witnessed, audiences are driven to purchase tickets for live events, licenses to view box office and pay-per-view events as well as engaging further with other paratextual content.

Linking back to the effect of WWF and McMahon’s evident capitalistic business practice, these territorial wrestlers, acting as established, individual, influential drivers of consumption and engagement were acquired out of a symbiotic necessity, warranted from an era of deregulation and free-market competition narrowing the possibilities for future sustained employment. As Piper states, McMahon had aspirations of growing his promotion beyond state lines to a national scale, and “figured if he had the best wrestlers locked up under contract to him, no one in the sport would be able to match his product.” But this caused unease among wrestlers, including Piper, who had no intentions to “double-cross” any promoters they already had good working relations with. With this in mind, Piper relates this worry by stating “Again, we had no idea where this was leading and we wanted to protect our contacts in the wrestling world.” (Piper and Pocatello, 2002, Pp135-136) With an industry which was largely self-marketed via independent wrestling stars, acting as their own brand identities, driving fans to buy tickets to events from witnessing their effective performance and maintaining characters across multiple territories – McMahon had cornered the market via rapid expansion and investing heavily in aggressive competitive,

neoliberal economic practice, assumed a dominant stake in the industry as whole and, in doing so, disempowered the bargaining position of the country's wrestling labour force while acquiring and exploiting their established individual brand identities and creative power.

The acquisition of the territories via aggressive expansionist means was just the first in a line of corporate behaviour WWE and McMahon continued to exhibit. From putting the majority of its competition out of business through acquisition or competition, as well as pinning down the nation's best creative talents to long-term contracts favourable to the company's implied *raison d'être* of control and profit – WWE showcased a paradigm of creating its own international monopoly for professional wrestling. After the decimation of the territorial system and acquiring WCW, the WWE would also silence the growing success of renegade promotion ECW (Extreme Championship Wrestling) led by former wrestling manager and photographer Paul Heyman. WWE adopted a similar mode of presentation to ECW, which consisted of the company and its output taking an anti-establishment stance as well as providing a grittier and more realistic sense of characterisation in its wrestlers. The anti-establishment characterisation of ECW arguably stems from the controversial way it originally seceded from the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA), having wrestler Shane Douglas throw down the NWA championship belt after becoming champion and denouncing the relationship live on air between ECW and one of the last vestiges of the territories in the NWA. In terms of its creative output, a higher amount of violence and innovative match types were featured in ECW, including more use of chair shots, tables and ladders, as well as rules catering to a more no holds barred form of match. Conversely, ECW was also arguably considered a renegade, rebellious promotion due to catering to 'smart' fans by way of

promoting wrestling matches featuring respected, experienced performers which highly-engaged fans would appreciate more than casual viewers due to their increased fannish engagement via the internet, magazines, and tape trading . There were occasions of heavily dramatized storylines, but the inclusion of matches spotlighting wrestlers such as Eddie Guerrero and Dean Malenko would cater for a more pure presentation of technical professional wrestling seen as a distinct minority in modern WWE productions at that point, placing primacy on the skill of athletes over the spectacular soap-opera storylines and hyperbole the industry leader would tend to produce. Overall, the creative innovations and disruptive qualities of the company arguably influenced WWE to shift towards their 'Attitude Era' of the late Nineties – whereby an edgier and controversial style of presentation was committed to in order to attract the desired 18-35 male demographic.

Eventually, the disruptive and innovative force of ECW was acquired by the WWE and its top athletes and intellectual property absorbed into the company's creative pool. The company would see some success when trying to service and sustain the 'smart', loyal fan-base by producing pay-per-view shows *ECW: One Night Stand* – whereby the matches contained almost exclusively ex-ECW athletes and the general creative production and atmosphere being an ode to the original promotion's past success. As well as providing fans with an authentic sense of content previously enjoyed from the acquired company, the event placed Paul Heyman back in the rebellious leader role originally enjoyed by fans, vehemently shouting controversial anti-WWE monologues live on air – connoting the sense that despite being owned by WWE and working under its banner, the ECW of old was certainly alive and kicking, ready to serve as a spiritual dissenter to the mainstream norms and status quo established by the industry leader. The success of this event influenced

McMahon and WWE to rebrand the renegade promotion as a weekly televised show, inheriting the momentum stirred from its established sense of resistive aesthetic and providing the company with a simulated form of competition to creatively exploit. This new *WWE ECW* show, aired on the then-titled Sci-Fi channel, would begin featuring regular use of popular ECW originals such as Rob Van Dam, Tommy Dreamer, and Sabu – but eventually losing the built sense of indexical authenticity with fans by gradually introducing modern WWE talent into the roster, including Kurt Angle and Big Show.

The intentions for the rebrand were made clear to fans when established WWE talent were being creatively championed over the ECW originals, showcasing a political move to use the previously established authorisation from fans and momentum gained from prior success with the acquisition to further propel the value of WWE creative intellectual property. The audiences of the product would eventually dwindle as fans did not take kindly to the overt way in which their favoured product was being dismantled and overwritten. Aldous (n.d.) notes how “ECW wasn’t ECW anymore, and everyone knew it”, and despite budding new wrestling stars finding their footing within the industry at a highly visible level such as The Miz, CM Punk, and Sheamus, “the brand suffered from being a poor version of *Raw* and *Smackdown* and simply became the ‘developmental’ television show for new prospects”. *WWE ECW* was taken off air and shelved in 2010, with the remainder of its creative talent pool redistributed to other areas and outlets of the company. This led to the final asset-stripping of ECW, with its entire legacy reduced down to a commodified and appropriated video library re-presented and reinterpreted at the whim of McMahon and the WWE.

Recounting of history involving the development of WWE as a dominant, globally influential powerhouse of professional wrestling output shows a proven line of aggressive, capitalistic behaviour which survives to the current day, continuing to disrupt organic cultural growth for personal gain and market traction. Renaming incoming experienced talent, such as renaming popular tag team 'War Machine' to 'The Viking Experience' much to fan chagrin (Mazique, 2019), has the effect to lessen perceived prior impact in the industry and create a more favourable legal positioning and creative control over their future work in WWE, which further encourages a sense of amnesia in audiences and easier acceptance of communicated company values and implied direction of preferred engagement. These corporate behaviours reify their hegemonic influence over the industry by asserting power over talent and creative output and taking ownership over external successes, but another major issue is the tendency for acquiring cultural and historical value from subordinate creative outlets and appropriating them for its own needs of constant innovation, sustaining flow of audiences and ongoing striving for increased profits. This leads to discussing the problematic process of cultural appropriation in comparison to the more positive notion of cultural appreciation. Cultural appropriation is defined as "the taking of something produced by members of one culture by members of another" (Young, 2005, p136), with that culture not being "one's own" and the appropriated material consisting of "intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge' (Ziff and Rao, 1997, p1). This differs greatly from the process of cultural appreciation which Gracyk defines as simply exploring "what is there" (2007, p112), meaning that when cultural produce is appreciated, they are "merely exploring manifest aesthetic properties" and arguably are not "taking" anything or creating instances of displacement or blurring of that culture's identity (Cattien and Stopford, 2022, p2). An

argument can be made that some sense of cultural appropriation is observable on the British and global scene in general, particularly in the way visual and stylistic qualities from Lucha Libre have been adopted and further popularised by performers and promotions not native to or tied in any way to the origins of the cultural variant. Examples of this would be wrestlers such as El Ligero, living in reality as Simon Musk from Leeds, England, and Canadian wrestler Riley Vigier performing as El Phantasma. Both performers exemplify an observable nature of global wrestlers adopting the cultural expressions of Lucha Libre by way of masks and name style. Despite these actions potentially being defined as appropriation, it can also be seen as more in line with cultural appreciation as explored by Gracyk, Cattien and Stopford as it comes from a place of enjoying and acknowledging the established aesthetics known to be culturally produced by Latin circles of professional wrestling. Although this study understands these terms are usually reserved for discussing the nature of appropriating minority, ethnocultural elements by a privileged culture without a sense of permission or authorisation, the process can somewhat relate to the hegemonic relationship between WWE as a global, dominant market leader establishing its presence in international markets. In the case of WWE, the company is not simply paying homage but actively taking from and reshaping understanding of those cultural origins by expanding into those new regions, adopting successful elements from them and re-forming them for economic gain.

Furthermore, there is the issue of blurring cultural importance and origins from this argued appropriation. Creative destruction, a term coined by Joseph Schumpeter and described as an “essential fact about capitalism” (2003, p83), refers to the business and production context of an incessant need to innovate by replacing existing or older processes

to make way for new ones. By being established as an ongoing brand presence in the UK wrestling market and using the weight of WWE's dominant economic stance and buying power, NXT UK has arguably achieved a similar effect to that of prior eras of wrestling history whereby the established regional success of a 'scene', its established identities such as style, presentation, individual creativity and the influential power of prior established personnel incorporated within it are simply acquired by neoliberal, expansionist means and absorbed into the ongoing capitalistic, homogenous approach such a large and rigid structure can only maintain. As a result of this consistent, aggressive process, this creative destruction serves to further displace organic development of regional and collective identity in British wrestling circles, as well as stifle potential future growth or successful creative and economic expansion of the national scene outside of WWE's contractual influence.

This conversation revolving around the concept of historical repetition, destructive neoliberal and capitalistic practices by WWE and the potential displacement and stifling of cultural production in the UK within a wrestling context is continued in the final section of this chapter. Experiences and opinions gleaned from ethnographic interviews, alongside further critical examination and close reading of historical and contemporary developments, will be used to further explore both the positive and negative connotations existing with the ongoing hegemonic relationship between the WWE and UK professional wrestling.

NXT UK: Positive Symbiosis or Destructive Neoliberal Expansionism?

From the previous examples given from the history of the American professional wrestling territories, WWE utilises arguably imperialist neoliberal practice in the way it promotes events, values and contracts labour and extends influence across the market with both a paradigm of global expansionism and ideological dominance via the assertion of superior positioning in market share. By the latter part of this statement, I argue that such positioning allows for a hegemonic, top-to-bottom influence of business practice and labour politics by the WWE towards its much less established and economically vulnerable independent counterparts. As Okeley observes, “those who occupy powerful positions in society are thus able to exert their definitions of reality on others” (2012, p89), referring to a hegemonic relationship whereby groups considered subordinate to the dominant one will absorb ideas, processes, and even ideological paradigms both unconsciously and willingly. The concept of cultural hegemony, according to Jackson Lears when referring to Gramsci, “the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group.” This notion of consent is arguably achieved by a “position and function in the world of production” (1985, p568) Gramsci (1971) acknowledges here the differences in power between those with differing levels of wealth, even in democratic states, observing how those inequalities are sustained in culture by analysing the power relations the dominant form serves, and how the culture collaborates with those constraints. Furthermore, the notion of cultural imperialism can be linked to this, which refers to “the use of political and economic power to exalt and spread the values and habits of a foreign culture at the expense of a native culture” (Bullock and Stallybrass, 1977, p. 303). This occurs when the dominant elite of that society, culture, or

group is enticed, coerced, compelled, or even incentivised to align institutions with or promote the structures of the dominant system (Schiller, 1976, White, 2001). This domination can be achieved either by one or both social and political controls. This study contends that the evolution of WWE into a perennial industry leader has, in a microcosmic context, established a hegemonic influence over the creative trajectories and the construction of meaning within the contemporary professional wrestling culture. This influence, notably within the British scene, aligns with the advantages derived from a global neoliberal economic and regulatory system. This hegemonic impact gives rise to collective challenges in labour practices, potentially distorting historical understandings and heritage, as explored in earlier chapters. The cultural aspects discussed, encompassing style, presentation, and culture-specific forms of enjoyment and participation, further underscore the far-reaching implications of WWE's ascendancy.

However, this argument is not entirely new in terms of analysing wrestling within the framework of neoliberalism – an economic and political philosophy involving limiting government economic intervention, emphasising free-market capitalism, deregulation, and promotion of individual entrepreneurship. Giroux notes this neoliberal essence of the individual, referring to it as containing “cynicism toward all things public and collective.” (Giroux, 2001, p6) Silk and Andrews argue that sport “acts as a powerful educational force that [...] organises identity, citizenship, and agency within a neoliberal present” (2012, p1), which links to the observations made by Giardina (2005) who states how sports “work as pedagogical sites to hegemonically re-inscribe and re-present (hetero)-normative discourses on sport, culture, nation, and democracy throughout an ascendant global capitalist order.” (p7) In simpler terms, sports imbue the senses that our current neoliberal world operates –

“purge the system of obstacles to the functioning of free markets; celebrate the virtues of individualism [...] and competitiveness; foster economic self-sufficiency; abolish or weaken social programs....” (Silk, Andrews, 2012, p7)

Butryn situates WWE and its practices within this framework of neoliberalism, noting the historical and continued efforts of the company to globally expand and symbolise the larger American entertainment and sport hegemony. (2012, p281) Butryn observes how WWE still uses problematic stereotypes but knows how to repackage them to suit localised audiences across the world, and yet “still do the ideological work of the conservative corporation” by adopting practices which counter the well-being of its labourers (2012, p291). These include an insistence of workers being independent practitioners so as to not warrant the provision of healthcare insurance, a heavy work and travel schedule, controls over intellectual property, and contractual control over a performer’s independent promotional activity despite their mode of work being defined as such.

Taking these discussions of WWE’s neoliberal expansionism and arguable hegemony over the industry from its dominant position, it was a clear concern among the wrestling fan communities of Britain, and voiced by various popular voices in professional wrestling circles, that the establishment of NXT UK by WWE as a mainstay touring and broadcast wrestling output would disrupt the apparent boom and excitement created by companies such as ICW and Progress, using their superior buying power to entice the highest level talent the country had to offer at the time and binding them to contracts which might exclude their participation within certain avenues of performance and fan interaction. The following part of this chapter explores this situation alongside interviews with industry

practitioners holding views on both positive and negative aspects of this power relation of WWE and the British independent scene. Showcasing both sides of this equation aims to provide a balanced context to show how some see WWE as a future component for opportunity and growth, in opposition by others as seeing the process as unsustainable and damaging to the scene's heritage and cultural identity outside of hegemonic influence.

One of the main positive counterpoints to the issues faced with the WWE disrupting the grassroots UK wrestling boom, other than providing wrestling talent with more international and financial opportunities, is the notion of standards of practice at live events arguably being elevated as a result of WWE's contractual influence over talent obligations. Due to a lack of legislation specifically regarding professional wrestling in Britain as its own unique entity, alongside existing generally within a neoliberal, free-market state of British modernity, the wrestling scene in Britain has mostly been an unregulated domain of undermined health and safety standards for its performers, propped up by the individual talent's will and fortitude to continue engaging with their passions, as the historical expressions earlier mentioned by Robbie Brookside indicate (*Video Diaries*, 1993). This further links to the notion argued by Jansen as a neoliberal rationality to labour (2018a), exploring the circumstances in the wrestling industry whereby professional wrestlers are taking bigger risks with their bodies to create economic opportunity, yet most promotions on the independent circuit are not supplying health benefits or treating them as employees worthy of such.

Oisin Delaney, one half of the tag team 'The NIC' (Northern Irish Connection) (see figure 34), holds a more hopeful view of what WWE can offer the UK scene by setting up a

professional training facility and localised brand, noting the positive aspect of WWE quite literally now being “on our doorstep”. With the new WWE Performance Center being established in London and promoting live events across the country fairly regularly, Delaney proposes that an exchange of skills and experience can be achieved by independent talent being able to wrestle those with experiences wrestling on televised productions for WWE. Delaney states he has already benefitted from such a relationship by being paired with experienced WWE performers at independent events. “When I was young I thought you had to be six-foot-four and built like Arnold Schwarzenegger to even be considered to wrestle for WWE, but now I’ve wrestled guys who have been contracted. It makes it attainable for people”, states Delaney – also indicating a sense of wish fulfilment as a fan growing up engaging with WWE content. Furthermore, Delaney details the benefits of working for WWE as a British performer, stating “when you’re contracted you have job security, health benefits. The NXT UK Performance Centre – it’s like when someone gets signed to a premier league club, the training facilities are phenomenal.” (See appendix 7)



Figure 34: The NIC (Northern Irish Connection) featuring Oisín Delaney (Left) and Charlie Carter (Right)

Kasey Owens, experienced and regularly featured wrestler for ICW, who has had first-hand experience of performing on televised NXT UK shows (see figure 35), parallels Delaney's views on the positive, constructive aspects that the industry leader's contributions can offer the British scene for coming generations. She posits the opinion that it is good for emerging UK wrestling talent to have attainable goals of being able to work for the biggest wrestling company in the world, stating "10 or 11 years ago it was never an opportunity. You could go to Japan or maybe Mexico but a WWE try-out was always too far away". Furthermore, she indicates it incentivises performers to improve further rather than "stay in their bubble." Lastly, Owens acknowledges her appreciation for British wrestling but stresses the important point that modern British wrestling talent are more likely to be inclined to the style of WWE, as well as possibly Japanese and Mexican styles dependent on level of fan engagement. Therefore it may seem more enticing to strive towards working for the WWE because they have grown up with a mostly exclusively WWE-based understanding and appreciation of the sport (see appendix 11).



Figure 35: Kasey Owens (Bottom) performing for NXT UK, receiving a hold from Nina Samuels (Top)

Experienced Belgian-born wrestler Robin Lekime offered a largely oppositional stance to NXT UK and its influence on the British scene, alluding to the sense that traditionally upheld boundaries have been broken and blurred in terms of regional establishment of audience and relationships with particular event spaces – all as a result of WWE taking full, unfettered advantage of a booming regional industry at the whim of lacking regulation and protection. Firstly, he acknowledges the financial security gained from working for the industry leader, but indicates it is not always a certainty that contracted wrestlers will be utilised and end up being paid a contractual minimum without being able to engage with their passions of performance. This is reinforced by Lekime, stating it is “easy money, but if you really love it, it gets itchy after a while and you want to perform”. Secondly, Lekime observes the invasive breaking of respectful traditions in the WWE’s expansion directly into the UK industry, recalling his original entry-point into wrestling in Britain, stating “it was a promoter’s territory. He stuck to his area and didn’t go into anyone else’s. It’s like the old understanding. WWE doesn’t care about that, just money.” As McMahon decided to compete and put the majority of other wrestling territories out of business, Lekime argues, the same is happening in the UK whereby many smaller promotions are disappearing due to losing creative talent pools, relationships with buildings and potential broadcasting opportunities due to the bigger appeal offered by the dominant WWE. This further complements understandings of WWE as a purely capitalistic force of profits superseding cultural appreciation. Lekime completes his view of WWE’s direct involvement in the UK, stating “I’m not a fan of them coming over. [...] Put your stuff on our TV but stay out of our halls. Let our guys learn here. Let our guys work here”, stressing the damaging effects WWE has in limiting opportunities for independent, cultural

growth outside of neoliberal economic paradigms of expansionist profiteering (See appendix 9). Lekime's motivations for such an attitude may stem from decades experience of working on the worldwide independent scene, understanding the effects on this level of the industry when talent pools are acquired and the opportunities for older, veteran wrestlers like him are diminished.

This symbiotic relationship between the dominant industrial leader of WWE to its subordinate, independent regional producers led to a shift in this mentality to wrestling labour nation-wide with many smaller regional promotions investing in medical professionals to attend events and minimum safety concerns being met – all to try and comply with the desires posited by WWE and gaining the potential of being able to book WWE-contracted talent. This leads to those top-level performers still being able to engage with the wider community in a limited fashion and pass down valuable knowledge to future generations as earlier claimed by Delaney. Supplementing this, the large investments made by WWE to provide a high-level training facility staffed by experienced, respected members of the British wrestling fraternity gives both contracted wrestlers the chance to improve further and hone their craft at a higher level, as well as aspiring practitioners to have a feasible line towards working for WWE, as explained by Delaney and Owens. However, as Lekime observes, this has still proven to be a one-sided, potentially-damaging venture due to the rules set favouring one side at mostly the expense of the other. With the introduction of health and safety minimum requirements set in terms of gaining the privilege of booking WWE-contracted talent at independent events, one would argue the advantages and financial gain from higher ticket sales would alone justify the investments made by these smaller promotions. However, this hegemonic relationship between the WWE and the

independent British wrestling scene has negatively affected business for promotions in the way they film and distribute their own live recorded content. Billy Wood notes frustrations when previously dealing with WWE when hiring WWE-contracted talent to perform at a recording for one of IPW: UK's popular annual events 'IPW Anniversary XIV' at Mote Hall, Maidstone. He passionately states "there is a complete correlation between WWE taking talent away from IPW to my eventual walk away from British Wrestling", explaining how he had recent NXT UK signed wrestlers Xia Brookside, Dave Mastiff, and British Strong Style (Trent Seven, Tyler Bate and Pete Dunne) appear at his booked event with the aim of filming the show for later distribution. Woods describes the controversial situation presented to him, noting "they turn up on the day, and [Xia] says "I'm not allowed to be filmed". I went "What? Excuse me?". "I'm not allowed to be filmed." Dave Mastiff was the same, as well as British Strong Style. So, you now have three things you can't do because WWE has said so." (See appendix 2)

As previously discussed, one of the factors for the ongoing success of modern independent wrestling promotions is not just the ability to utilise digital marketing and social media for marketing and fan community outreach, but to create a library of digital content to narrowcast towards their niche network of engaged fans. Billy Wood is a subscriber to the importance of owning content for distribution and has found prior success licensing his library of filmed and edited IPW event footage to various broadcasting networks – most notably producing a regularly featured show entitled "International Pro Wrestling UK" for the Fight Network, as well as being featured on Highspots Wrestling Network – a popular on-demand digital content provider for worldwide independent wrestling content.

Furthermore, Wood continues to reflect on the frustrations of developing talent and characterisations, only for that creativity to eventually be acquired by WWE – leaving further complications for independent promotions to prosper organically. Indicating a sense of frustration, Wood details having to witness complications with independent wrestlers he helped succeed through regular featuring during his tenure as owner of IPW, including the tag team Pretty Deadly (Sam Stokely and Lewis Howley) and other popular independent performers such as Xia Brookside and Damien Dunne. Witnessing those performers having opportunities to work matches for the WWE-led NXT UK promotion as well as eventually becoming fully contracted, it stifled the creative power and opportunities for independent promoters responsible for the original exposure of said talent. “They can work your shows, sure, but they can’t be filmed. It plays with your mind, you know what I mean? It was a problem.” (See appendix 2)

This is reminiscent of the notion that capitalism and neoliberal business practice is quite rigid, relying heavily on innovation and creativity to sustain consistent levels of competitiveness in the modern market. As Larsen notes, “knowledge becomes a strategic force of production and an important commodity” in a contemporary, capitalist and neoliberal society (Larsen, 2014, p161), which Kung further discusses by stating how “viewed strategically, the higher the levels of product creativity [...] the greater the potential for market success and competitive advantage”(Kung, 2017, p161). Due to the nature of the WWE attempting to engage with a wide net of demographics and positing a ‘PG era’ of content production for a worldwide audience, it is unsurprising to witness such a widespread acquisition of the UK’s best and most developed resources by way of in-ring

talent, producers, and promoters. Eventually the WWE established working partner agreements with both Progress (Docking, 2016) and ICW (Leigh, 2017), meaning these promotions would be able to exchange talent for events and cooperate in terms of providing a system of developing fresh new talent into their preferred system of style, presentation and professional practice. The WWE would have instant access to experienced, regional performers to be moved across to its fledgling NXT UK promotion, taking full advantage of their local success and loyal fan following to enhance the visibility and support for its product. It is also alleged that WWE may instigate a clause as part of these partnerships which would allow it to purchase these promotions in full and shut them down if they wish to do so (HBN Staff, n.d.). If this is the case, it is arguably a factor which might influence the owners of any independent promoter engaging with a relationship with WWE to give full compliance to the will and values implied. By proverbially keeping the most successful of British wrestling promotions tied to WWE values and contractually under its influence, the industry leader has potentially repeated history once again by engaging with neoliberal, expansionist strategies to acquire and thwart potential competition. In a similar vein to that of the American territorial promotions and the effects on the regional audiences tied to them, a result could be displacement and distortion of British identity in professional wrestling to suit its own homogenised, generic blend of presentation – thusly further contributing to future generations potentially continuing to understand professional wrestling on these Americanised, mythical terms.

The blame for such a situation cannot be solely attributed to WWE as an aggressive force of free-market expansionism – in fact, the United Kingdom has long since held a history of normalised attitudes and societal structures of neoliberal economics and

capitalistic business practices, arguably leading to national and regional capacities of cultural produce susceptible to global forces of expansion and appropriation. The Thatcher-era of British politics saw a vast shift in attitudes and ideologies relating to economics and market forces, with moves to instigate shifts towards deregulation and free-market competition, privatisation, weakening worker's rights, and the unions protecting their interests as well as promoting widespread welfare cuts (Scott-Samuel et al, 2014, pp54-55). This Thatcher-led shift in British politics and ideology, further linking to the wider frame of Reagan-era liberalised economic models, is ideologically survived by subsequent contemporary ones led by the modern Conservative leaderships of David Cameron, Theresa May and Boris Johnson, as well as adopted by Blairite factions of New Labour. As with the prior era of professional wrestling in Britain whereby national outputs of wrestling produce were mostly supplanted by the economic power and capitalistic appeal of WWF content, the firmly established neoliberal paradigm of its national politics and ongoing class struggles make it a prime environment for a company such as WWE to find success and little in the way of barriers to entry.

As observed with the absorption of the American territories and slate-wiping of prior individual creative success of promotions and wrestling performers alike, there is a very real threat for further displacing actual cultural and historical formations of the sport in the UK and feeding reductive, commercialised and mythical understandings of professional wrestling meaning and identity overall. Although no control can really be placed on fan communities and their choices of engagement, the way in which those engagements are utilised and reframed can be manipulated for beneficial reasons. WWE makes efforts to provide "illusions of community" (Kennedy, 2020, p69) in the way they frame fan

engagement to its own ends, appropriating cultural movements for profit and expansion of hegemonic influence by placing British fan communities, newly-formed as well as futural, within its fabricated sense of globalised wrestling fandom otherwise known as the 'WWE Universe'. Where fans and producers in British wrestling once collaborated to form new identities, meanings and practices of enjoyment and interactional engagement for future generations of British fans to inherit, WWE effectively seeks to acquire such developments and appropriate it for its own needs of profit and expansion at the expense of organic regional, cultural and creative development – all the while using simulated processes of collaboration and spaces for resistive practice so as to stifle real terms for dissent. As Eric Kennedy notes “for WWE, and capitalism on the whole, the merging of collective resistance into stories about the powerfulness of individuals to reform the system serves only to benefit the system” (2020, p84), referring to storylines and characterisations appealing to cathartic pleasure for audiences but not informing any sense of real, collaborative efforts for true change outside of the in-ring narrative diegesis. This is exemplified by the WWE redeploying the “collective counterculture” built up from fan backlash on social media arguing for wrestler Daniel Bryan to be featured more prominently. WWE reformed the narrative around this situation by creating the ‘YES!’ movement, appropriating this collective presentation of resistance into their storylines and characterisation of Bryan. This, as Kennedy defines, led to WWE being the “true winner” by achieving increased revenues, business relations, and boosting the success of its streaming platform, *WWE Network*, and in doing so reinforced the capitalist structure of the company (2020, p83).

Despite the many positive aspects a globally established company can bring to the largely unregulated UK scene, namely in the levelling-up of health and safety standards on

the independent level and giving better financial opportunities for future generations of creative talent, the hegemonic domination of the British wrestling industry will mostly arguably serve to further mystify the regional heritage of the sport of professional wrestling, silence resistive, and dissenting creative movements through economic incentives, and allow the WWE to continue to exist as an establishment actor dictating the global status quo of futural professional wrestling produce.

The final chapter of this thesis aims to explore British professional wrestling within the context of a global pandemic and endurance through multiple stages of national lockdown and social distancing. Continuing concepts from this chapter including neoliberal tendencies of issues will be raised and explored regarding the placement of WWE in the UK during the pandemic and its dominant hegemonic relationship with a stifled independent industry unable to produce. This leads to discussions about the acquiring and re-presenting of cultural heritage through a highly commodified lens, contributing to further futural problematic, generalised readings of professional wrestling in global and regional contexts, as well as driving creative paradigms towards economic grounds rather than organic, culturally produced ones potentially serving as future competition to WWE's historically implied monopolistic aspirations. In terms of British wrestling identity from the context of a global pandemic and national lockdowns, factors of importance and personal incentive to sustain engagement can be outlined. By analysing wrestling from the position of unavailability, paradigms of importance can be understood in terms of what motivates performers and fans to maintain engagement, as well as the factors of live performance which strengthen identities and meaning between performer and fan. Mental health factors

of professional wrestling consumption will be discussed in relation to catharsis achieved from live performance, but further in context of lockdown whereby parasocial factors of remote relationships between fans and favoured performers can be argued. Lastly, controversies involved with the recent 'Speaking Out' movement will be explored in relation to potential legislation and future concerns of labour in coming generations of British professional wrestling promotion and production.

Chapter Five

From Headlocks to Lockdowns: British Wrestling During and Beyond COVID-19

In 2019, the world witnessed the global pandemic and spreading of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), leading to national lockdowns across the globe to try and stop the spread of infection. Britain had its first lockdown in March of 2020, whereby people were not allowed to leave their homes without reasonable excuse, home-working was instigated where possible, and wholesale shutdown of the front-end entertainment, retail and service-based shopfronts was deemed essential. Restrictions were also put into place via social distancing measures, meaning that people were limited on physical interaction and personal proximity, but most critically a control on households and visitation parameters. Alongside the difficulties presented by these changes with access and acquisition of essential supplies such as groceries and healthcare, the gradual shutdown of pubs, clubs, arenas and all other entertainment venues across the country hobbled the wrestling industry in the U.K, with the same effects happening worldwide. With live, audience wrestling events potentially off the table for the foreseeable future, industrial innovations were sought to continue wrestling broadcasts by both the industry leaders and independent promotions, albeit in a much more reduced format. This new situation of major American promotions becoming the predominant avenue for wrestling broadcasts in the UK, alongside the prior abilities for audiences and fans to act as agents for collaborative meaning-making and identity development - calls into question the issues raised from organic cultural creative produce being overtaken by the neo-liberal, acquisitional and commodifying paradigms of companies such as WWE using their hegemonic top-down influence to both appropriate, re-present

and exploit such qualities for capitalistic gains. However, there are also more positive aspects of continuing a sense of collective engagement with professional wrestling more generally in a time where such options were very limited. Further to discussing these notions, this chapter also aims to discuss the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent lockdowns on the British wrestling industry from other facets of critical exploration. These other facets include the mental health implications of lockdown and its relation to the continued relevance and perseverance of professional wrestling fandom, the way in which parasocial factors of relation between fan and wrestler have become more relevant as a result of lockdown, as well as a look into controversies such as the 'Speaking Out' movement, legislative developments and potential futures for British professional wrestling as an industry moving forward beyond COVID-19.

A Brief History of the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Effect on the British Professional Wrestling Industry

The first recorded case of the virus was in Wuhan, China in December of 2019, whereby the World Health Organisation (WHO) was made aware of an outbreak of pneumonia cases in China which had no identifiable cause. Eventually the efforts to contain the outbreak failed, leading to international cases spreading and COVID-19-related deaths being announced all over the world, as well as the virus being coined its namesake from February 2020 onwards. The WHO declared the rapid spreading and outbreaks of the virus as a public health emergency for national concern and eventually characterising it a full global pandemic in March 2020 – further deeming Europe as the epicentre (Moore, 2021). In response, many countries imposed national quarantines and lockdowns to aid in

suppressing the spread of the virus, such as Italy imposing a full closing of the country in early March, followed by strict control of millions of their population by France and Spain as little as a week later (Reuters Staff, 2020). With over a million worldwide cases being reported by April 2020, amid a worldwide race to produce a feasible vaccine for the virus, the United Kingdom made its first full response to the virus with a national lockdown being instigated on the 23rd March, as well as its beginning measures being legally put into force a few days later including businesses deemed 'non-essential' to be closed, people to stay home unless seeking food supplies or medical aid. The rules were soon relaxed, allowing people to leave home for outdoor recreation and exercise as long as social distancing was kept, and people were allowed to meet in groups of up to six people. Throughout July to September of 2020, the UK population experienced a minimal amount of restrictions, with hospitality businesses allowed to reopen to the public while adhering to new safety guidance regarding the virus, and large gatherings of as many as thirty allowed despite urges to maintain the 'rule of six' set from lockdown one. Due to a returning spike of cases and a high maintained rate of COVID-related deaths, a second lockdown was introduced in November 2020, re-closing non-essential businesses and imposing a tiering system whereby areas in the country receiving higher rates of infection would receive much stricter limits to movement, distancing and commercial availability. The final, third lockdown imposed by the UK Government was required due to new variants of the COVID-19 virus being unable to be contained, therefore on the 6th January 2021 restrictions were reimposed similar to the first lockdown whereby people were urged to stay at home as well as support-bubbles being allowed to be formed between households (Baker et al, 2021).

With the nature of these national lockdown rules defining live entertainment outputs in the country as 'non-essential' and unsafe due to social-distancing concerns, it was a difficult time for both promoters and practitioners to sustain their professional careers in wrestling due to the immense financial strain evident from not being able to promote shows or perform. Still accessible to British audiences, All Elite Wrestling and WWE continued to broadcast professional wrestling content during this time due to professional sports and media outlets being deemed 'essential businesses' (Allen, 2020), but in a reduced capacity and requiring some level of creative innovation to do so effectively and maintain audience loyalty. AEW simply continued to film its content without audiences but include a small, socially-distanced group of their contracted wrestlers as an impromptu small audience in the attempt to act as a proxy for the expected audible response and live participation usually portrayed. WWE used a technological approach to innovate a response to this new broadcasting situation, dubbing its new televised experience the "Thunderdome", whereby their shows were broadcasted from their 'performance centre' – a facility the company uses to train upcoming talent – equipped with a ring surrounded by a proxy 'audience' comprised of video walls showing live reactions from fans streaming the show from home. This concept eventually rolled out to whole arenas in the attempt to preserve the typical touring presentation the company would usually offer (see figure 36).



Figure 36: WWE's 'Thunderdome' arena setup, replacing live audiences with walls of screens showing streamed viewers

NXT UK continued to broadcast in the UK under a similarly reduced context as its top-end WWE counterparts once restarting in late 2020 after a post-lockdown hiatus, utilising the 'Thunderdome' concept of fans acting as proxy live audiences by being streamed to screen walls surrounding the ring in the broadcast. However, Independent promotions in Britain suffered greatly during this period, evidently unable to create production values akin to the industry heavy-hitters of AEW and WWE and sustain themselves fully without revenue being received from live attended shows. British promotions outside of the WWE network of affiliated support but still holding enough resources from prior success still provided content via their on-demand services, offering 'empty arena' matches whereby wrestlers would be filmed competing in-ring but without the support of a live crowd. Despite these efforts to continue providing wrestling content to audiences, albeit in a reduced form, fans did not witness the same level of immersion and enjoyment found typically when engaged either as a live participant or remotely viewing fully-audenced content. In our discussions about this period of wrestling presentation in the

pandemic, Nottingham-based wrestling fan Leigh Broxton expressed a distaste about the use of fake crowd noise being introduced with the purpose of providing a pseudo sense of immersion one would achieve at an attended live event. “As a British wrestling fan it’s all about the atmosphere and there wasn’t any”, states Broxton, acknowledging the intrinsic values British fans find in the ability to act as active participant and collaborator at live wrestling shows. After comparing the issue with similar efforts being made in football broadcasts, Broxton furthers this expression of distaste, “it’s the lack of atmosphere. Like in British wrestling there will be some idiot standing up and starting a chant to take your shoes off if you hate Zack Gibson. It was brilliant”, concluding with a useful contrast of saying how watching a wrestling show without the ability to participate, or even witness organic participation remotely, “feels a bit like playing a video game without the A.I doing anything back” (see appendix 6). Broxton’s assertions give insight into the importance fans place on the relationship attained between product and consumer, as well as in the more micro-sense of fan and performer by way of witnessing feedback and development based on their input via instigating chants, directly engaging with performers as well as simply cheering, booing or remaining intentionally silent. On the other end of this relationship scale, these points are further linked to similar assertions made by British wrestling industry veteran Dean Ayass, noting the following from the position of being an experienced performer, commentator, and producer. He mentions experiences of performing in front of crowds as small as dozens, but still enjoying the process due to those few fans still showing enthusiasm and passion enough to react and participate. Ayass indicates the importance of such an audience-to-producer connection on the direct, live level in order to provide the adequate atmosphere and creative drive for modern audiences to interact. “Whether you’re a face or a heel, the worst thing is indifference. If I’m cutting a promo and people are just

sitting there, it's the worst thing you could have. It must be very difficult for them now." (See appendix 8). Ayass notes one of the core modes that allows professional wrestling an ongoing level of success and engagement from fan and audience communities is due to the emotional connection it creates and creatively feeds from.

Linking this discussion to wrestling presentations by WWE during the pandemic leads to a further consideration of issues earlier offered in Chapter 3, whereby controlling audiences or replacing them entirely with preconceived, idealistic placeholders only serve to reinforce hegemonic values being presented and accepted in a top-down manner. This potentially limits opportunities for organic, natural cultural expression and collaborative meaning-making – which is argued as a primary mode of enjoyment and identity within British circles of professional wrestling. It has been an ongoing criticism of WWE to manufacture desired audience reactions in post-edited broadcasts and presentations of its media products, the most common example being boos for particularly invested-in performers being replaced with cheers to justify creative positioning by the company and satisfy investors. A consistently argued use of this strategy accused by viewers is exemplified by the dubbing-over of crowds booing wrestler Roman Reigns, arguably due to either a simple dislike of the style and efforts given by the performer or resisting the overt 'push' of the character on fans by the company so as to attempt to engineer a consensual form of support. As noted by Dave Meltzer and Bryan Alvarez of Wrestling Observer Radio, WWE collects moments of positive fan reactions and later uses clips from that acquired pool to insert over unfavourable responses (Vaccaro, 2022). The continued use of piped-in fan noise is evidence of this, considering the broadcasts of NXT UK utilised engineered crowd noise in this way alongside the muted visuals of 'Thunderdome' streamed fans. This process parallels

that of the holiday-camp wrestling promotions such as All Star Wrestling and LDN that utilise strategies to direct audiences into desired lines of engagement so as to provide the illusion of wilful enjoyment. With these forces acting as ‘audience manipulators’, the resistive and dissenting power audiences and fans may possess become nullified and the effects of their illusory positive engagements become exploited and commodified.

These problematic notions of genuine cultural output in-context of professional wrestling being acquired, re-formed, and appropriated for commodifiable gain is further exemplified within the specific iteration of NXT UK in its efforts to appeal to British audiences and sentiments via cultural and historical acknowledgements in its presentation. With WWE and AEW wrestling being the predominant output of wrestling available to the masses during the time of the global coronavirus pandemic, it proved a prime period for the industry leader to fully capitalise on its regional positioning in the UK by holding an ongoing ‘Heritage Cup Tournament’ (see figure 37) on its weekly syndicated NXT UK broadcast. Wrestlers including ‘A-Kid’, Noam Dar, Dave Mastiff and Trent Seven competed in matches styled under original Mountevans rulings, retitled first as “British Rounds” rules but eventually altogether being rebranded as “Heritage Rules”. These would include a slightly more streamlined version of Mountevans rules, whereby six rounds of three minutes each were fought with two falls achieving a win, but public warnings for foul play were no longer observed and restrictions on legality of techniques were not scrutinised as heavily as before. The winner of this tournament would hold the trophy and title of Heritage Cup Champion, making title defences as and when challenged or the next tournament commencing to determine a prime contender.



Figure 37: A-Kid (Left) shaking hands with Tyler Bate (Right), about to compete for the NXT UK Heritage Cup

Alongside consistent references to past figures in British wrestling history provided by the commentary of retired British wrestler and Ring of Honor veteran Nigel McGuinness, WWE was arguably attempting to seek an agreeable sense of authorisation from UK audiences by reading a sense of authenticity due to its clear efforts to create bridges between historical and contemporary presentations. This is very similar to pre-pandemic efforts with the NXT UK promotion to create an authentic historical link, which is a tactic used by WWE to tap “into nostalgia for the “kayfabe” era of televised U.S. wrestling” (Watts, 2019, p226) As Warden observes, venue and location can be a culturally significant artefact associated with professional wrestling, the assertions of value and associations with identity between audience and product. Referring to the original launch of the UK championship belt to be competed for by NXT UK talent, and despite the ability for people to engage with associated content via the WWE Network, the “backdrop of Blackpool’s iconic Tower Ballroom and the notable traditional British strong style meant the actual

location of this event remained of key importance” (Warden, 2018, p866). There was a clear intended use of the iconic British landmark and its association with live performance and a history of professional wrestling being promoted in Blackpool, as an effort to frame its attempted promotion of British wrestling as authentic in parallel with past ventures – connecting to notions of indexical authenticity as explored by Grayson and Martinec, whereby an artefact or product can be linked to a point in time either in the temporal or spatial sense. By being selective in the venues promoted, NXT UK as an extension of WWE sought to inherit the symbolic cultural value associated between those areas and the historical establishment of wrestling, and thusly conveying its product as just as authentic and worthy of regional support as that of independent, grassroots efforts.

However, it can be argued that this is a typical and historically witnessed trait of WWE to acquire cultural wrestling outputs, such as the earlier mentioned territorial buy-outs and redeployment of the ECW brand, rearticulate it within their own boundaries of creative control and redeploy its new ‘spectacular’ form for capitalistic gain as opposed to making genuine cultural nods and respectful collaboration with existing identities and practices. This then further contributes to the mythicising of professional wrestling readings and problematically displaces those important, original regional identities. This to the writings of Debord, who argues that the proliferation of images and spectacles alienate us from each other as well as our own understandings of self and identity. He states “the spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image” (1994, p17). The media distils the world into simplistic narratives for people, which in turn closes temporal and geographical distances and gives an illusion of a connected, universal and societal whole. Debord observes that this leads to people’s lives remaining as merely a series of

commodity exchanges, and even applying this theory to today, emotions, opinions, and communities are exploited and monetised – becoming commodifiable. Of course, the positives are clear with the spectacular aspect of professional wrestling providing means of escape from the struggles of post-modern life. Emotional catharsis can be achieved through the process of audiences living vicariously through the actions and careers of their favoured performers, witnessing their successes and expressing disdain, sometimes even physically, against their immoral, unethical actions of the ‘heel’, antagonist opponents. In the spirit of Nietzsche and concepts of ‘The Last Man’ (1995), this highly-sought feeling of emotional equilibrium to placate realisations of personal troubles might be considered unfavourably nihilistic yet, conversely, leads to functional maintenance of our everyday lives.

The connections between the writings of Debord on commodified spectacle and the negative ramifications of WWE being involved so heavily in the British wrestling scene also links to theories posed by Riesman (1967), whereby a scale of ideal social types are presented. The first of these is defined as ‘tradition-directed’, whose communities understand what they do is because it is the norm, acknowledge authority as indisputable and have no desire for autonomy. The second type are ‘inner-directed’ people who look to past iterations of authority and social lineage to determine their acts and affairs, and lastly the third type being ‘other-directed’ people with instilled values from social lineage being overtaken by the authority of their peers. With a continued sense of WWE supplanting understandings of British wrestling history with its own preferred, commodifiable iteration – particularly in a period where resistive and organic, progressive forms of British identity in wrestling are almost non-existent and unable to produce to the same degree as before – the argued generic, mythic readings of wrestling are thus allowed to proliferate further to the

point that futural cultural efforts may always be effected by this hegemonic relationship of top-down ideological creative practice. In the same way as with the American territories and the prior era of British wrestling, these generational cultural pools of knowledge, ideas and even talent are arguably being commodified into Debordian spectacles, affecting blurred futural understandings of important cultural aspects. This potentially could lead to wrestling audiences no longer seeking 'inner' direction in terms of the Riesman-esque qualities of informing direction and engagement from prior knowledge and lineage. These communities, then, are feasibly 'other-directed' in terms of being an unconscious passenger succumbing to the re-presentation and commodification of their own heritage, meanwhile taking those reformed assertions as read. This could affect future generations of performers, with attaining the status of WWE performer being a prime *raison d'être* for career goals, and adhering to the hegemonic values presented by WWE – such as peak physical fitness and look, relinquishing creative control of their characterisation, and agreeing to highly demanding contractual obligations . These desires may not be purely driven by the economic incentives of higher pay opportunities – as shown from the interview with wrestler Kasey Owens, she states her reasoning for striving for a WWE contract stems from a fannish desire of fantasy-fulfilment, whereby the ultimate goal is to be appreciated on such a grand stage and perform in the same light as those figures, such as Shawn Michaels, she grew up watching and admiring (appendix 11).

Some efforts were seemingly made to pay homage, such as the decision to continue utilising key historical figures in British wrestling history within the presentation and production of NXT UK – namely with *World of Sport* veteran Johnny Saint serving as an on-air commissioner and influential, retired British wrestler and ROH alumni Nigel McGuinness

providing colour-commentary for broadcasts, alongside the occasional crowd appearance from other past *World of Sport* performers such as Adrian Street (see figure 38) and Marty Jones. These inclusions are only superficial ways for the WWE to try and justify their continued commodification of acquired relevant cultural produce, but in the true sense of ongoing creative destruction the consistent economic drive capitalist producers require, these elements only served to provide passing ideas for populating its streaming service ‘WWE Network’ with viable content to aid in channelling more viewers to its flagship content – further feeding its ongoing drive to sustain its near-monopoly industrial status.

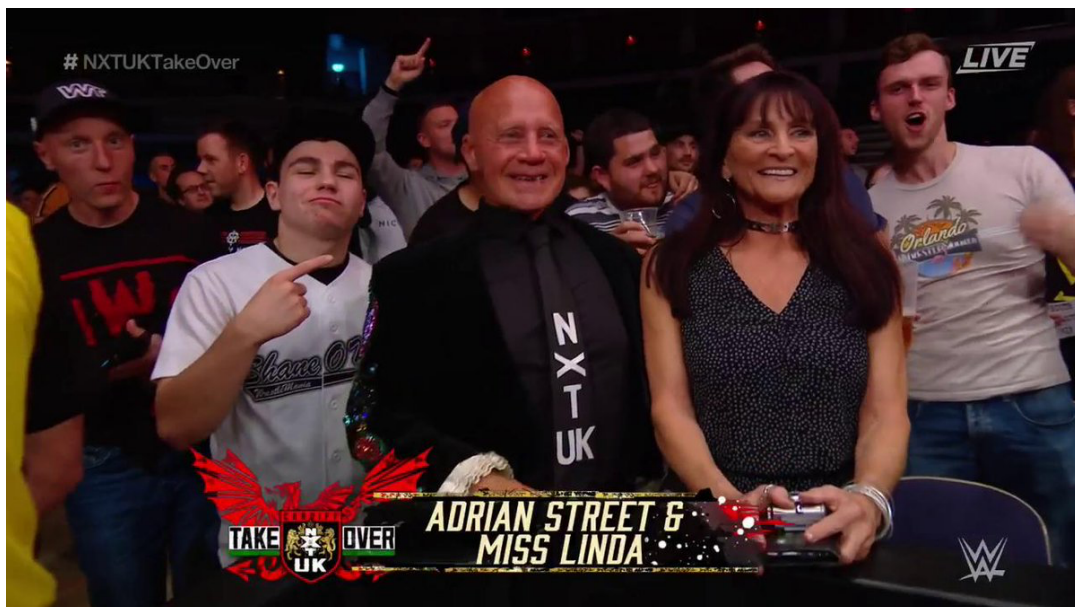


Figure 38: World of Sport wrestler Adrian Street (Left) and fellow wrestler, wife and prior valet Miss Linda (Right) making an appearance at the NXT UK Takeover: Wales event

This problematic situation of British wrestling provision during the pandemic did not yield entirely negative repercussions, however, but also highlighted the generosity and support given by the community at large still highly engaged with their favoured content despite existing in a reduced and exclusively remote context. Fans continued to support

wrestlers through purchase of merchandise such as signed T-shirts, posters, and photographs, as well as fundraising events held to provide income opportunities for performers and money towards supporting those in the industry suffering worst. An example of this is the 'No Fans Monday' event promoted in March of 2020, involving a partnership between Wrestletalk, an online-based wrestling fan news service, and British-Born NJPW veteran wrestler Will Ospreay to present a streamed, audience-less wrestling show and encourage donations from viewers. The event managed to raise over £9200 in donations which was divided up as income support for the featured wrestlers on the show (Blanchard, 2020). As noted by Davidson and Giardina, this presents a "snapshot of the sentiments of those who are engaging with the sport at a high level in the midst of global uncertainty" (2020, p471). Although circumstances can hinder and limit the ways in which audiences and fans can interact and engage with their chosen sports outputs, the continued loyalty shown by way of extended financial support and communal solidarity for its futural sustainability is telling of the importance that engagement has on their daily lives. This also extends to the performers and industry workers, whereby factors of personal importance can also be highlighted outside of simple economic grounds of job security and personal livelihood. As Barthes and other writers have observed throughout history, wrestling can be argued to serve as valuable catharsis for ordinary working people to both negotiate meaning in an increasingly difficult post-modern world and a Bakhtinian sense of carnivalesque outlet and expression for underlying class-based tensions. In the contemporary, post-digital era of fandom, the qualities of importance intrinsic to continued fan support and engagement can be detailed when assessing what is uniquely missed when those avenues for consumption are unavailable, as well as factoring in these elements of continued financial support in times of widespread economic uncertainty. The following

section will detail the mental health aspects which connect fans to their favoured performers and promotions, as well as the motivational factors for practitioners to maintain their industrial identity during a global pandemic and era of vastly limited opportunities for employment and expression of their passions. By showcasing these elements, a better understanding will be met in terms of the universal qualities of what it means to be a fan of British wrestling, and perhaps of wrestling in a general sense.

Professional Wrestling and Mental Health

Despite WWE continuing with its ability to promote NXT UK during the pandemic and serving as one of the few viably consumable outlets for British professional wrestling broadcasts, a continued level of support was given by fans of independent British promotions and performers. As earlier stated, fans donated to fundraisers in order to support their favoured athletes in sustaining costs incurred from loss of work opportunities, as well as continue to purchase merchandise such as t-shirts and autographed materials, meanwhile the performers themselves maintained a sense of their professional expression by consistently engaging with fans and past content via social media and video sharing platforms.

The global COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns saw an observable decline in mental health, as observed by Chandola et al as being most prevalent in the early stages of the first national lockdown with “more than one in three adults living in the UK reporting problematic levels of mental health” (2020, p6). Multiple concerns are argued to have caused these issues, with the most obvious being the general stressors of possible exposure

to the new illness, potentially dealing with the loss and bereavement of family and relatives, as well as growing prospects of unemployment and economic uncertainty (Ayling et al, 2020, p1). One particular element affecting mental health decline during this pandemic period was the intense loneliness experienced by many due to the imposed social distancing laws, further causing common mental disorders (CMD) such as clinical depression via factors including being furloughed from employment, living alone, and further problematic developed behaviour including smartphone addiction in teenagers and adults (Catling et al, 2022). Even prior to the pandemic, multiple studies have found a general deterioration of mental health and well-being in the British population in a post-Thatcher neoliberal ideological state, with Scott-Samuel et al commenting that “Thatcherism has had a fundamental and long-term impact on public health and health inequalities in Britain because of the way it affected the social determinants of health and made socioeconomic position an ever more important factor in health and well-being” (2014, p54). This quote highlights that Thatcherism, the political and economic policies associated with Margaret Thatcher's leadership in the UK, has had a lasting and significant influence on public health and health disparities in Britain. This impact was primarily due to the way Thatcherism shaped the social determinants of health and emphasised the role of socioeconomic status as a crucial factor affecting the health and overall well-being of individuals. In essence, it underscores the enduring consequences of Thatcherism on the health and social inequalities within the country, linking policy decisions to health outcomes

Alongside this factor of class-based economic frailty, the long process of Britain repealing its membership to the European Union, otherwise known as Brexit, has taken its toll on the population and particularly within the cross-section of people who voted to remain (Hervy et al, 2022, p5). In an era of widespread mental health disorders as a result of

national policies, legislative decisions, an overall ideological shift which favours economic strength and value over general wellbeing – creative media and entertainment products, as well as the factors connecting them with audiences, are more important than ever.

In the context of British professional wrestling, some insight was gathered when interacting with fellow fans at live, pre-COVID professional wrestling events. There were multiple occasions where general social engagement and impromptu discussion led to understanding reasons for continued viewing of the sport and desires to engage with the community at large. Many fans offered reasonings associated with sustaining one's own mental health by way of feeling part of something important, having fun and the release from the struggles of everyday life and employment, as well as feeling fulfilled witnessing the success of others. This sentiment was also conveyed in interview conversation with long-time Nottingham-based wrestling fan Leigh Broxton, when asked what he missed most about being part of the wrestling community and engaging with the sport in a live sense. Broxton notes "when you're a part of that crowd and have that atmosphere, you could be in the worst crisis in your life but be able to forget about it", indicating the cathartic release and escapism gained from engaging with wrestling, its narratives, communities and aspects of living vicariously through favoured characters. "All that matters is what's going on between those ropes. [...] Apart from some exceptions, they all seem like nice people and genuinely want your opinion. Everything about the experience I miss, the whole package."

(See appendix 6)

The feelings presented by the likes of Broxton and fellow fans express the mental and emotional fulfilment gained when engaging with professional wrestling via live

attendance, participation and remote, consistent viewership. They also coincide with other accounts within the media which further assert the positive connotations of consuming professional wrestling in the context of mental health, such as relating the sport to a form of “redneck anime” which serves as a unique and useful mode of creative engagement argued suitable for those who tend to over-analyse and suffer from anxiety (Melton, 2021). Other accounts also attribute mental health benefits to wrestling consumption, such as being influenced to begin a health and fitness regime, as well as cope with the loss of a relative through the emotional catharsis received from being immersed within the highly emotional narrative diegesis the sporting performance can offer (Vasquez, 2017). However, it is performers, athletes, and promoters, not just fans, who benefit from such an argued sense of positive emotional connection and personal reinforcement. Wrestlers such as Scotty Rawks and Chris Ridgeway both relate their profession to gaining positive mental health factors as either an engaged fan, or as a practitioner alongside those factors informing part of their incentive to do so. Rawks explains the feeling of escapism a performer can achieve when becoming immersed in characterisation, stating that “when you come out of the curtain you leave your individual mind-set backstage, because your energy is focussed on portraying a different character to entertain others. You quite literally get to be a different person for half an hour.” (Jones, 2018, para 5). Ridgeway explains the fulfilment gained from fans as both escapism from simply getting “to come out of whatever the hell is going on in their life” and having something they can control and be proud of within the process of giving dedicated support and engagement with their favoured promotion or individual athlete (Jones, 2018, para 16-18).

Further discussing mental health factors connected to practitioners may also relate to a consistent desire to perform and express themselves creatively, gained through the vehicle of their characters and enactment of physical and emotional labour in and out of the ring. Doing so leads to gaining both a sense of fulfilment in providing entertainment and positive experience to those in attendance and seeing direct feedback and emotional response based on stimuli they have created. Oisín Delaney relates to this emotional fulfilment gained, and sorely desired from a position of social distancing and lockdown, from being a wrestler performing in front of live audiences. He says “performing on shows is what it’s all about. When [...] the crowd are reacting to what you’re doing. It’s the feeling you want when you become a wrestler, it’s that feeling in a match when there’s a crowd around the ring and you have them in the palm of your hand.” (See appendix 7) These experiences of wrestling practitioners in time of sparse opportunities for performance links both to established notions of catering to the human need to belong (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), the companionship gained from being engaged within a community of shared interest and self-fulfilment in terms of enacting on values of the self. This companionship and the desired feeling of community relates to Smith’s notes on wrestling as a unique form of collaborative emotional labour and what he terms as “latent empathy” in the performers, stating “each performer, despite the outward display of hatred and domination, is responsible for his opponent’s welfare. The two main manifestations of empathy are protection and trust.” (Smith, 2008, p169) From discussing the experiences and feelings towards their professions, wrestlers seem to imply there is an effort to seek reinforcement of self throughout their creative exploits and receiving emotional fulfilment through support from fans, which is largely reminiscent of the notion defined by Dutton as “expressive authenticity”, which involves an understanding of something becoming authentic or living up to the status of

such through the process of “true expression of an individual’s or a society’s values and beliefs” (2003, p259). Furthermore, parallels can be established between wrestling performance to that of creative arts and theatrical outputs, as well as fan-centric activity such as cosplay – a term combining the words ‘costume’ and ‘play’ to define a community of fans that attend events dressed as their favoured fictional character and dedicate vast resources to do so. (Rahman et al, 2012, p318)

Just as fans observably seek the sense of belonging and shared identity as fan studies suggest and gain fulfilment from personal expression, arguably contributing to positive mental health factors, wrestling practitioners also seek and gain gratification through the art of live performance and the very act of playing a character. In a manner akin to the formation of 'tribes' within subcultural communities characterised by shared participatory practices, wrestlers unite to create a family bound by their unwavering dedication to the sport. This close-knit community shares a collective experience of cooperative emotional and physical commitment, where they labour together in pursuit of their shared passion. These family-like groups are bonded by such activity, sharing a “sense of belonging, rituals, traditions and moral responsibility to each other” (Rahman et al, 2012, p320) as witnessed in cosplay and other performative communities involving fandom, experientially and culturally informed as opposed to merely by gender, class or attitudes (Cova and Cova, 2002).

As with cosplayers, the identification of wrestlers is “not stagnant; it often shifts and evolves over the course of time without a fixed boundary.” (Rahman et al, 2012, p321). The key distinction lies in the fact that in broader international wrestling traditions, particularly

within Mexican and Japanese contexts, wrestlers often express their character in a more imaginative and flamboyant manner. This is evident in their use of masks, capes, and elaborately adorned attire, which they employ to create theatrical and captivating entrances at events. These wrestlers also tend to embody largely externalised, mythical personas as part of their performances. The majority of these kinds of 'gimmicks' tend to evolve and change over time, with wrestlers commonly creating entirely new performed identities as a means of refreshing one's career or appeal with fans. However, the most successful characters in wrestling in terms of sustained fan support and engagement, are arguably those which are simply an extension of the real-world personalities and identities of the athletes themselves, often using a version of their own real names and imbuing experiences contextual to their own lives within their performed characters. Sha Samuels created his gimmick name through the simple shortening of his real first name "Shaheen" , applying his real middle-name of Samuels as his character surname, as well as influencing his character from both a love for British gangster films as *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (Richie G, 1998) and *Football Factory* (Love N, 2004) and being a native Londoner. Robin Lekime wrestles as a performative extension of his own identity and ideals, informing his sports-based, grappling-based performative aesthetic on a real-life passion for bodybuilding and technical wrestling, as well as other contemporary British wrestlers such as Chris Ridgeway and Dan Moloney all embodying characterisations inspired by reality and true-life experience. Torrisen and Stickley refer to the dramaturgical model of the self and theories originally explored by Goffman (1974), suggesting how identities are always being reformed through the process of social interaction with fellow beings, leading to the understanding within this model that people exist as performing actors due to not being a consistent, psychological entity (2018, p52). It is a recurring discussion in academic

discourse to connect the act of participatory performance, theatrical or otherwise, to the notion of sustained or improved mental health and outlook of life for individuals, as well as being integral to an overall healthy society (Jones, 2007). Torrisen and Stickley argue from their study on such a relationship that people engaging with theatre “improved their wellbeing by giving them something meaningful to do, social contact, peer support and improved self-esteem” (2018, p49)

By linking these notions of performance identity to that of wrestling characterisation and performed reality, it is easier to understand the desire for practitioners in the field to continue engaging with audiences and further develop their performed sense of identity, and long for it in times where they are mostly cut off from the ability to do so. In these times, what is missed is the sense of belonging and communities developed through shared experience, labour and even hardship. Kasey Owens, when referring to her motivation for continued practice in the field, states how being involved in creatively embodying a performed persona offers relief and escape from the monotony of daily life She states that wrestling “becomes a family, it becomes that other half of you. [...]”, before moving on to make an insightful and original contrast to her day job for Ann Summers. “It’s about empowering women and making them feel great [...]. We’re there to make sure everyone feels great [...] and has the best time of their life”, Owens observes, before finishing the comparison by stating “I think that side of my life helps the wrestling side as I’m there to make sure people leave happy and have a great time. If it means me getting hit over the head a million times with a chair, I don’t care!” (see appendix 11). Owens relates her sense of *raison d’être* as a wrestler in terms of providing a positive experience and emotional connection with fans and audiences, with a returned sense of accomplished self by doing so,

therefore linking concepts of mental health as incentive for practice and engagement .

Samuels offers a similar understanding of this concept when ruminating on motivations of being a wrestler and the particular elements missed and deemed most important from a context of no longer having access. Due to having incurred injuries prior to the COVID-19 shutdowns, Samuels expresses self-doubt for his eventual post-pandemic return to the sport due to the long period since the last time he has performed in front of fans. “I’m going to have anxiety which I’ve never had before – like, can I still do this? That anxiety, fear about wrestling is always on your mind. Am I as creative as I was? When you’re in that wrestling bubble your head is always thinking.” (See appendix 10)

The statement made by Samuels here, alongside the prior observations made by Owens, represents the argued notion of performance and expression being intrinsically linked to mental health factors, as well as associations with cosplay whereby the performance and feedback from an active community of fans provides people with a means of creating contexts of joy and contentment not witnessed or achievable in their daily lives. This can be the exhilaration of victory or the garnering of vocal admiration from a huge crowd of fans. This general concept of missing the cathartic emotional feeling garnered from response to stimulus created as a practitioner also relates to the opposite content, such as Robin Lekime relating how much he missed engaging with fans as a ‘heel’. He states “I’m a heel in real life, I enjoy pissing people off. It’s not in a harsh way but an amusing way. That’s what I miss is having hundreds of people booing me, when I come up with something where you get the reaction from the crowd.” (See appendix 9) This relates back to the concepts earlier explored by Torrisen and Stickley where performance and creative expression can lead to a better understanding of the self, sustaining mental health through cathartic outlets

of creativity – and in Lekime’s case, a full realisation of self-esteem through such understanding and enjoyment of self-identity.

Parasocial Factors of Wrestling Fandom

When discussing the concept of what British wrestling existed as in a time of uncertainty and obscurity within the global COVID-19 pandemic, it is worth revisiting the concept of the relationship between wrestling performer and fan and how that connection is maintained, stemming from a shift between live and in-person connection via audience response and fan-producer interaction in the personal sense to that of a temporal and spatial shift to watching within a largely disconnected format. By exploring parasocial interactions and relationships (Horton and Wohl, 1956), connections will be made to the sense that most fandom, particularly that of professional wrestling, pertains to the very human concept of needing to belong or be a part of something meaningful (Pickett et al, 2004), but unique factors can be related when showcased within the specific context of fans engaging with favoured wrestling performers.

Relating emotional connection between wrestler and fan is not a new concept. Example of this include earlier mentioned work by Jenkins explored the masculine identity factors in classic WWF wrestling, noting they arguably cater to male fans and the desire to live vicariously through wrestlers as a sense of hyper-masculine wish fulfilment (2005), as well as the general framework of sports fan studies eluding to the notion that following a sport and a team caters towards the psychological needs of the self and one’s own identity. Contributors to sports fandom discourse have stressed the notion for following sports, and

particularly teams within sport, can be argued to cater towards the psychological needs for fans in terms of giving a sense of emotional belonging and purpose via the established emotional connection created from their engagement (Wann, James, 2019). For example, one may identify with a certain set of values posited by a team in terms of the personality of its players or even the identity of the city or area represented, such as being hard-working, working class, or blue-collar (Doyle et al, 2013). When connecting the notions of forced lockdowns, limited social interaction, and the context of wrestling fans no longer interacting with their chosen wrestling promotions in a personal, physical manner such as live shows – parasocial interaction (PSI) and parasocial relationships (PSR) and their relation to how a fan might emotionally connect to a wrestler or wrestling performer in the digital, physically disconnected sense is a potentially insightful direction for discussion.

Although both PSI and PSR relate to the notion of emotional sense of connection people develop between themselves and media or fictional personalities in an unreciprocated sense (Jarzyna, 2021, p1), there is a boundary between the two terms which must be highlighted due to the tendency for them to be conflated in contemporary discourse. PSR is a term used in more of a macro sense of referring to the general interpersonal connect one makes with a media personality outside of an immediate setting, whereas PSI specifically refers to the micro sense, defining the conversational dynamic which occurs between viewer and media personality when direct address is utilised (Schramm and Hartman. 2008). Similarly to real-life, in-person social encounters, people may establish an impression of a media performer during their first parasocial encounter and develop feelings of liking, solidarity and even trust with said personality despite the spatial, and sometimes even temporal, boundaries between them (Tukachinsky, 2010).

These presented factors and experiences related to professional wrestling, its remaining practices, emotional connection with viewership and endurance to sustain itself during a time of global uncertainty allows for a “snapshot” of high-level, heavily engaged fan sentiment, and arguably provides substance to the notion that consumers of sport, and by extension professional wrestling, continue to showcase appreciation and close dedication to their chosen brand or creative output despite a reduced context and observable ratings decline (Davidson, Giardina, 2020, p471-472). As presented throughout this chapter, it is arguable that a development of parasocial relationship – provided via direct address and digitally mediated content produced by promotions and individual talent – allows for the sustenance of emotional connection and continued support in similar ways created by engagement and participation found at live wrestling events. Instead of patting our favourite wrestlers back after a match, or joining in on a chant towards a heel wrestler to garner physical, emotional response and oft times inform creative direction in a match, this process is replaced by a remote form of interaction which, although it does not share the temporal and spatial characteristics of typical live participation, sustains an equally intrinsic emotional connection and incentive for further pursuit of support and engagement with chosen promotions and individual athletes. With the process of wrestlers being able to maintain fan engagement by producing video content on a semi-regular basis, it allows for their emotional needs to be satisfied in terms of the need to perform and express themselves through their creativity and continued development of professional characterisation. Examples of this include Sha Samuels performing regular comedy-based skits via social media in the form of short videos entitled ‘Mug of the Week’, where Samuels would choose a particular public figure involved in recent controversy and direct a typical

wrestling-based 'promo', an industry term relating to a directed monologue performed by a wrestler in order to instigate potential feuds or rivalries, as well as to help promote an upcoming match or event. Alongside this, many wrestlers chose the lapse of in-ring opportunities throughout lockdown to 'perform' and engage with fans via posting exercise videos and updates on their personal health and fitness regimes, as well as take opportunities to discuss their experiences and views on many of the wide range of wrestling-based podcasts proliferating in availability throughout lockdown.

A major factor in remote enjoyment of professional wrestling, and one closely connecting to the parasocial value televised professional wrestling offers, is that of witnessing the live attended audience and any form of broadcasted commentary included. With communal expression of enjoyment and aiding in the guidance of meaning-making through cheering, booing, and audible critique at particularly poignant moments within the performed fight narrative, an emotional connection can be achieved both through a combined sense of direct address and immersion gained from witnessing wrestling content within a broadcasted-live context. The remote viewer may achieve emotional investment in a quasi-live manner as well as gain insights into shared meanings and identities by witnessing others enjoying the same content and verbally expressing themselves. As Warden notes, "these three elements – the physical, the speech act and silence – exist in a performative Gordian knot in professional wrestling, intertwining, interrupting and interweaving to create a palimpsestic aural and visual experience for audience and performer alike" (2017, p24), observing the established connection occurring through the emotional, shared diegesis of performance, narration and audience engagement. Burke explored similar dynamics of remote audiences of live broadcast wrestling (2001), but more-

so within a framework of analysing toxic behaviour in the group dynamic of viewership, such as assertions of masculinity, sexism, and outcasted minorities. However, the notion of participation within a live dynamic and being influenced to act as a live audience member despite existing in a spatially remote fashion connects to this argument of parasocial relationships being developed. Although this relates mostly to groups enjoying wrestling in such a way, joining in with chants made within the broadcast and acting as pseudo-attendees themselves, this immersion can still arguably be felt on an individual level with strong emotional connections being formed between viewer, televised audience communities, and the individual performers. As Grossberg notes, fan's investment in certain practices and texts provides them with strategies which enable them to gain a certain amount of control over their affective life, which further enables them to invest in new forms of meaning, pleasure and identity in order to cope with new forms of pain, pessimism, frustration, alienation, terror and boredom (1992, pp64-65). The elements of parasocial interaction and continued engagement with favoured creative output during a global pandemic showcases the personal emotional satisfaction and mental health fulfilments fans gain from the ability to sustain relationships with their favoured British wrestling content, and further highlights the important values live interaction and collaborative practice can bring in terms of bridging the relationship between fan, performer, and promotion. Through the example of wrestling fan communities remotely sustaining their connection to the wrestlers, promotions, and communities which provide them joy and emotional catharsis, it arguably aids in reaffirming the notion of how "fandom is, at least potentially, the site of the optimism, invigoration and passion which are necessary conditions for any struggle to change the conditions of one's life (Grossberg, 1992, p65).

'Speaking Out', Legislation and the Uncertain Future of British Professional

Wrestling

With many setbacks caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been made more apparent in British circles that there is an arguable need for legislation and government intervention to both protect its workers, establish minimum requirements of health and safety, as well as to develop a clearer ruleset outlining the professional relationship between promoter and talent in the wrestling industry.

During the COVID-19 pandemic and national shutdown of wrestling shows, testimonials began to surface from various personalities in the business highlighting past instances of abuse and foul-play, later defined as British wrestling's 'Speaking Out' movement. Many allegations were made, with some reaching the mainstream domain via national press coverage – including the allegations made by popular female wrestler Millie McKenzie against fellow wrestler Travis Banks with claims of emotional abuse during their prior relationship (Raza, 2020), as well as wrestlers such as Ligerro, David Starr, and Jack Gallagher being released contractually from their respective promotions and shunned by the fan community due to allegations of sexual assault (Konuwa, 2020). Social media activism has been included in scholarly discussion in response to movements such as 'Me Too' and 'Speaking Out' by extension. Bowman Williams et al mention the widespread issue of sexual assault barely being reported due to fear from the victim of retaliation by the perpetrator, or not believing they will incur proper consequences (2019, p373). Jaffe et al conclude that awareness-raising movements conducted over social media can help the self-

perception of survivors of sexual assault and their trauma, meaning that sharing those experiences and exposing wrongdoing can create real debate and shared, informed meanings to refer to, rather than relying on media definitions. They add that “better understanding how media representations and online trends might affect sexual assault survivors could help to inform journalism and coverage of sexual trauma” – potentially leading to more objective and effective coverage of these issues in the media. (2021, p217).

The ‘Speaking Out’ movement in wrestling brought attention to various cases of sexual harassment and abuse within the industry. It led to the exposure and expulsion of some individuals who were accused of sexual misconduct, fostering a sense of accountability. The movement sparked conversations about the need for better policies and safeguards to protect wrestlers, particularly women, from harassment.

Alongside the allegations made and the exposing of hardships faced by women in the industry by way of abuse and malpractice, other key issues with British wrestling and its labour were fully uncovered and fully realised as a result of pandemic concerns – namely in the lack of employee rights, financial protection, and guarantees usually assured by other sporting industries. Pete Bainbridge, veteran British wrestler of the latter *World of Sport* era and promoter notes the difficulty of maintaining a previously successful independent promotion during a time of uncertainty and extended closure within the pandemic, stating it was not possible to claim business support due to his promotion not existing long enough to cover the amount of tax returns required to apply. Alongside this, wrestler Will Burden provides a similar case of being unable to gain government financial support for loss of earnings during this time due to the nature of employment as a professional, freelance wrestler not being fully legitimised as a livelihood or career avenue (Scott, 2021). The severe

lack of opportunities across the board for the once-bustling labour force of Britain's wrestling community during lockdown has led to many training from home in the hope of gaining the attention of WWE and getting opportunities for employment – further contributing to the established hegemonic authority of WWE as the only perceivable route for one's career in wrestling to truly be successful and secure. With a sizable portion of the remainder of Britain's independent performer standouts being contracted and displaced from the organic, cultural roots of the British wrestling industry into WWE's appropriated, commodified one, it would appear subsequent progress to rebuild a thriving, booming independently sustainable industry as seen in the previous decade would be further stifled.

Some level of potential for upcoming progression of the British wrestling industry as a sustainable, culturally organic entity can be gleaned from recent legislative recommendations made as a result of Speaking Out controversies and employment status concerns. Efforts are being made to make the wrestling industry in Britain more 'professional' in terms of potential support via unions, government legislation, and individual promotions declaring action. In September of 2020, Revolution Pro Wrestling and owner-promoter Andy Quildan made the announcement that they would be working with Equity, a UK-based trade union for practitioners in the creative industries, to work on a professional code of conduct for the company to follow in terms of empowering the workforce with professional advice and representation. Equity Organiser Steve Duncan-Rice made a statement about their co-operation:

“Equity are very pleased to have established this Code of Conduct with RevPro. The set of policies which comprise the Code were mutually agreed

upon following a series of discussions with RevPro management and their implementation will be monitored on an ongoing basis. By providing Equity with regular access to their roster, enabling unionisation, Andy and his team are setting a powerful example. With this Code RevPro have established a framework of accountability with their talent whilst also providing performers with a means of accessing advice and support regarding their rights as self-employed artists. We very much look forward to working with RevPro and we hope that their example will encourage other promotions to engage with the union.” (RevPro, 2020)

Due to the nature of professional wrestling historically being torn between both established definitions of sport and theatre (Litherland, 2018), there has been a long-standing issue with wrestling on the global scale whereby it has been difficult for performers and industry personnel to unionise, create better working conditions and economic certainty within a free-market, as well as being constantly under legislative scrutiny due to alleged unethical and sometimes criminal activity from more popular outlets within the wrestling industry. This includes the steroid trials of 1994, in which Vince McMahon was accused of supplying illegal steroids to his contracted wrestlers under the WWE, and the negative press on the industry as a whole resulting from the Chris Benoit double-murder and suicide in 2007. Due to the nature of wrestling being understood as a predominantly entertainment-based product, it is arguably identified more on a purely capitalistic, profit-making basis in-line with modern ideologies of supply and demand, as opposed to a sporting context which tends to hold more cultural currency and garners better legislative and national support against market forces. It is surprising that there has been no real effort in

the past for UK legislators to support the realm of professional wrestling in Britain – considering it has been a long-standing fixture of cultural enjoyment for the country over many decades. However, with the previously mentioned issues, the unsteady trend of wrestling’s popularity alongside the historic distrust and distaste for the sport as expressed by Griffiths (2015), it is potentially justified as to why the industry has been left to the whim of market forces and not nationally supported.

As stated by Bowman Williams et al, social media activism, by way of Me Too and concerns of labour and workers’ rights, “has been a catalyst and communications tool for action offline” and plays a central role in pushing for remedies and reform” (2019, p392). By effectively naming the violations made and the inequality surrounding them, activism via social media can be a very powerful tool to inspire true action and reform. In the case of the UK professional wrestling scene, the ‘Speaking Out’ movement and various calls for workers’ rights and labour concerns to be addressed by the industry, as previous mentioned, a response has been made by various politicians, scholars, and industry personnel to discuss and detail potential routes to try and solve these issues. Recently a debate was made in the UK House of Commons about the issues raised and potential strategies to be undertaken in the British professional wrestling industry, leading to the formation of an All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) to produce a report based on the inquiry into wrestling in Britain led by parliamentary figures Alex Davies-Jones MP and Mark Fletcher MP. This was evidently in response to the controversies and allegations uncovered by the Speaking Out movement, but also influenced by the widespread decimation of the industry witnessed by COVID-19 shutdowns. Using written and oral evidence from various communities in UK wrestling, including over 80 wrestlers, trainers, promoters and academics for context, a list

of recommendations were made with regards to officially defining all aspects of the industry and its functions, strategies to respond to the various issues and controversies emerging as a result of a lack of regulation, and unfettered power structures, as well as aspects of representation and legal protection.

In this report, various recommendations have been set. Firstly, the report calls for professional wrestling to be classified as 'sporting' and that the shows and promotions associated with it should be considered within a sporting context to properly inform and produce more effective, appropriate future guidance and potential legislation. Secondly, the poor health and safety standards across the independent scene are acknowledged, calling for enhanced requirements under licensing and insurance arrangements that promotions have instilled, as well as better provision and attention to concussion-based instances. Furthermore in relation to the health and safety concerns of the industry, the inquiry has recommended further guidance from health professionals, fitness forms to be signed, and minimum first aid training to be in place for all promotions and shows. Thirdly, in regard to the 'Speaking Out' movement, they recommend that the voices of victims of abuse should be continued to be encouraged, as well as better outreach and case management systems to be in place to deal with such instances properly and effectively. Another point raised by the group is that insufficient protections are established for training schools, and that checks and protections should be placed with the acknowledgement that young people and minors are subject to the protection and of the trainer, of which is in a position of trust, and thus should be considered officially as sports trainers to reflect the correct legislation. Other proposals made are to introduce better connections to trade groups to aid in better representation factors in the industry and its promotion, better memorialisation and

heritage protection for the British wrestling industry, data protection improvement, more protection for wrestling practitioners working overseas, and creating a safety standard for wrestling rings (Davis-Jones A, 2021).

The report posed by the APPG is the first proper attempt in modern times to address the issues involved with the British wrestling industry in a significant and progressive way, rather than historical attempts to stifle it by constituting bans and strict regulation stemming from a general conservative distaste for its developing iterations. This historical tendency to suppress rather than support the national pastime through legislation is exemplified by the council bans towards the end of the 1930s due to the growing 'All-In' style being deemed too violent (Lister, 2005, p255), as well as the arguable classist undertaking, discussed in Chapter One, of cancelling televised wrestling in the 1980s despite still gaining reasonable viewership after consistent attempts to suppress its accessibility to a mostly working-class audience base. One of the first poignant recommendations the APPG report considers is to call for a redefinition of what wrestling means in a contemporary context – namely siding more heavily on positing it as a 'sporting' output over an arguably 'theatrical' one. Although possibly being read as a simplistic approach to progression through distinction, the shift in understanding of professional wrestling in Britain as more strictly within the context of sport would open the industry up to better standards in practice observed and followed by other major sports in the country. It would potentially achieve a higher level of governmental support through legislative support and funding opportunities, more commonality across promotions in an approach to standards of practice, bigger avenues and routes into the industry for newcomers and trainees, and most importantly considering the urgent requirement for professional safeguarding procedures

and industry-wide guidelines to provide stability and prevention of abuse and malpractice. With these proposed recommendations being accepted and already called for prior, while various personnel and promotions offering early attempts to navigate potential safeguarding protocols such as the aforementioned RevPro and Equity relationship proposals, it is highly possible that wrestling may once again be acknowledged more widely as a “particularly British leisure pursuit” (Dunn, 2013, p12), and the contemporary, ongoing offerings within it legitimised as a critical and substantial contributor to the cultural output of Britain as historically witnessed.

It is highly arguable that female wrestlers will serve a vital role in taking British professional wrestling forward into a new era, given that the popularity and visibility of women’s wrestling has increased in the past decade. There are, however, still instances of objectification and fetishisation on the independent wrestling scene, largely reinforced by contemporary WWE efforts to bring back female ‘gimmicks’ with a preference for very specific forms of physical beauty over ability. It is from these historical attitudes, not just in Britain but globally, that feminist concerns of symbolic annihilation (Gerbner, 1976) have occurred in context to the wrestling industry, whereby problematic and unrealistic representations of women in the sport has led to female positions of power and influence being in the minority. Furthermore, an ongoing paradigm of attractiveness over professional skill has been established, as with most performing industries, so as to both incentivise subservience to patriarchal desires and achieve a problematic sense of acceptance as detailed by Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth* (1991).

Despite some level of these issues surviving in contemporaneous times, the problematic process where opportunities for female wrestlers were dictated by misogynistic desire as witnessed in prior periods are slowly but surely becoming less of an issue for contemporary scenes. Rather than past eras of an argued heavily-masculine, hetero fan base that were mostly complicit in the degradation and objectification of female wrestling athletes, contemporary audiences show a desire for better representation and opportunities for women, as well as support and enjoyment of the equally valuable efforts contemporary women's wrestling has to offer. Of course, the myth of a consistent, predominantly male demographic within historical wrestling audiences is disproven when observing consistent levels of female audience members attending broadcasted *World of Sport* wrestling matches, but the attitudes towards promotion of women were still patriarchal in nature as opposed to contemporary British audiences progressively seeking better representation and diversity.

Sam West, promoter for Resurgence Wrestling based in Leicester, notes this sense of contemporary wrestling fans having progressive values stemming from generational influence. Noting observable examples as the rise of Progress and modern British wrestling as a more democratic and resistive form of engaging with the sport, wrestling fans are merely reflecting a generational shift in attitudes towards women, race, religion, and sexuality and promoters have responded to that by way of creative output. As West states, experientially due to already being both a promoter and fan, "promoters have always been taught and drilled to reflect what the audience want, it's a very audience-focused performance medium", and modern British wrestling promotions are not merely catering to these shifts in a supply-and-demand sense, but are actively providing grounds for such

expressions to be platformed due to being both fans and producers themselves (See appendix 3). One issue here is with the nature of holiday-camp, family-friendly promotions of wrestling as discussed in chapter three, whereby those promotions are not aimed at engaged fans but tend to be audience by families, children, and utilise stereotypical representations to connect with a less media-literate viewership. However, with an increasing level of support and representation for Women's wrestling, both on the independent and mainstream level, it is feasible that these promotions may follow suit to this demand and feature women in their promotions in a much more positive light.

From this progressive state of wrestling modernity, women are seeing a higher level of promotion as equal athletes to their male counterparts, being promoted as main events rather than prior eras of undercard obscurity, as well as entire promotions such as Pro Wrestling EVE (Energy, Victory, Excellence) being built around a foregrounding of the empowerment of women in wrestling by showcasing an exclusively female roster and giving them a platform to excel in a previously male-dominated field. Kasey Owens, veteran female wrestler and regular performer for Pro Wrestling Eve, observed the shift for women's opportunities in the contemporary UK wrestling scene when interviewed about potential futures for British wrestling. Owens confirms these notions of match quality and popularity of female talent in the UK vastly growing within the last four to five years, proudly stating she feels like "the women in the UK are actually in some cases putting some of the guys to shame", but acknowledging it partly comes from a stigma female talent still feel about having something to prove due to having such a boom of fan support and opportunities developing. Furthermore, Owens asserts that in order for better female representation to be sustained in wrestling, as well as providing a safer and balanced future for the business

as a whole, women need to be part of the promotion and management process as well as the performance side. Owens further states “a lot of people still say it’s a very male dominated business. But women are here – it’s not like we’re still fighting for that spot. We’re here. People know how good women’s wrestling is, and our voices are being heard, we’re not fighting for that spot anymore.” (See appendix 11). With a more diverse range of experienced voices informing future standards and practices within the British wrestling industry – inclusive of all minorities of race, sex and ever-shifting gender identities – the post-COVID-19 environment may provide the clean slate and tabula rasa effect the British industry arguably needs to sustain itself into a new, successful generation and era for both sides of creative production and fan engagement.

This chapter has chronicled the problematic issues that have arisen as a result of COVID-19 regulations, whereby the British industry and identity within professional wrestling has been subject to further displacement and estrangement from global understandings of the sport. The UK scene has been subject to continued acquisition and appropriation by neoliberal forces – namely the WWE and its established NXT UK brand broadcasting is blurred, manipulated representations of British cultural output and continuing to assert dominant control and influence over future developments and innovations made in futural spheres of British professional wrestling production. Future promotions seeking to gain national or global success and inherit the cultural power of professional wrestling seen in prior eras will find it difficult to run against the superior economic power, established global brand identity, and high level of corporate influence WWE has to offer – as well as its main competitor AEW having an existing broadcast deal with ITV. With the failure of *WOS Wrestling*, it is also highly unlikely broadcasters will invest

in a grassroots, home-produced national broadcast of wrestling content created independently of global, corporate influence. This is highly reminiscent of the situation presented in chapter one, whereby neoliberal factors of hard-line profit and ease of outsourcing led to the establishment of WWE as both near-monopolistic global provider of wrestling, as well as a hegemonic industrial force supplanting cultural contributions to the sport and affecting future understanding and meaning-making of the sport overall on a mythic scale.

However, despite these negative forces affecting future success of the British wrestling industry independent of global capitalistic interference, studying the views of fans and practitioners of the sport in times of being mostly cut-off from their favoured pastime has led to a reified understanding of the contemporary identities in British wrestling that do exist beyond mere concepts of style almost exclusively witnessed from historical productions. With developing parasocial relations evident from continued engagement with favoured performers and promotions achieved remotely, influential factors have been argued – mostly residing within typical human concepts of the desire to belong and sustaining levels of positive mental health during a time of uncertainty. Furthermore, these actions go towards further establishing modern manifestations of unique British cultural, collective identity in wrestling – namely the important function of the unique, carnivalesque enjoyment and collective participation at live events informed by a hybrid mix of embedded practices of sports viewership and sought-after catharsis wrestling narratives traditionally offer. In other words, COVID-19 has uncovered what contemporary British wrestling fans primarily desire and culturally identify with, which is the way in which they collectively create meaning by participating at live events, informing their process

from established cultural norms of spectatorial practice such as soccer and theatre, as well as having the ability to serve as active agents for creative direction and development. No longer is British identity wrestling exclusively represented by stylistic practice and presentation of its performers and promotions, but predominantly by the way its audiences prefer to engage with it – the collective meanings they linguistically create through chants and vocal interaction, as well as seeking catharsis through collective enjoyment as opposed to purely narrative resolutions.

Conclusion

Professional wrestling in Britain has endured a series of rise-and-fall cycles throughout its history, from the decline of nationally broadcasted wrestling in the 1980s, exemplified by the cancellation of World of Sport, to the 'dark' period of the 1990s explored in chapter two. This decline forced many promotions to align with WWE, acknowledging its market leadership to sustain ticket sales and ensure survival. However, the tide turned with the resurgence of British identity in the sport, championed by entities like the FWA, Hammerlock, and the subsequent boom of promotions like Progress, ICW, and Revolution Pro. This revitalization made British professional wrestling not only relevant but also successful once again. Throughout this thesis, multiple instances highlight a discernible British identity in professional wrestling, intertwining with a broader, collective global engagement. Importantly, this identity distinguishes itself through unique cultural forms of enjoyment, engagement, and professional practice. Traditionally, stylistic elements, particularly the technical 'catch-as-catch-can' style, defined how wrestling was culturally expressed in a British context. Modern performers, such as Zack Sabre Jr, continue to present themselves as submission-based grapplers, respecting and embodying British wrestling traditions.

This stylistic British identity is not only embodied by individual performers but also adopted globally as an homage to its origins. For instance, Bryan Danielson continues to incorporate technical, ground-based 'catch' content, aligning himself with British wrestling legend William Regal on AEW televised products. However, contemporary 'Britishness' in

professional wrestling extends beyond stylistic traits. It now lies in how fans engage with the sport in carnivalesque, culturally horizontal ways—redeploying football chants, incorporating heckling tendencies from theatre and comedy, and participating in collaborative relationships with producers. Despite the ever-evolving British cultural framework and progressive values witnessed in wrestling circles, elements of style and fan practices remain foundational in identifying 'Britishness' in professional wrestling contexts. These enduring forces act as a staple, shaping the future of British professional wrestling for generations to come.

This thesis delved into a crucial yet challenging aspect of British wrestling's continued evolution – the impact of global neoliberal forces driven by capitalistic expansionism. This phenomenon, driven by profit motives and the preservation of hegemonic industrial dominance, raises concerns about stifling organic cultural development within the sport. Examining the apparent lack of scheduled NXT UK live events and the transformation of once-popular British talent into farfetched, Americanised character gimmicks, the thesis underscores a potential closing chapter in the independent success of British wrestling. Notably, wrestlers like Pete Dunne and the Grizzled Young Veterans, who contributed significantly to NXT UK's success, have experienced a redefinition and displacement of their originally successful characterizations upon ascending to WWE main roster television.

While Dunne, Bate, and Seven successfully inherited a following from their British Strong Style roots, their characters have undergone significant changes on the WWE main roster. Pete Dunne's transformation into 'Butch' reflects an early 1900s aesthetic

reminiscent of Peaky Blinders, diverging from his original character. Similarly, the Grizzled Young Veterans now act as part of a cultist team, 'The Dyad,' led by NXT: Level Up character Joe Gacy, deviating from their established, successful gimmicks on the British scene. Even female wrestling figures like Kay Lee Ray, pivotal in raising awareness of high-level contemporary women's professional wrestling in Britain, have fallen victim to WWE's rebrand strategy, being dubbed Alba Fire. The success stimulus that regional connection and identity factors provided in the UK scene seems to take a back seat to the Americanised, moderate style sought by WWE and Vince McMahon for international audiences.

This wrestling identity crisis, where successful British talent undergoes rebranding and displacement on the WWE main roster, reflects the tension between preserving cultural authenticity and succumbing to the globalised, homogenised style favoured by major wrestling corporations. As the thesis concludes in 2022, it signals a critical juncture for British wrestling, where the balance between maintaining distinct identity and conforming to global expectations remains uncertain.

The WWE's perpetual quest for innovation and relevance in a global market highlights their industry dominance, showcased through an extensive portfolio of self-produced and acquired content. This vast content repository, ideal for syndication and licensing, facilitates lucrative deals with major networks worldwide. Notably, a 5-year billion-dollar contract with Fox for the broadcast rights of 'SmackDown Live' and an exclusive billion-dollar agreement with NBC's streaming service 'Peacock' for the 'WWE Network' attests to WWE's strategic expansion (Lauletta, 2018).

As WWE solidifies its hegemonic position in professional wrestling globally, it raises concerns about the ownership and influence of cultural identity within the wrestling realm, reflective of a broader trend in a neoliberal, profit-driven, and homogenised corporate landscape.

This thesis offered a cultural exploration of British wrestling history, tracing its trajectory from an era of widespread national popularity fuelled by working-class values to a subsequent decline influenced by popular distaste and susceptibility to neoliberal market forces. The narrative transitions through a phase of uncertainty and stagnation, eventually arriving at a contemporary landscape marked by narrowcasted, niche, and independent content. This modern era embodies shifting attitudes, amplifies minority voices, and fosters globalised relations through cultural exchange factors. The thesis illuminated a consistent thread of developing subcultural practices, promotional ideologies, and evolving meanings within the creative outputs of these wrestling eras. Yet, all are united by a historical pattern where cultural values, formed identities, and meanings face acquisition, displacement, and potential destruction due to the neoliberal, free-market forces of creative destruction.

These issues echo concerns raised by Coppa, who, in the context of fandom within a contemporary capitalist world, warned against the dangers of economic exploitation, acquisition, and redistribution. Coppa envisioned a scenario where fan creativity and participatory avenues, if solely steered towards profit, could lead to fans becoming mere 'followers' (2014, p80). This resonates deeply with the challenges faced by British wrestling as it navigates the complex interplay of cultural identity, economic interests, and the

relentless pursuit of global dominance within the corporate wrestling landscape. The quote from Coppa, despite being from 2014, remains highly relevant because it addresses enduring concerns related to fan communities and their interaction with corporate entities in the context of contemporary capitalism. The issues raised by Coppa have not only persisted but have become even more pronounced with the passage of time. In the era of digital media, globalization, and corporate consolidation, the commodification of fan creativity and participatory avenues has intensified. Fans' activities are often co-opted by media companies for profit, and the risk of fans becoming mere "followers" rather than active participants in shaping their subcultures has grown. This concern is not limited to a specific time frame; it reflects a broader socio-cultural and economic trend. In the age of digital platforms, social media, and global entertainment conglomerates, the exploitation of fan labour and creativity for economic gain continues to be a pertinent issue. As such, Coppa's warning serves as a timely reminder of the ongoing challenges faced by fan communities and their struggle to maintain their unique identities and subcultural values in the face of profit-driven forces.

From the developments outlined in this thesis, parallels can be drawn between Coppa's observations on contemporary fandom and the specific context of professional wrestling, particularly within regional markets such as Mexico, Japan, the United Kingdom, and Europe. The potential issue, as warned by Coppa's framework, lies in the ownership of regional identities and subcultural practices within these wrestling circles. The hegemonic influence of WWE over its industry subordinates globally raises concerns about the acquisition of cultural wrestling produce, with instances where the exchange is not by "consent rather than coercion" (Okely, 2012, p90). Instead, there are tendencies for a willing

secession of cultural produce for personal economic gain and opportunities, often at the expense of prior fan support and goodwill. This poses a threat to ongoing movements aiming to inherit the origins of style, practice, and culturally significant enjoyment of wrestling for future generations to sustain, adapt, or reshape within the organic terms of national cultural development.

Despite the prevailing sentiment in contemporary fan circles that "British wrestling is dead," reflecting pessimism toward the establishment of NXT UK and its disruptive industrial influence, there is a conscious concern about the apparent repetition of historical struggles to sustain an original identity. The territorial system in American wrestling has been acquired, and regional identities and meanings mostly dissolved. The disruption and redefinition of the UK industry by WWE using its industrial and economic weight indicate a continued struggle for British heritage and a unique identity within the worldwide environment of professional wrestling.

However, history demonstrates the survivability and perseverance of British wrestling, along with international and multi-regional counterparts, to maintain a marginal identity despite the popularity of WWE and Americanised representations. With a recent return to live event promotion and audience attendance in a post-COVID-19 social environment, key communities play a vital role in endowing established notions of a unique British wrestling identity to future generations. Creative talents outside the WWE boundaries represent these notions through performance style, aesthetic, and contextual ideological approaches, showcasing what it means to be a British wrestler in an international, globalised market. Another crucial force is the need for further legislation in

the UK industry to develop concepts of safeguarding, business practices transparency, ethics, and minimum safety requirements for the creative labour force in British wrestling. Proper legislative support may contribute to re-establishing professional wrestling in Britain not only as a sporting context but also as culturally significant, as evidenced by prior eras.

Future academic discourse on professional wrestling must persist in efforts to establish definitions and comprehensive explorations of British identity in world wrestling circles. This involves examining how styles are produced and presented, how meanings are generated and communicated within communities, and understanding the intrinsic cultural factors of fan practice and spectatorship. Continued endeavours are necessary to contribute to maintaining and further developing the rich history that the business and culture of professional wrestling hold and continue to produce.

In contemplating the future trajectory of British professional wrestling, it is evident that the industry stands at a crossroads, shaped by its rich historical tapestry and the dynamic forces of contemporary global wrestling culture. The resilience demonstrated during periods of transformation, from the televised era to the challenges posed by the influx of American wrestling in the 1990s, underscores the adaptability of British wrestling to evolving circumstances. As we navigate the complexities of the current landscape, marked by the influence of multinational corporations and the interplay of traditional and modern elements, the industry holds both challenges and opportunities. The advent of digital platforms, streaming services, and a globalised fanbase presents avenues for reaching diverse audiences and fostering new connections.

Moreover, the renewed emphasis on independent promotions, training schools, and grassroots initiatives reflects a commitment to nurturing homegrown talent and preserving the authenticity of British wrestling. This, coupled with an awareness of the unique cultural aspects explored in this study, provides a foundation for a wrestling landscape that is both reflective of its roots and responsive to contemporary demands. Looking ahead, the future of British professional wrestling may hinge on a delicate balance: maintaining a connection to its historical identity while embracing innovation and globalization. As the industry continues to evolve, it has the potential to carve a distinct niche in the global wrestling scene, offering a blend of tradition and novelty that resonates with audiences worldwide. Ultimately, the future of British professional wrestling rests in the hands of those who contribute to its narrative – the promoters, performers, and, most significantly, the devoted fans. Their collective influence will shape not only the industry's competitive landscape but also its cultural significance and enduring legacy. In this ongoing journey, the dynamism and adaptability that have characterised British wrestling throughout its history will undoubtedly play pivotal roles in determining what lies ahead.

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Events Attended For of Research

IPW: Undisputed XIV, 22nd September 2018, Mote Hall, Maidstone, Kent, United Kingdom.

IPW: LA-Xtreme Measures, 29th May 2019, Westgate Hall, Canterbury, Kent, United Kingdom.

IPW: Return of the PAC, 20th February 2019, Westgate Hall, Canterbury, Kent, United Kingdom.

RevPro: Uprising, 15th December 2019, York Hall, Bethnal Green, London, United Kingdom.

New Japan Pro Wrestling/Ring of Honor: G1 Supercard, April 6th 2019, Madison Square Garden, New York City, New York. USA.

LDN Wrestling, 28th April 2019, Angel Leisure Centre, Tonbridge, Kent, United Kingdom.

Appendices

Appendix 1:

Interviewer: David Boyd

Interviewee: Carl Stewart, A.K.A 'Carl Conroy'

Interviewee profile: British ex-professional wrestler, has toured worldwide including United Kingdom, Europe and Canada, as well as promoted shows in the UK.

Date of interview: 24/05/20

Location of interview: Online calling software

List of acronyms: IN= Interviewer CS= Carl Stewart

IN: What was your first experience of wrestling as a fan? What got you into it and what sort of stuff did you like?

CS: Funnily enough I wasn't brought up on British wrestling. My first experience was American wrestling. My parents were

wrestling fans in the 70s and 80s, and I pretty much stumbled on it by accident. I was looking for something to watch one day and put in a beta-max video of the first Wrestlemania. I was pretty much hooked from there, so that was my first experience of wrestling. I didn't come across British wrestling until later by tape-trading with friends. So I was very much Americanised at first but have diversified since.

IN: With the American stuff, who were your favourites? Also, when you were introduced to British wrestling, what or who drew you into that too?

CS: With the American stuff I was a big 'Hulkamaniac'. I was instantly drawn to Hogan - he was so charismatic and larger than life. It was an era when personality wasn't quite so important - you still had to have one, obviously, but there was still a lot of focus on the wrestling itself. The gimmicks were that they were athletes, they were wrestlers. They had certain personalities rather than gimmicks, if you like. So Hogan really drew me in as being something completely different. Although I did like the other wrestling, the lower card stuff - the first match I watched was Tito Santana versus The Executioner at Wrestlemania 1. Even that drew me in, I loved it all. I pretty much devoured anything wrestling-related from then on.

IN: So when you got into the British side of wrestling, is there anything specific that drew you in to watching that? What differences did you notice?

CS: The one thing I noticed straight away when watching British wrestling was that, although it was lower budget and lower production than the American stuff I'd been watching, it was completely unique and I noticed there was a quirky kind of appeal to it. As I've got older and watched more I can appreciate there is a sort of cultural charm to it. Back then I noticed it was different, and I liked it, but I was very Americanised in my thinking at that point. It took me a while to really get into the British stuff, even though I liked what I saw.

IN: Looking back as both a fan and someone who has worked in the industry, what do you now think about the difference between British and American wrestling of the time?

CS: Like I say, it has a certain unique cultural identity - it's very 'British'. That made it stand out. Going back to that time, every territory or place in the world had a different type of wrestling, but now it's a much of a likeness - it's more of a hybrid of a styles. But going back in time,

the uniqueness of every different place in the world was very appealing.

IN: What drew you in to getting involved in wrestling? How was the process of breaking in?

CS: I'd been completely obsessed with wrestling since the first match I'd watched and had no doubts as to what I wanted to do as a career from then on. I pretty much fell into it in the end actually, as I was in Sixth Form doing Media Studies as a GNVQ. I had a choice of two shows to go to - 'Hammerlock goes Hardcore' which was in Sittingbourne, Kent, or I could have gone to a show in Croydon with stars from Michenoku Pro in Japan. This was in and around 1996. So poor student me had a choice of one of the other, and for some reason I chose the Hammerlock show. I got talking to people there, and because I was doing this Media Studies course I had access to equipment like camcorders and editing equipment, and I actually went and filmed the show and edited it later as part of my course. They liked what I did so I carried on doing that for a bit. In the end, coming back to London where I was staying after that particular show in Sittingbourne, I was on the train with some of the people from the show. I got talking to them and one of the guys is still my best friend to this day, although he blanked me at the time. I asked them how to get involved and they told me about the training school they had, which was in Ashford at the time, and it all went from there really.

IN: Was that the beginning of the wrestling school era, as I've heard it before about only getting in through who you knew?

CS: It was really a closed shop up until then. Hammerlock was the first place to start changing that. Other than that there was absolutely nowhere else, and that sounds incredible for today when training schools were ten-a-penny, but there really wasn't anywhere. If you wanted to get into pro wrestling you either had to be have amateur background or know someone or be related to someone. There was no way in until Hammerlock opened that first wrestling school.

IN: What are the advantages to the old system compared to the new, and vice-versa?

CS: There are pros and cons to both. I think with the old way of doing things, there was a way of almost guaranteeing quality. Because you had to work so hard to get in in the first place only the most determined made it. I think today,

although you do get a lot of good talent coming through, you also get a lot of bad talent too - because those floodgates being opened. Where you get those 5 or 6 elite workers coming through, you also get a lot of lower level guys that turn up to 2 training sessions, see how easy it is to start their own shows and then put themselves on top of the bill. With the closed-shop time, though, there were many people that perhaps didn't get the chance and could have carried British wrestling past the TV era and potentially not led to the mid 1990s being such a cess-pit of profitability and business.

IN: With your experience, what was wrestling in Britain like in during that mid to late 90's period? I've heard it referred to as the 'dark times' due to the decline after the TV era. Is that a fair label? What was your experience of that period?

CS: People refer to it as 'dark times' and it really was! It was chronic, really. After the ITV wrestling came off there was a bit of a bounce in live attendance as it was the only way people could see it, but obviously after a few years with no TV to make new stars, the appeal went away. By the mid 90s it was dead as a doornail. Even someone like Brian Dixon, the biggest promoter in the country, even he was only running a few shows a year at his main halls in Bristol, Hanley and Croydon. There was just nothing going on. This is around the same time as Hammerlock started in about '93. There really wasn't a lot going on until about 97 as there was a sort of revival beginning to be sparked. But before that it was dead as a doornail as it really was that low at the time. So you just had to keep plugging away hoping something would happen.

IN: What sort of style was seen in that period? Was there still any of that classic technical style, or was it just trying to ape American styles or sticking to a family-friendly mode?

CS: Well there was a bit of a mixture to be honest. There was still an influence of classic British wrestling, but there was an influence from the American stuff too. People were starting to lean on things that were more popular in wrestling at the time. The 90s were a depression in wrestling at the time all around anyway, but people were leaning on things like ECW which was popular at the time, so there were a real mixture and people just trying anything to see if it would work. But obviously there was still an influence from classic British wrestling as a lot of those guys were still around.

IN: What shifts were you seeing from that transitional period in terms of style and also fan culture at the time?

CS: By that time, the FWA started in about '99. There were a few promotions springing up before that, but at that time wrestling was starting to boom again because of the 'Monday Night Wars'. So when things came back up again there were an explosion of promotions and it changed the landscape. It brought different kinds of fans. Where British wrestling had always been fairly traditional in terms of its audience, now you had people heavily influenced by the 'Attitude Era', all of the stuff like the NOW going on at the time. It was different. You had a mixture of audiences at the show, and I'm sure the people turning up expecting to see a traditional show were probably completely bewildered by what they were seeing, so it did change things and it did bring a different kind of fan in.

IN: Now it is said we have unique audiences for wrestling in the UK in the way we chant and sing at live events, and so on. Why do you think British fans are like that now? What were they like back then?

CS: It was very traditional. Hammerlock, particularly - their crowds were very traditional. It's definitely a cultural thing. I've been to shows during that transitional period where the audience were more like a football crowd - with the chants and songs. There was a place I worked in a lot called Melksham, a little town in Wiltshire, which really was the epicentre of my wrestling world at the time. Their crowd was really unique, they'd bring inflatables to chuck in the ring at the wrestlers which was great fun. I don't know about nowadays, the end of 2012 was my last show, but there were still traditional audiences in certain places but I suppose a lot of it is a regional thing. Some places can be completely different to each other - it's just based on the culture. When I was a promoter, I didn't normally promote in big cities as you had so much conflicting with that, but I used to like promoting the smaller towns as they don't get a lot of entertainment. Everyone would turn out and be enthusiastic. You go to the bigger places and the crowd reaction is different - you've got to work a lot harder to entertain those people. Go to different places and you get a different audience.

IN: What is your idea of the 'Britishness' of British wrestling in your experience? What makes it British?

CS: It was completely different to American wrestling, and elsewhere in the world. It probably most closely resembles Lucha Libre as it's completely different to other kinds. The old British style was completely different from what you'd find in the states, but it had an influence around the world. As for the Britishness of it, I think people could identify with it. It wasn't pretending to be over the top or trying to be flashy - people saw characters rather than gimmicks and I think that's what set it apart. You would go to a show look at someone dressed up as some kind of extravagant gimmick, but you would just look them and think "that's not really who you are is it? That's just a character", but if you see real people but with certain personality traits exaggerated, I find that much more British. You find characters in sport; in football you find certain characters who cause controversy and you kind of identify with that. I always thought that approach of having real people just exaggerated with personality traits rather than gimmicks was a much more intimate approach which people could identify with more. That's much more uniquely British, we love our eccentrics in this country, we love our characters. That, coupled with our style, was very British. It fit very nicely into the culture. Whereas something glitzier and more glamorous probably wouldn't. As people we're fairly reserved, and I think that kind of approach really did fit in with that audience. It struck a niche.

IN: You say you're not up to date with contemporary wrestling. Is there anything that put you off?

CS: I can't really identify with it. It's so far removed with what I grew up with that I can't identify with it. I am stuck in my ways and stubborn, I like what I like. I have seen some of it but I find it so choreographed. It's ironic saying that because of the traditional British style being very fluid, very 'showy', but I just can't get into modern wrestling. I find it very obvious. There was a match I watched which was bigged up to me, where a guy was shot into the corner and the guy is just waiting for the foot to come up for way too long, I can't remember who it was. Some tag match. I just can't identify with it or a lot of the people watching now. I'm quite traditional - cheers the good guys and boo the bad guys sort of guy, and I'd sit there and take it all in. I just can't identify with the fan culture now; I've got older and my tastes have changed but I just can't identify.

IN: What are the missing parts do you think as a traditionalist?

CS: Kayfabe, Basically. But you can't put toothpaste back in the tube. When I went to watch wrestling, I believed in

everything. The first show I went to was a WWF show in Birmingham and going from that to going to my first British show where everything is so much more closer up and more real in a way, going to a WWF show it was more like watching a play as you're so far removed from everything. But going to a live British show where you're so close to the ring - people land outside the ring you can feel it, you can feel them landing. You can see the sweat flying off people. It's so much more real when it's right in front of you. And we WERE real. I think that's the main thing missing now, everything is so "nudge-nudge wink-wink" now, putting a little sly glance to the audience. We never did that. We didn't want to know. We just wanted to watch the wrestling, and I think everything is so open now. It's just not for me.

IN: Do you think there is a link between this change and the shift from the old system to opening schools to anyone and giving opportunities to whoever, regardless of skill? Has that opening up of the business led to a sense of degradation?

CS: Yeah, I'm not going to say I went through the same thing that people before me went through, as they had it much harder, but it still wasn't an automatic rite of passage that you would train and end up on a show. I'm taking anything away from current wrestlers, but it is that much easier now. I used to do some coaching in Scotland, and I would see people come in the door which made me want to lay down the law and say "fuck off with that attitude", but the people running the schools just wanted the tenner. That's a real shame. You have to apply some sense of standards and practices, and that's missing a lot. It's all about revenues rather than putting something back into wrestling. I don't agree with that.

IN: You started when the internet was mostly in its infancy. What do you think of the growth of the internet and advances in technology in relation to wrestling?

CS: I think it's been fantastic. That might surprise you seeing as I'm a wrestling traditionalist, but I think anything that makes it easier to put your content out there, to advertise, to draw people in that you wouldn't necessarily have been able to, and reach people you couldn't before. I think that's positive, but then comes the negative effects with that. With the wrestling schools with the good and bad coming in, you get the same thing with the internet and its influence - how much it's opened it up. When I started, I'd never heard of kayfabe before until I was in a wrestling dressing room, and other terms I'd never heard of in my life. Now everyone knows them. You can't stop that from happening, but it's not something

that sits well with me. What the internet can do for wrestling, though, is fantastic. I started promoting in 1999, and if I had that tool to promote with I would have been grateful.

Appendix 2

Interviewer: David Boyd

Interviewee: Billy Wood

Interviewee profile: Promoter of Fight Nation, Ex-Promoter of IPW (International Pro Wrestling), CEO of Hastings United FC

Date of interview: 11/05/20

Location of interview: Online calling software

List of acronyms: IN= Interviewer BW= Billy Wood

IN: Before your involvement with wrestling as an owner and booker, were you a wrestling fan? What first got you into it?

BW: I don't think you can get involved in wrestling unless you are a fan. There has to be some element of involvement, understanding or fandom when you're getting into something so niche. For example, with me, it started at a very young age like most fans. I grew up on the Hulk Hogan era of wrestling, so as a young lad I was seeing these larger than life characters on TV. It was impossible to not see it. For me it was around the early 90s and was obviously Hulk Hogan and the Ultimate Warrior - big bright colours - that's what got me into wrestling as a young child. I think what kept me interested in wrestling during those childhood years was being intrigued by it all. There was obviously Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, the Power Rangers and other things which were all action-based, but these were real action heroes if you know what I mean. Real people. So that's what always kept my initial attraction into it and that's how I fell in love with wrestling. As I got older it became more of a "what's going on? Let's lift the curtain a little bit" - it kind of got to the point like once you see the magic trick 3 or 4 times you think "wow that's amazing! We want to know how it happens" - I think that's what happened to me with wrestling, I wanted to know how it happened, and that's when the internet started happening and becoming a thing. People started putting reports up, the Observer wasn't just a newsletter sent out but was available online, prorestling.com was a big thing back then. People wanted to know the results. For example, Raw happened on a Monday and you wouldn't see it in the UK until the Friday, so what you'd do is on the Tuesday you'd get the results of a website, read them all week and get excited until Friday to watch it. That was probably my change in fandom in

96-97 in started to understand what actually was going on - not saying "is wrestling fake?" - not that - I think you learn that early on. I think once you realise Father Christmas isn't real you kind of realise wrestling isn't real either. At the same time you get a different respect for it because the amount of effort and energy put in, what they do to become pro wrestlers. So that's how it started with me, I really got into the nuts and bolts of wrestling behind the scenes. Then I used to buy Powerslam magazine, and in the back of that there was an article to join Hammerlock Wrestling in Kent, and that's how I ended up in wrestling - through Hammerlock. So I started travelling to Kent every Sunday to start with, but then football on my end changed that. Then I'd travel other days of the week, then there were camps. That's how I got involved in learning the art of pro wrestling on the back of Powerslam, and there was a show called the Transatlantic Challenge on ITV which was Hammerlock based. That was when it changed for me and when I wanted to learn the craft.

IN: From my understanding from some reading, you had some involvement with ownership and promotion of wrestling before IPW. What were your experiences then?

BW: On the promoting side of things, at that age you're a teenager doing whatever you're doing then go off to start your life- So I played football and that was a huge part of my life. Then I moved to Canterbury and went to University at 18. When I left university in 2007 I thought about getting back involved in the Wrestling business, so I partnered up with a guy called Stuart Allen and reignited a company called EWW, Extreme World Wrestling, down in Hastings at the moment but at the time it was a Whitney-based, Oxfordshire promotion but Stu moved down to Hastings. So me and Stu met and we launched EWW in 2008. We started promoting that for a few years across the UK. We toured and were based predominantly in Herne Bay but we also did shows in Hastings, Warrington, Liverpool, Coventry - we kind of went across the UK a bit. My career in music was taking off a bit so I didn't have much time for it anymore so I left in 2010-2011, steeped away to focus on the music side of things. With that, it was great as I still kept in touch with everyone, so Jonny Storm, Marty Scurll, Andy Simmons - these were the people I continually kept in touch with and still went to some indie shows, but I kind of stayed away from being a part of it as I was too busy. You can't do things half-arsed, that's what I've learned over my life. Then in 2014 I was going to see WWE live at Wembley, and I met up with Marty Scurll and Jimmy Havoc beforehand, and they would catch me up on the UK scene. Marty said I should get back involved. Long story short, decided that night that I fancied doing it again. So I started a company called Fight Nation, launched in 2015 and ended up based in primarily 3 locations - we toured

Eastbourne, Canterbury and Weymouth. In Eastbourne and Weymouth we'd get anywhere around 300-400 people, and at Canterbury Westgate Hall we'd get about 150-170 people as that was the size of the hall. That went really well for a long period of time, and then in 2017 the opportunity to buy IPW came up, which I purchased in May 2017 with the final changeover happening at the anniversary of 2017.

IN: So with your previous experiences moving into IPW, what was your mission statement and goals going forward with the newly acquired brand?

BW: So the idea with IPW was to freshen the brand up. It had a long history, it felt like it hit a brick wall that year. I wouldn't say because of the talent, but previously Andy Corden ran IPW, who split with the owner at the time and then went with RevPro. RevPro ultimately was IPW, let's say. They kept the belts the same, everything was the same, but they just changed the name. So Andy ran his shows in his venues, and Dan ran his. But a lot of IPW went with Andy in terms of the vibe and feel, as RevPro went on to do what it's done, and IPW didn't. So the idea was to freshen things up, change the brand a bit. I love the idea of going in and working on the marketing of things and refreshing them. I find it exciting to take an old brand. For example, with Fight Nation, we are associated with the NWA. We were the British NWA promotion, and I nearly purchased the NWA before Billy Corgan. I flew all the way to Texas to have the conversation and pretty much had an agreement in place at the time, but it didn't work out. Going back to IPW was to freshen things up, get it exciting and make a statement - which I think we did. We took it on and we brought Austin Ares in for a run, there are things I think we did which made the brand exciting and it was going really well at the time.

IN: Out of personal interest, what do you think of how Billy Corgan has handled the NWA? Would you have done things with it any differently if you did end up owning it?

BW: I think what they've done the NWA has been brilliant, the patience they've shown. Some wouldn't be able to do that as financially a multi-millionaire Rockstar versus a thousandaire, let's say, it's going to be a different thing. My thing with the NWA was that I think content is king, I'm a big believer of that. If you go onto Fight Network and watch Fight on Fight, the Fight Nation shows, you'll see big similarities between the two as they share a producer - a guy called David Marquez. So yeah, that's exactly what I would have done with the NWA. So going forward, for me about content and not about live shows. I think what they've done is right, and what I would have been a little different I suppose at it

would have been based here, but I would have definitely focused on content.

IN: What do you mean when you say content is better than live shows? What's the dichotomy there?

Content can potentially be viewed by millions, live shows - we all know the average attendance of a British wrestling show, if you take away 3 or 4 promotions, isn't high. We have to be frank with that. So your audience is limited. Don't get me wrong, I think live shows are great, and they are the lifestyle if anything, but I would prefer to deliver content that you can then tour, as you can build the audience up first. But that's my own opinion, I know people and have worked with people that hate taping events and prefer it to be all about live shows, and I respect their opinion, but I'd rather stop and start and get what I need, get the crowd up, rather than having to rely on live events. Filming a live event that flows is very hard, filming a live event that flows and captures the emotion you want is very hard. So I'm a big believer in content, content wins the day in everything you can do and in any business I've worked in and still work into this day, it's all about the content we can get and put out - whether that's in video form, photo or word - it's all about content. It's hard, when you're running a wrestling show once every 3 months, how do you fill that time?

IN: What was your general experience throughout your time IPW? What do you think went right and what were your struggles?

I think the thing that went right that the whole of 2017 and 2018 we produced fantastic content. Trying to be a knight in shining armour was probably the biggest failure for me. What I mean by that is taking on Manchester because Lucha Forever folded and flopped it and paying for that event to happen, losing 1500 pounds to put the show on and "save British wrestling" and do something good, take on that venue and build it - honestly it wasn't even the wrestling I like. It shouldn't be about that but when you're working with something you should be passionate about it. So it's not like I do what I want because I like it, it's about being invested in it. It then becomes an exercise where you open yourself up to over-opinionated people. I don't get these people that, and this is why I'm glad I'm no longer involved in it all or pay much attention now, people that attack online and then when others or they get attacked, they claim internet bullying. They're doing exactly that; they ARE internet bullying by hounding and slagging people off. If you have nothing nice to say then don't say anything at all, keep your mouth shut. Who gets excited about making someone feel horrible about themselves? You've just drove 6 hours to get to them, 6 hours back, and

you stop at a service station for a drink and you read all the bad stuff. It's like "come on, really?". It's ok to have an opinion, but when it becomes targeted and they say "we don't want IPW here", don't come to the show then!

IN: It's just opinion really isn't it, rather than constructive criticism?

BW: Yeah, constructive criticism like "that wasn't quite right because of X, Y or Z" is one hundred percent brilliant. I think constructive criticism is valuable. Many times I've listened to it and it wasn't a problem at all. But people would jump on you because the DVD orders were behind because business was running behind, and it's one man rushing around for everything. I think it's understanding needed that IPW was always running at break-even at best, the big shows paid for the small shows. It was running that way for a reason as it was trying to build. It was a gamble to build it. I think my biggest achievement was the gamble, my biggest failure was it not happening. What I mean by that is my personal life changed. I split with my wife so financially I was paying double for everything, so where I had a massive war chest to play with previously, my war chest was gone. So I couldn't make gambles like I was because I was handcuffed a little bit. Not skint, but you had to box a bit clever and every bad decision would really screw you. I'll give you an example, Wrestlemania weekend. I love the bloke to pieces, the guy we were meant to run the show with in New York, but what I was promised wasn't delivered. So you get out there and there's no fucker there because it wasn't promoted. So you're like, what do you do? You can't not pay the people going out there with you. We had a situation where we took a gamble on the junior heavyweight tournament by bringing over the Pro Wrestling Noah guys which was a massive financial commitment. So that, plus the Wrestlemania weekend, were the two things made me think I can't do this more, and the decision to give up and pass it on.

IN: You toured in many different areas of the country with IPW. Were there specific areas that you had more success in more than others? Any places that were difficult to put on successful shows in?

BW: There was this whole Kent and Milton Keynes divide, which was quite interesting, but, saying that, Milton Keynes sold out every month. I think Milton Keynes was tailored to be the fast-paced monthly show that would give you content if you weren't living in Milton Keynes. That was the whole idea. So it was like, yeah it's not in Kent but what it is it's a place where we can shoot great content, in an exciting small environment, a sweaty, in-your-face style which I think it

provided. The first show had Tyler Bate on it, Pete Dunne versus Jimmy Havoc - Sabu appearing and stabbing Jimmy in the eye which wasn't great but good for content reasons. Second show you had Matt Riddle versus Mark Haskins, Keith Lee versus Dave Mastiff - these were big shows. Then we had the Will Ospreay versus Pete Dunne, which I still have the footage for and you could only see if you were there live on the night. That shit is exciting! That was the whole point of the Milton Keynes thing. Manchester was a comedy show, and that wasn't how I see wrestling. Yeah, you can have fun with wrestling and comedy has a place, but that's Chris Brookes and those guys' thing. They can get on with that, and they take real pride in it - and fair play as they do it the best. We had fun; we had some good fun nights but it just wasn't me.

IN: So what is your idea of what wrestling should be?

BW: Wrestling, for me, is an emotional rollercoaster, so I don't think it should be six twenty-minute matches of action, action, action. It should have a mixture of some comedy, but there should be a great narrative running through - not only in the show on the night but also throughout the year and there should be peaks and troughs throughout as you go along. There's going to be dead points with the story like there always is - EastEnders is 52 weeks a year, 3-4 episodes a week, there are episodes that mean fuck-all really, but that's the whole point. That's how you build a narrative, you have to slowly build a narrative and then drop again - that's just the way it is. So for me, you have your comedy, you have your serious thing, you have your over-arching story that people can buy into show by show, you have your upcomers for people to get excited about, you have your established stars. That's a wrestling show for me. I believe wrestling is entertainment. Not just shock value for the sake of it, but it should always be entertainment. I'm not into breaking down the fourth wall, or any of that "great match last night with you, my man!" kind of stuff, I don't buy into that. For me, if someone like David Starr is being perceived as an asshole, then to me he's an asshole. We're not going to do the whole "great match last night thing" - not going to happen. That doesn't excite me, which may have put some people off as they wanted what Progress kind of did. Wrestling for me is entertainment. People say it's garbage, but if you watch 96-97 WWF, the matches weren't 5 star matches - there was a lot of garbage but great stories were being told. Vince Russo might get it a bit as this guy that was all like BAM! BAM! BAM! Jerry Springer, but that was the time. You go back to '98-'99 with things like South Park, Jerry Springer - these were things that were hot, this was what TV was. So in hindsight we can look back and go "that was a bit too much" or "that guy doesn't have a clue about wrestling", but what he had was a

clue about society, and that was where society was at. So for me, when I took on IPW, I wanted to create a promotion that fit society for that time period. It wasn't corny wrestling, but it wasn't trying to be an indie super wrestling show - I'd rather just put a TV show on with characters, rather than "you've got Travis Banks on the show, oh my God I better come to it" or "Travis Banks versus Mark Haskins would be a killer match", "what's the backstory behind it?", "I don't know but it will be a killer match". No, we want backstory. So with Rob Sharpe and Jack Sexsmith, the Filthy Club thing. We took a long period of time with that and built it, built them together. Then he finally won the title, where they went from there, how and why the breakup happened, one of them wanted to win the Super-8, then he comes back when he's about to win it and BANG! Stops him doing it. That's exciting to me and that's planning. That's story. The one sad thing with that story is we couldn't have had that in one building, so if people didn't see the story they couldn't buy into that reaction. Based on the reaction of Rob Sharpe with his reign in IPW from the start to the end, that for me is building a star. Yeah Rob Sharpe isn't on Progress, yes he wasn't on RevPro, he might not be on the biggest indies or doing the cool thing to do - but every time that music hit he got a reaction because we built an emotional attachment to him, and that's down me understanding who he is over time, and saying "Rob, you're a likable human being. You genuinely are. I need to get that out of you out of the fans. Be You!", "Oh I don't know about that, duck". He always play the villain; he'd come out with his whip and cane and he'd be telling everyone off. I said snap the cane, it has to go. We've got this big intimidating dude that uses the word "ducky", it's great, let's go with it! We did, and we really pushed it to the hills. Him and Kip Sabian were my two success stories.

IN: There seems to be a dichotomy between people saying we should adopt this niche culture in wrestling, whereas others that say there isn't enough of those timeless, traditional elements of storytelling like you are talking about. What do you think of that split?

BW: For me, wrestling has become a bigger shill than it ever has been before. These fans are taking favourites and being all about buying merch all the time. That for me is short-minded and short-ended. I think wrestling is a niche in itself and an art form that can be interpreted in so many different ways, and it is. Some are doing great, some not so good. Riptide are being praised for their 'cinematic' style, some of their policies when it comes to veganism or sexism, or whatever - Riptide have made huge mistakes too and lost money.

They're going to swim or sink, whatever they want to do. They've gone from being a regular event to being more spread out, which I guess works for them and makes better business sense. It's the same thing when you look at one of those new companies that was supposed to be the new 'cool' company like the one in Nottingham, Wrestlegate was it? What happened to them? They disappeared pretty quick. I think what we've got to understand it why we're doing it. You could try setting up a promotion and straight away people will try to bring you down. That happened with Fight Nation to start with, by the way. The first show we ran was in London at Islington Academy, and Progress HATED it as it was on their doorstep, and we drew terribly - 40 people showed to that event. I knew they would as there wasn't any content. Who knew what Fight Nation was? So we had to go and create content, and that was how I did it by hiring a shit-hot building to get good production values. I was ripped down before we even started, and that's fine as that was their defence mechanism kicking in. But two years later most of the buildings we had were doing really well. We did a show with Jay Lethal in Eastbourne that had 400 people there. We did Mark Haskins versus Marty Scurll in Weymouth that had 350 people in the building. If you go on to YouTube and look up that episode of Wednesday Night Wrestling, you'll never see a crowd more invested into something like that, and that was kids around the ring. Not adults buying into the concept of Mark Haskins versus Marty Scurll, the cool indie wrestlers, but buying into the story of the match and the story we built in the venue. So my thing is that wrestling can be interpreted however you want, but you can do it in two ways - to satisfy your own creative input and potentially risk your own finances or do it as a business reason. For me, Fight Nation we had a very good business mind on where we wanted to go with it, but IPW changed a lot of my mindset and I put a lot of what I was doing with Fight Nation into IPW and then maybe made a few wrong decisions based on some emotions, but going back to your point - I think wrestling is niche with 10 million niches around it, and it's up to the fan to find what they want. As a fan there has never been a time like now to watch so much content. So there's a lot of white noise there, and you need to know who you're trying to cater to and set the business up to cater to them. For example, whatever I do in the future in wrestling will be very much based on a business model that I know might not be 'cool' but will be solid in terms of business.

IN: Do you think there is any hope that wrestling in Britain could go back to a more domestic level like it was in the World of Sport era, rather than today's niche culture where everything is so spread out. Or do you think the way the world is now; the contemporary state of British wrestling is where we will stay in future?

BW: I can't see a domestic pro wrestling future. I don't think the powers that be will let it happen. I think there are too many egos involved, everyone wants a too big a slice of the pie. I think World of Sport was absolutely castrated by opinions. If ITV failed, why would you bother? There's no point as you can get the WWE and AEW content. I just don't see it.

IN: I suppose there is the opinion that ITV have historically shown disdain for wrestling, considering Greg Dyke cancelled World of Sport, and even led it on a downslope by moving it to an earlier time-slot, and in general trying to modernise programming in-line with that modernist approach set by Margaret Thatcher at the time. Then there's this AEW deal where instead of giving proper time and effort to promote them, they have relegated it to an edited repeat, 4 days after broadcast and not until the early hours of the morning when no one is watching. Do you think it's perhaps a politic thing, and that wrestling is being suppressed?

BW: I think it's more than that. Greg Dyke cancelling wrestling when he did - wrestling was declining massively before then. It wasn't hot TV. People forget what World of Sport was, it wasn't just wrestling - it was sport, the final scores - lots of things wrapped into one which wrestling was part of. I generally think its niche, and if that niche isn't serving you with ratings, why would you take a punt on it as a broadcaster? I've looked at it from my point of view and how I would push wrestling going forward, but I think there is so much content now that if you're a TV company you could just go and grab something like Impact, where it's well produced already. But also after Coronavirus, how many promotions will we see hit the wall? What will be around in 6 months' time? We're in a really interesting space, but domestically, unless it appeals to kids there's no domestic value for wrestling. Appealing to adults is limiting. Progress on TV would be an absolute flop as it's catered to a certain audience. Same as RevPro and even IPW - even I didn't get the mix right. Even I touched on the 'cool' things for way too long, and I regret that as it felt quite cheap. Will Ospreay versus Pete Dunne had no relevance to my storylines at the time, but it got me trending on Twitter, it sold out in seconds, it created this mad thing about WWE versus New Japan where the first time a champion from each had faced each other since Hulk Hogan and...whoever it was, I can't remember now. But it was a moment - but really it was a moment for wrestling, not IPW.

IN: In terms of British audiences, it is said that our audiences are quite unique compared to other cultures in the way we participate, particularly at live events. What's your

opinion of where that comes from? The way we chant and sing, for example. Why is that tied to British culture?

BW: You know what, many won't know but I also run a non-league football club and there are A LOT of similarities with non-league football and wrestling fans. The same thing you said about chanting, the hardcore passion about their brand. They love their club, so they travel all around the country to see their club on match days. The same with wrestling fans, the same people turn up for Progress shows in Manchester will show up at the Electric Ballroom. It comes down to British cult following. I don't think it's just wrestling; I think its cult following. As individuals, I don't care who you are, want to be...loved isn't the word - I think we all want to be accepted by something. So the British wrestling scene, for a lot of people, is an acceptance. They're part of something. Same as being part of a football club - you're a part of it, you're accepted. It's accepted that you are a Hastings United supporter, right? You follow the club; you wear the badge and so on. That's how I see it. It's about connected to and understanding that audience. At one point I couldn't do anything wrong with my audience with IPW. It's not been about me when I'm at the shows, I will be at the monitors watching but I'll also go out and see everyone - they're paying for the show. That's how I've always treated fans. But there's a lot of horrible politics, there are a lot of nasty people that have tried to ruin that. There's a lot of time on people's hands for people to scroll on the internet and listen to all the trolls. It's tough. But going back to your point on wrestling fans, it's unique to me on cult following, it's not unique to wrestling. You'll have it in Star Wars conventions, you'll have it in Star Trek conventions, you'll have it in football. Seriously, go in and watch one of my games. The guys behind the goals - I call them the ultras - they're the ones singing, with the drum, whistles, having a laugh, drinking beer and having fun. They're exactly the same as the wrestling fans, exactly the same. So I don't put it down to wrestling, I put it down to acceptance and love for your hobby. Some people will look at wrestling and not fancy it, some will go "oh my god that's amazing let's go to a show", they go to a show and suddenly meet people that are like-minded and they are accepted. That's how I look at wrestling. I've been fortunate in my life to have many hobbies and a driving passion to deliver - and I've made mistakes, one big mistake lost heavy, but it's never stopped me from trying and as long as you learn from your mistakes it's ok to make those. I will get castrated for IPW taking a bad turn for the last 6 months of its life-span by giving it to Mark Young. In hindsight I thought it was the right decision. I was burnt out physically and mentally and it needed someone to take the reins, someone who came to me with a plan of how they would buy the company to do it. It

was the wrong decision and I had to take it back, and thankfully I only had to do two shows and let it go elsewhere as I felt it had ran its course and what not. I've got a really weird opinion of wrestling fans as I don't link it to wrestling, and I've got great memories of wrestling fans but some of those same guys tried to give me hell at the worst time of my life, so it's bittersweet.

IN: In this modern industry, we're seeing a hybrid style. Historically we had a clearly defined style with catch-as-catch-can and mat-based grappling, and you could say that was the discernible British style. Now it's more of a hybrid style with a lot of Japanese influence coming in, some American influence too. Where do you think the sense 'Britishness' remains in contemporary national British wrestling scene?

BW: It's completely confused. People will look at Chris Ridgeway and think he's the new Doug Williams with suplexes and submission moves, but it's not the same. They're all mind-numbingly smashing each other, not with chairs anymore, but with forearms over each other's heads. The rate of concussions is ridiculous. I think the British style is gone. I don't think it exists anymore. I think it's a mesh everywhere. It's a mesh in America. Some of the stuff you see on NXT these days you would have seen in Ring of Honor back in the noughties, it's merged onto mainstream. Everything is a mesh, I don't think you can sit there and say something is British wrestling, I think the only thing that makes it that way is if the wrestlers are British. I don't think it's a big issue to the success of the wrestlers, but I do think it's a shame. But I also think the bigger shame is these guys aren't told how to work for TV. They all want to be TV stars, right? They all want to go to WWE, New Japan, AEW - whatever. Nowhere in the UK, apart from Fight Nation, were teaching them how to work cameras. Watch one of those episodes, you'll see what I mean. We specifically tried to make them work the cameras to understand TV style, and my idea was to make Fight Nation that place for wrestlers to learn that style. Johnny Bailey and Sid Scala will credit Fight Nation for working that style in those days as we were trying to educate. That's why I brought Dave Marquez in from the US as Championship Wrestling from Hollywood was very much in that style. He did a lot of the NWA stuff in the late 90s and early noughties. That's the real shame is people not learning that now. They're all quick to try and be the next big Twitter sensation, but for me learning television is the most important thing.

IN: What's your opinion of WWE's involvement in the UK scene? Some say it is good for drawing for attention to British

wrestling and highlighting the best, others have negative opinions about their business practices. Where do you stand?

BW: Straight to the point on this - there is a complete correlation between WWE taking talent away from IPW to my eventual walkway from British Wrestling. I'll give you an example - my anniversary show. I had British Strong Style, Dave Mastiff and Xia Brookside on. Xia Brookside was my IPW women's champion at the time. They turn up on the day, and she says "I'm not allowed to be filmed". I went "what? Excuse me?". "I'm not allowed to be filmed". "No, I can't not film you losing the title. So I'm filming the match". Dave Mastiff was the same, as well as British Strong Style. So you now have three things you can't do because WWE has said so. Then your break-in talent - Pretty Deadly were an IPW incarnation. We had them with James Castle in a faction to start with, then they turned on James Castle so there was just Sammy and Lewis. They've gone on to do great things. Eventually you're going to lose those guys. Around August we started losing a lot of talent. To lose Xia Brookside was gutting. Also on top of that, went you lose people like Sid Scala. They can work your shows, sure, but they can't be filmed. Pretty Deadly then turn up at try-outs, so your idea changes for them as you know they'll be gone in a few months. Same with Damien Dunne - turns up at a taping, and I'm thinking I've got the tag titles on the Anti Fun Police and thinking what am I going to do? It plays with your mind; you know what I mean? It was a problem. On top of that, AEW taking Kip Sabian and Jimmy Havoc was a nightmare for me. Don't get me wrong, Kip Sabian was up to other things elsewhere already, but Kip was someone we spent a lot of time and effort to take him from a mid-card talent, to winning the rumble, then the title, to main eventing our end of year show. It's stuff like that, I wouldn't say is upsetting, but it's frustrating.

Appendix 3

Interviewer: David Boyd

Interviewee: Sam West

Interviewee profile: Academic, Promoter at Wrestling Resurgence

Date of interview: 8/05/20

Location of interview: Online video calling software

List of acronyms: IN= Interviewer SW= Sam West

IN: What was your very first experience of wrestling? What first got you into it?

SW: So I think my earliest memories would either be WCW on ITV, so circa 92-93 I think, and also I had an older cousin who had the Hasbro WWF figures. So I would have been about, in terms of time, maybe 4 or 5 at this point, yeah, 92 or around then. I think my parents bought me a few VHS tapes, so I had Hulk Hogan's greatest matches which had, like, the Andre match, a few other different ones, and then I think I had another WWF tape, and again WCW on television, so Sting, Vader, I particularly remember Ron Simmons when he won the world title off of Vader, which is quite a vivid memory. I still love that kind of era.

IN: So leading on from that as your gateway into wrestling, what was your first experience and discovery of a British scene?

SW: I remember in the Attitude Era there being posters in our local Town. I grew up in quite a small town in the north of Nottingham, and I think the leisure centre had a couple of tribute shows that had the fake Kane and the fake Undertaker, but I didn't go to any of those. So I think that was probably the first time I was aware there was such a thing as British wrestling. I think my first British wrestling show was when I was at university, I was in Bath. Maybe it was an All Star show? One of those companies that run the camps. I think Rockstar Spud was on it, I think that's the only person I kind of remember. That would have been about 2008-2009 probably. Then when I graduated and moved back to Nottingham I remember seeing some Southside posters and stuff like that, which was the main Nottingham promotion and I went in maybe circa 2011-2012. I saw a Southside show which I think had Devitt on it, I went to a couple of those with a couple of mates. I actually went to one of the Dragongate shows when they toured around that time. I think the second time they came over they did a show in Nottingham and me and my partner went to that around the time 2012-2013.

IN: So what kept you going to those sort of shows? When you compare it to your gateway into wrestling through WCW television, what was it that drew you to the British stuff? Was it just from a convenient geographical sense, or was it something specific to the 'British' kind of stuff that kept you going?

SW: I was really into the American wrestling right up until the age of 13 or 14, and then I started drifting away from it but always kept up to date with it even though I wasn't necessarily watching it, then the Wrestling Channel had FWA

shows and I remember that was my first encounter with things like Ring of Honor was on there. I remember Jody Fleisch and Johnny Storm being on those FWA shows- I think the one that had Samoa Joe, CM Punk on or something like that, and AJ Styles. I remember seeing all those on the Wrestling Channel. I was always, as a wrestling fan, interested in stuff beyond the WWE. I had ECW VHS tapes, and remember having a few copies of Pro Wrestling Illustrated which was a little more in-depth. I remember watching ECW stuff on Bravo, so I was kind of used consuming stuff beyond WWE and I was into indie wrestling so when I saw some of the stuff Southside were putting on and knowing of people like Kevin Steen, even if I didn't go to all those Southside shows, and I only went to a handful, I was kind of drawn to the people they were booking.

IN: So in terms of style, what was it that drew you to independent as opposed to mainstream wrestling? What were the differences you liked?

SW: I think it was the actual in-ring work. It was the ECW stuff that opened me up to a higher quality in-ring product, or just different than WWE - a faster pace. One of my ECW tapes had Jerry Lynn versus Rob Van Dam, the Hardcore Heaven match, which I think is probably the best one of that trilogy of matches they had. I remember I liked people like Super Crazy, Tajiri - the people who introduced that modern, indie style I guess. Then with Ring of Honor I was drawn to people like Lo-Ki, Samoa Joe - I preferred the sport at that point as much as anything, beyond storylines which I wasn't too fussed about, or the story stuff WWE were doing, things like that.

IN: So independent wrestling is more for 'smart' fans as opposed to the more casual fan, you'd say?

SW: Yeah, and I liked the atmosphere as well. Watching the ECW tapes at that age, 13-14, it seemed really cool. I think around that period it was actually cool to like wrestling at that point for a little bit. The intimacy of those shows I liked, everything from Joey Styles calling the moves and everything about that faster style of wrestling I liked. Ring of Honor really reflected that on the Wrestling Channel.

IN: What was the Influence behind starting Wrestling Resurgence?

SW: I guess it didn't really start as a company. The interesting story behind Resurgence is you have to understand myself and another guy John Kirby, we're co-owners, we both worked together at an arts centre in Leicester, called Attenborough arts centre which is where a lot of our shows take place. I'm a curator, that's my professional background,

a contemporary art curator, and John works in theatre so he used to run the theatre program at the arts centre and I ran the visual arts program and we both had the same wrestling fandom. So we were collaborating on different stuff, we knew we both liked wrestling. Then someone recommended to John Claire Warden's book 'Performance and Professional Wrestling' and we realised she was working at De Montfort University in Leicester. So in those roles we had a lot of license to develop events and projects for the gallery, and to engage someone like Claire. Attenborough Arts Centre is part of the University of Leicester so there was an immediate connection - one of our jobs was to engage with academics. We met up with Claire in 2017 and just chatted - Claire had a similar fandom as well as professional interest. Her background was theatre as well so there was an immediate synergy with what Attenborough Art Centre was doing and what she was teaching and researching. She went away and we agreed to do something, we didn't know what at the time. Claire found the 'Being Human' festival of humanities research - public events that engage with humanities research to make them more accessible, and they have an annual funding programme of small grants of 1500 pounds and so on. We applied together with the rationale that we would design a wrestling event at Attenborough Arts Centre that would engage with Claire's wrestling research. We got the grant and that was the first Resurgence show. It was only ever intended to be a one off - the concept was to have 3 wrestling matches as an exhibition to show what wrestling is today, the theme was 'History and Resurgence' which was where the name comes from, which was about connecting British wrestling history with the contemporary resurgence of British wrestling which was happening at the time. So we had the 3 matches and Claire did an academic Q and A and the event was completely free with an attendance of about 90 people. The matches were Millie McKenzie versus Jetter, Mark Haskins versus Dave Mastiff which was the main event, we had the Henchmen versus Never Say Die which was Alex Cupid and Dillon D'angelo. So the loose theme was there were more experienced wrestlers with a younger generation of wrestlers. It went really well, really well attended and just a lot of fun! Which is, I guess, probably the story of a lot of people who have got into wrestling promotion. We did it once and then everyone involved was like "how can we do this again!?". Funny things like a friend of Claire, Wes, who is a theatre lecturer at Lincoln University was our ring announcer. So it had academia and arts people involved right from the very start. Claire went away and got some more money from De Montfort University for the second show which was May of 2018. Again, it was a free event and followed the same format but we had 4 matches and it was around that time that we decided that, as it booked up quickly, we extended the capacity and started getting some buzz online a little bit, we wanted to try and do it regularly

and, not earning from it, but try and run it at as a small commercial business - there's only a certain amount of scope for funding a wrestling company through grant money, so me, John and the third owner of Resurgence, Pete, all chipped in together and booked out Nottingham Contemporary for the first of the canon of Resurgence shows which was 'Spandex Ballet'. It grew a little bit for the second one as we had 3 or 4 more people come on board - we filmed that show - we had people like Flash Morgan Webster on the show, Chuck Mambo, Millie, Charlie Evans, Chakara, T K Cooper - so you're starting to see some names that are our regulars that became involved at that point.

IN: So with that in mind, what were the goals going forward from there as a company in terms of style, aspirations, mission statement and so on?

SW: We wanted to try and reflect our professional backgrounds in the arts, so we wanted to bring the values we held as arts professionals and apply those to wrestling. So we were particularly interested in characters, wrestlers that had a fairly defined persona or style of wrestling, and also we wanted to bring values like diversity which was important to us early on, diversity in terms of gender, sexuality, cultural background - even class to an extent. We wanted the shows to be accessible - Attenborough Arts Centre itself is an accessible arts venue. My arts work as a curator has been involved a lot in disability art, so that has been the ethos of the arts centre, so we also wanted to bring that in. To showcase young wrestlers was always an aspiration of ours, but in terms of who we worked with it was largely character-based and to be fun - we always said we would only continue doing it as long as it was fun, for us as people. It really is a hobby, we're doing it not for profit, there really is no money to be made at the level we're operating at. Also we wanted to bring more awareness from outside of wrestling circles, we have people coming who have only been to Resurgence shows or their only experience is through Resurgence - so we wanted to reach out to other arts professionals who perhaps didn't know what wrestling was about and engage them. That's come from our ability to get arts council funding and things like that.

IN: So with mainstream wrestling as a gateway, would you say independents are a way of filling in the niches where engaged fans are looking for that specific content? Is that their main strength?

SW: No, I think the strength of independent wrestling is its immediacy, the scale of the experience you have. Certainly,

our venue level you are incredibly close to the wrestling itself, but also to the people wrestling. Going to an independent show is a completely different experience than going to an arena - it's much more personal, there's a far greater bleeding between fan and performer and the people running the company as well. There's loads of people coming to Resurgence now that I know as fans that I've only ever met from coming to Resurgence. There's definitely a sense of community with independent wrestling that I think attracts a lot of people. I'm not sure I agree with the term 'smart' fan, we get a lot of families that come to independent shows. Of course you can think of companies that specifically appeal to adults separate to that but that's just one part of independent wrestling. Even companies that do appeal more to adults, like Riptide, also run family-friendly shows, and I'm not sure those families are coming for that reason, I think they're coming for the fun. That's probably another element I think people that come to live wrestling come for the sense of comedy, fun and humour that I've never got at an arena show.

IN: Yeah, there's that sense with big arena shows where it's more about filling seats and making money for a company, still enjoying similar content to what you see on TV, whereas with the smaller shows there's the more direct sense of witnessing wrestling from the ground up, following a movement, getting to know the wrestlers more directly and developing a sense of loyalty. What do you think of that?

SW: Yeah definitely. It obviously does appeal to people for those reasons, like how I was drawn to it from the style and quality of wrestling on offer. That's definitely a factor for a lot of people but I wouldn't say it's the only factor.

IN: So the kind of audience you're going for - you say you're aiming for everyone and your approach of mingling professional arts with wrestling - does that put anyone off? Do you still see a lot of families coming to your shows or a more diverse audience? Or do you rely on more of a loyal, regular fanbase?

SW: We definitely have a regular fanbase. I'd say our most recent show before lockdown we got to around 240 people - it's the biggest show we've had. Roughly about 50%, maybe more of that were repeat customers, and we have a core of about 100 that almost come to every show. They're a very diverse bunch, a lot of them are families - I guess a third are families, but we get a lot of highly engaged fans as well. In terms of the style of our project, I guess you could think of it in terms of the kind of wrestlers we book. People like Gene Munny, who is our figurehead and champion for a whole year - he has a very specific following. There are a lot of people that really support Gene who like a lighter kind of independent style, the

comedy, they're wrestling not to take themselves too seriously, and also they appreciate the wider set of skills like someone like Gene or Cara Noir has. They're characters, 'character' wrestlers, so in that sense we get a crossover. Another element with that is how we book women as well. Our crossover with Eve, so we have our families and then our demographic we categorise as a 'travelling wrestling fan' that maybe go to Riptide, go to Eve, then come to us and then Soul a little bit. They travel around and support wrestlers as much as promotions. They tend to like us as you could say they're progressive fans or liberal fans - they like the positioning of women in Resurgence and things like that. Then there are quite a few in the families I've seen that have wider interests than independent wrestling. There are a couple of Dads that come with their sons that go to Progress on their own, but we get comments from them like "Resurgence is perfect as we get to take our sons to it" - we're almost a gateway into some of the other companies in that sense. Then the other part of that family group, smarter fans, this Resurgence group of arts people that are a mix of family and friends of ours are our core.

IN: So your approach of using those exterior elements like professional arts and mingling a more artistic approach in general has led to that diverse audience you have? As opposed to some independents I've been to which don't have many families and are audience mostly by that hardcore, super-engaged crowd?

SW: Yeah I think so. I think the venues we run is a factor - Contemporary, which is our Nottingham venue we run which is the biggest contemporary art gallery in the region is an excellent place, it's very high quality with facilities, very welcoming and very used to accommodating families, and the same with Attenborough which has a very inclusive ethos and the way that we market ourselves and focus on fan experience - I personally think our customer service is very good. We have had little incidents in the past such as swearing, but on the whole it is a very welcoming and inclusive environment, people know it isn't a risk. Whereas sometimes if you go to an established company or places that run different venues sometimes you don't know what you're going to get. There's quite a lot of potential for someone to have a bad experience at a wrestling show depending on how it's run, and wrestling in general isn't really family-friendly is it? It's about two people essentially beating each other up which can put some people off.

IN: To gather that diverse audience, do you think the way forward is for promotions not to pigeon-hole themselves as

'family-friendly' or 'mature audiences only'? My experience as a fan is to avoid any show that categorises their promotion as 'family-friendly' as it usually entails a very telling style, much like pantomime, which isn't something I'm looking for as a fan and is only really for young children to enjoy. I won't say it's 'fake wrestling' as that's the wrong term, but the telling nature of it and the blatant pantomime might put a lot of the 'smarter' fans off. Do you think the way forward is to just market yourself generally and let the wrestling speak for itself?

SW: We don't market ourselves as overtly family-friendly, but when we get enquiries, we generally say about 10-12 years as a minimum. We base ourselves off of WWE, so if a family approaches us and asks who can go to a Resurgence show we say we wouldn't do anything you wouldn't see on WWE. So if they're familiar with that that won't have any issue with us. That gives you quite a lot of scope if you think about the quality of the WWE product, or just in terms of what they commit to - street fights, extreme rules, ladder matches - that's all within that purview I think. We do get people that bring their young children but I think it's ultimately down to the parents. We don't book in a way that's necessarily family-friendly way. House of Pain is a Nottingham wrestling school we work with and they really are family-friendly, and it's not just that they market themselves as family-friendly, but that's a style in itself - they run and book the company and have worked camps for years and years and use that style in their shows. We don't do that, aside from blood, swearing and really gratuitous violence we don't book any differently to any other company.

IN: How would you define the 'family-friendly' style?

SW: 'Family-friendly' style means if you're the bad guy you go and get heat from the kids - you're going out there making stupid jokes and making a bit of a fool out of yourself, and then the good guys will be calling out the bad guys and using certain language, making jokes about them starting up chants like 'chicken!' and so on, like panto stuff. It works! I personally really enjoy going to House of Pain shows, and I think wrestlers that work camp shows learn a hell of a lot from that style. I'd say a non-family-friendly would be more traditional in terms of getting heat and focusing more on the actual in-ring product. It's a subtle difference but certainly in the way the audience is engaged with the wrestler is different.

IN: Perhaps more of a sports relationship? More into the 'art' of wrestling?

SW: Yeah a little more sporty, more hard-hitting, a bit more violent. A little bit more like the difference between, say, children's TV and young adult TV.

IN: A little more intellectually engaging?

SW: Yeah, and that's not to say House of Pain and those family-friendly shows don't those sorts of matches that don't do that family-friendly style, but they will have 3 or 4 that really hammer that audience engagement and really rile up the fans. I think in terms of the family-friendly wrestling out there, us and Soul, the Riptide family shows - those are three companies that I think are putting out a high quality in-ring product that is accessible to ages 10 and up all the way to those 'smart' fans.

IN: Going back to having diversity in wrestling and lots more opportunities for people - do you think British fans in general are becoming more progressive? Because of approaches such as yours, like putting in more content involving women, different cultures, racial and sexual diversity - do you think that the move to that approach booking in a progressive way has led to fans to demand it more? Or is it responding to that demand?

SW: Yeah, I would say in general, with the more specialist independent company there's more of those values reflected in the wrestling. Certain fans demand it more. I don't think it's reflected with everyone, perhaps more with the 'smart' and more engaged fans in general are quite left-wing or left to centre values. It's partly a generational thing. It would maybe be naïve to assume wrestling was previously conservative, I don't know enough about history of British wrestling fandom to know that, but in terms of contemporary wrestling like companies such as Eve, who are very aggressively progressive if you know what I mean. Progress definitely has that element, even just calling themselves Progress, although it's arguable as to whether they've lived up to that. There's this concept of wrestling as a democratic form, audiences have the ability to influence what they see as a product, and that wrestlers and promoters have always been taught and drilled to reflect what the audience want, it's a very audience-focused performance medium. So that role the audience have to influence the performance, if your audience is increasingly progressive, such as 18-35 fans generally being more progressive in their values, I think that's the sign that wrestling will naturally reflect that. I think wrestling as a medium is a bit of a sponge. If something gets over, Jack Sexsmith for instance, his run at Progress was successful and people got behind him for the values he stood

for, promoters and companies will begin to reflect that themselves. Trends are followed.

IN: In terms of the relationship between fans and wrestling, being more closed off previously and now a lot more open with much less gatekeeping, opportunities for training and booking wrestling- maybe that has something to do with more progressive values with the less reactionary approach and a better intermingling of communities?

SW: Yeah, I think some interesting research would be to look at the background of wrestlers. We're not just talking about fans and wrestlers; the values of the fans are very similar to the wrestlers. The ones we work with generally tend to be middle class and have come through university, tend to have more liberal styles with music, fashion, veganism and so on. So I think it's more of a general reflection of wrestling appealing to a certain demographic which tends to be more liberal. Like with Progress tapping into the Punk-Rock ethos and the values of that music scene really successfully.

IN: We've moved from that World of Sport era, a clearly defined national style with traditional catch-as-catch wrestling, into a more hybrid style incorporating lots of different national styles. Has that affected British wrestling fandom too?

SW: The wrestling style is definitely an amalgamation of different styles now and that's no different to a lot of other art forms, probably as much a consequence of globalisation and not necessarily exclusive to wrestling. That's really interesting and makes for a much richer wrestling experience. The athletic and technical standard is arguably higher than previous generations. I don't want to say it's better, as some things I'm interested in such as storytelling, match psychology - there's a lot of that lacking in contemporary wrestling. But in terms of a purely athletic standpoint, they're fitter, faster and leaner performers on the whole. It makes it more appealing, I think, or more accessible. You can show someone a Ricochet and Ospreay match and they will immediately engage with that as it's more intertextual - they can read it in terms of a martial arts film or comic book films and things like that. I think that maybe gets people more into it more than it used to. I think people would be put off by a slow WWE style of American match purely based on psychology. That's probably not going to hook people like an Ospreay and Ricochet match.

IN: Conversely, I suppose you could see the timeless aspects that have always, in every generation been a successful

element in wrestling such as the storytelling and the emotional side - perhaps there's an argument there that if a match isn't necessarily full of high-spots to keep casual fans engaged, there's a way to use those classic elements involved. Something like the Cody and Dustin Rhodes match in AEW last year - it didn't have many high-spots at all, and arguably stuck to those old-fashioned American methods but had a huge amount of emotion and story going into it and had many people talking about it, engaged and casual fans alike, arguing it as the match of the year. Then again, like what you're saying, I also know people that absolutely hate wrestling with a passion, and yet don't mind watching those highly athletic, fast-paced and move-focused matches. I suppose they just can't look away as it's so engaging with the charged level of physicality.

SW: I think NXT has done really well. I think their true success has been to take elements of that contemporary style and blend it with the traditional, old school storytelling approach. Some matches have had really great reception like the Gargano and Adam Cole matches. They seem to have a formula that works really well in NXT that blend both those philosophies together.

IN: As an extension of talking about the style of British wrestling as we spoke about earlier, now we have this hybrid style of incorporating lots of different styles, how would you define the British style now, or the 'Britishness' of wrestling? Or do we even need to?

SW: It's a tricky one because there are a lot of proponents of British wrestling in America. They have people like Grisham, going back further they had Chris Hero, Quackenbush, who were teaching British wrestling better than it was being taught here a few decades ago, so the technical stuff that made British wrestling stand out isn't quite exclusive as what it once was, but it is still there. Knucklelocks training school is particularly strong because of Darrell Allen who runs it. Knucklelock wrestlers tend to come out with a stronger grounding in British grappling. I think we've lost a few, such as Tyler Bate and Pete Dunne, who are the best examples of contemporary British wrestling, certainly at the highest level. Now they're not really seen in the UK. It might be the case of the British style being diluted a bit, but we're still selling comedy and always have. If you go back to World of Sport and the Les Kellett stuff - that definitely is a part of wrestling with the fun and humour in it. Other countries have their way of doing it, like DDT in Japan has a very Japanese sense of humour, and America has some comedy

too, but there's something particular with the British comedic approach.

IN: I agree, we do have a firm grounding with the more theatrical aspect of wrestling, the comedy and taking a step back to be more self-aware. Why do you think that is in terms of British culture? Is it our deep history of theatre and things like pantomime informing that?

SW: I'd like to think so. You can't read wrestling without thinking about its history in the music hall. That's something I'm interested in in that it sat aside a lot of the other disciplines in that music hall, theatre and early origins where it was a lot more raucous and audiences were more engaged and involved a lot more, the carnival. Wrestling definitely holds on to that instinct of clowning - that's what I think is an element of what makes a wrestler, Slapstick comedy, Buster Keaton. In the UK there are things like Monty Python, I think there's a bit of that. The British sense of humour is a little more cutting, sarcastic and self-deprecating. Gene Munny brings a lot of self-deprecation into his performance which people tend to relate a lot to.

IN: What are your opinions on what British wrestling is doing right and wrong?

SW: I think what it's doing right is that it has packaged itself in a way that is a lot more appealing to a wider audience. I think it's got a good aesthetical sense of what is contemporary - British wrestling feels very contemporary to me, and there are only a handful of moments in wrestling history, to me, where wrestling has been contemporary and connected to a wider contemporary culture. Normally it lags behind the rest of arts culture. I think companies like Riptide, Soul, hopefully us, Progress - I think they're very good at reflecting the wider culture. I think we're quite good at positioning ourselves with the music industry, the gig industry, the popularity of independent or craft businesses, craft food craft beer, craft wrestling - I feel there have been a few companies that have managed to fit in to that and that's what has made it appealing. It's niche, it knows it's niche, it's not trying to get on ITV or whatever. I think it knows what it does well, but I think we're in a bit of a rebuilding phase. Like the great football teams and leagues, I think we had a peak about 2-3 years ago now, especially with the WWE UK stuff coming in, but the talent pool - the young talent pool - is really strong at the moment. Possibly as strong as it was back then. There's a real pool of great young wrestlers coming through. I don't know how Covid will have a

situation on that, we'll have to speculate that, but I think in about 3 years' time we'll have another stint of really great British wrestling again.

IN: In post lock-down how do you see the health of the British wrestling industry moving forward? What do you think the industry has learned during the pandemic experience?

SW: I don't know. I think wrestling will be one of the last things to come back, sadly. I can't see how you can have a wrestling show with social distancing. We don't have the companies that can run empty arena shows like AEW, that's just not an option. My most optimistic hope is we're back in October but I wouldn't be surprised if it wasn't until next year. The effect is really going to be on wrestlers, that's where there will be a lot of impact. We were at a good point where there were more and more people earning a full-time living from wrestling but now that's been completely taken away from them, and if you think about the impact on precarious labour in this situation, wrestling is the ultimate version of that. I don't think, or I hope it won't affect too many companies. I speculate the one's hit the most will be the ones that have schools. I don't know when they'll be able to come back. I know House of Pain have been doing fundraisers because of loss of income and things like that. I generally feel the infrastructure will still be there and people will be raring to go when it comes back.

IN: So you'd say loyal fan communities are an integral part to the survival of British wrestling promotions, especially going forward?

SW: Yeah, I hope the fan communities won't go away. I feel wrestling is one of those interests that has peaks but there is a level that tends to always maintain itself. Even in the supposed 'dark times', if you talk to people who worked back then, there were less companies back then, that was the main thing, and the gates weren't bad. There were still the fans, just not companies. I think as long as the companies stay the fans will too. I'm optimistic, it's just frustrating. I love wrestling but think a lot of wrestlers will be missing it more than me.

IN: A much discussed topic amongst fans I have spoken to and observed is the activity from WWE and their entrance in to the British scene with NXT UK. Most say it's a bad thing and British wrestling is dead due to top talent being contracted, and so on, but some see it positively as a way to properly showcase our industry on a grander stage and there is still a

large wave of talent left uncontracted. What are your thoughts of the WWE in the British wrestling scene?

SW: I have two things I think probably should be treated separately. One is the Performance Centre, and the idea of having one in the UK with contracted wrestlers. There's that and the infrastructure which I don't think many are aware of. Then there's the actual product of NXT UK and the use of contracts to have talent exclusive to them. The first part, infrastructure, I think has a lot of benefits. From people and wrestlers I've spoken to that have been there for training, try-outs and bootcamps - that is a great thing to have it really is. The expertise there, the way they've been smart in contracting wrestlers associated with other training camps, so you've got great trainers contracted from other camps like Mike Hitchman from Dragon Pro, Zack Gibson from the North West people like Eddie Dennis. A lot of engaged fans will know them as trainers, but they're still able to teach at their own schools and they take that knowledge learned at the Performance Centre and pass that on to the younger generation, so that pool that aren't associated with WWE are benefitting - there's a trickling-down effect. The physical care and access to medical care and experts available there - there are wrestlers I've spoken to where they've said they've had their pain management transformed by techniques they've learned at the Performance Centre, and that has had a knock-on effect to other companies that now take welfare more seriously, medics are the norm and if a show doesn't have that people are good at calling that out much more now. So I think that is all very positive, but then there's the product which I don't like at all. The way that they have been cherry-picking and, in a way, stockpiling talent. There are a lot of people from NXT UK that we could work with if we wanted to, but you can't build a long-term relationship with someone if NXT UK decide they're going to pop up and decide to have a date here or a TV taping there. You can't really work with those people, and that's frustrating as a promoter. If someone gets offered a spot on an NXT UK taping when they were meant to be working for Resurgence, they're obviously going to want to go to work for WWE. We have no problem with that - go and take that opportunity - but it leaves your company in a spot as you can't rely on people you thought could as there's this 'thing' here that didn't used to be here that can pull people away as and when. So it has an effect on the wider scene and people have to be wary of it. You have to think if we invest in him/her, write a lot of story around them or decide to give them the belt, we now have this danger that WWE is going to come along. So those are the two ideas I have. The idea, though, that WWE is the death of British wrestling, I think, is absolute nonsense. I don't agree with that in anyway whatsoever. You just look at the gates that they're getting

and the quality of the product - I've tried to watch it for research purposes and it's just dull. That frustrates me more as it could be really good, the talent is there. It isn't reflective of what drew WWE here in the first place, which was how lively and diverse the scene was and all the characters - none of that is reflective in NXT UK to me. If it was a lot better and it was doing a good job, I'd be a lot more for it, but I'm also worried they'll just get bored and ditch it. Then on top of that, it's Vince McMahon isn't it? It's a horrible corporation with their business practices. But there are a lot of people in our community and wrestlers out there that want to support our independent wrestling as a genre separate to WWE. WWE are more of an inconvenience really.

IN: There's an argument that WWE have essentially acquired British wrestling history and are re-presenting it to audiences from an American perspective. Do you think that is an issue? Do you think perhaps a better link to the past and our own wrestling history is needed in the British independent scene? Could we have a better connection and understanding of our past and traditions in wrestling, rather than having a big company coming in and doing it for us? Or does it not matter?

SW: I don't feel like NX UK makes enough of it. It would be interested to do that. ITV kind of did it with WOS. I like that independent wrestling at the moment is a contemporary form, and personally I don't like nostalgia. I'm not into harking back to a great British tradition, there's too much of a flavour of nationalism in that. For me the most exciting wrestling is contemporary. It's not that I don't like that tradition style like World of Sport, I do watch it on YouTube. There are some great matches. But I don't think history needs to be reflected, I'm proud of what's going on now.

IN: With everything now separated into niches, or 'pockets', as well as the failure of WOS to appeal to a large enough audience - what would you say could be a way forward to create a more domestic product? World of Sport was VERY successful and drew a lot of attention, so do you think there's a hope of a return to a domestic scene or is the future this contemporary, subcultural and niche approach?

SW: I would say the latter as I think that's the way culture has evolved. People want content on demand - look at YouTube - it's a reflection of the media landscape and popular culture in general. I don't think there's anything wrong with that, and the UK scene has been good in embracing niche and seeing it not as a bad thing. Something I find frustrating with WWE and AEW is they don't push boundaries of what televised wrestling can be. I'm a fan of the Netflix sports

documentaries. WWE did something called 'Breaking Ground' which followed NXT stars as the product was becoming successful. I'd love to see something like that with British wrestling, tracking people involved in the scene, companies like Riptide, ourselves, Soul - that would be cool. The ICW documentaries BBC did a few years ago were really good, I'd be interested in more of that content.

IN: Arguably those documentaries brought a lot more eyes to the scene too with viewers flocking over to see some wrestling, that was my experience, anyway.

SW: Yeah and integrating that along with actual matches as well - so the stories are built through them as much as the wrestling itself. Also, having people there advocating why it's interesting too rather than just putting it on TV. The thing is with WOS on ITV is that no one was introduced, you weren't told why you should engage with these people or why you should care about the protagonists. AEW is the only thing I watch now since lockdown, and since the lockdown it's been really good because of some of those things. That's the sort of wrestling that would have a place in a mainstream context - people's stories, more documentary-focused, then the action as well.

Interviewer: David Boyd

Interviewee: Cody Hall

Appendix 4

Interviewee profile: American professional wrestler, has toured worldwide including United Kingdom, Japan, United States and other European countries.
Son of WWE Hall of Famer Scott Hall/Razor Ramon

Date of interview: 8/05/20

Location of interview: Online calling software

List of acronyms: IN= Interviewer CH= Cody Hall

IN: Before you first experienced the British wrestling scene, what were your thoughts on what British wrestling was, or entailed as a wrestler?

CH: I obviously knew about World of Sport and that technical hold-based style, which was first shown to me by Colt Cabana, and I'm a fan of Zack Sabre Jr so I'd seen it still alive in modern wrestling. But I essentially just viewed it as just more work.

IN: How would you describe British wrestling in comparison to other countries you have wrestled in?

CH: Honestly it's not vastly different, the wrestler's life is generally the same as far as the travel and eating whatever you can find on the road, the random fans and venues you come across. Of course, a more professional company will offer a tour bus or flights instead of car rides, better and bigger venues from the fan's perspective and for a wrestler, for example. A proper changing area, which at times is a big struggle that nobody talks or thinks about. But it's a carnny makeshift life that is fun in the moment without having real substance. Also on the UK scene I must say the travel is the best thing going for it, as the country is relatively small it makes the driving substantially reduced from what I'm used to in Japan and gives guys opportunities too that wrestlers in America will never get because of the sheer size of the states and promoters not being willing to fly most people in.

IN: What are your thoughts on the British wrestling industry in terms of how it is run and the backstage politics? Were there any issues you faced, or perhaps even anything you liked?

CH: Once again essentially the same, being in Japan there was a language barrier. But it was always very evident the politics involved as far as who's friends with who, who kisses ass, who has the boss's favour, and unfortunately on an independent level that exists just as much or even more so despite the lack of real big money or fame, just purely ego and people getting off on being the boss or wrestlers truly believing they're special and being their own biggest fan, which is the kiss of death. Also, yes because I was used to Japan and guys being true professionals, actually only being allowed to wrestle if they had true ability and years of training. Wrestling independent level guys who have no business being wrestlers becomes a problem. I've had many guys quit, cry, be scared, and complain after the match about the level of physicality, these people don't belong in wrestling, and it's why they are only on this level which unfortunately is accessible to anyone now.

IN: Were there any new styles you had to get used to when wrestling here? Is there still a discernible 'British' style? Or do you think it's more of a hybrid now?

CH: No new styles, everyone does their style. But for most people style means just to copy someone else and have no originality. Of course now it's very athletic oriented, and dangerous, as opposed to the classic story telling and having a character and charisma style.

IN: What are your thoughts on British wrestling fans and audiences you performed in front of? Did you notice anything unique in the way they participate at shows and enjoy the wrestling, as opposed to other countries you've wrestled in?

CH: The fans were nice. Very different than Japanese as in the sense they can be drunk and rude, but nice overall. Very vocal with talking shit or cheering or booing. In general most fans at shows I'm very pleased to see, it's the Internet fans that are really a bad part of wrestling.

IN: If you had to critique British professional wrestling based on your experiences here, what would you say is good about it as well as the bad points too?

CH: I have no critique, I'm nobody to judge. It wasn't what it was years ago, I think WWE has killed a lot of that, and just with time many companies faded away. But I still truly enjoyed my time in the UK and throughout all of Europe. But I wouldn't recommend anyone going to Britain just for their style or anything of that sort. Sorry to say as that's the point of your paper, the people and the country itself have a beautiful flavour I'll always love and enjoy. But wrestling is wrestling, and I'd say it's dying there and everywhere.

IN: So do you think that the British scene has lost its classical edge? Do you think if the scene looked back to its roots a lot more rather than to more modern approaches, things might improve?

CH: I get heat, not everyone can achieve it. It is the fans, but you can only blame the performer at the core. Yes it's lost the hotness I used to see on Twitter when I first started versus years later when I finally got my run there. No I don't think you can fix it or any of wrestling it's too far gone in a different direction. It's like if your girlfriend cheats on you, you can still even love her and want her back, but it's never the same. Today's guys won't change and the quality of the guys coming in continually brings it lower and lower.

Appendix 5

Interviewer: David Boyd

Interviewee: 'UTTRob'

Interviewee profile: Wrestling Fan, Popular Twitter Account

Date of interview: 29/06/20

Location of interview: Online video calling software

List of acronyms: IN= Interviewer R= Rob

IN: How did you first get into wrestling in general?

R: I grew up in a family that already watched wrestling, so it wasn't really a case of 'finding' it. It was on every Saturday for World of Sport when I was growing up. Probably because it was so culturally significant, the Big Daddy and Giant Haystacks stuff really sticks in the mind. We'd always go to see my Grandparents on the Saturday, and their generation were more 'dyed in the wool' fans whereas my parents were more casual. If you were to ask my Dad the names of some wrestlers he'd say Mick McManus, Jackie Pallo and Sting - that'd be it. He sort of lives it through other people. My mum actually told me she tried to watch some of the recent Covid wrestling shows for WWE Raw but she couldn't get through it because of the lack of atmosphere.

IN: So World of Sport was your first experience of wrestling and not the WWF?

R: Yes. WWF actually had some episodes on World of Sport but it was all very "oh that's the stupid American stuff" according to my family. It wasn't until '91 until we got Sky that I was able to watch it but World of Sport had gone by then so it was the only option.

IN: So who were your favourite wrestlers and what drew you to them?

R: My favourite was Kendo Nagasaki. He totally embodied the gimmick. As a kid he was a super-hero for me but now you realise he went 40 years living the character and not speaking to people. He only had his identity revealed in the end because he had his real name on an invoice.

IN: What's your take on what caused the demise of World of Sport?

R: It was Greg Dyke. He wanted that 'trendy' 'yuppy' audience. It's funny because British wrestling looked very low rent compared to the WWF and wasn't in the big glamorous arenas with high production, but neither was football. Football looked awful in the 80s and had a very bad reputation. The only way football survived was it embraced the 'yuppy' image and became a very clean product and open to the masses. So had wrestling kept going on TV in Britain it would have needed a massive facelift but there was no one there with the will to do it.

IN: What was your experience of wrestling in the 90s once British wrestling on TV was cancelled? Did you still attend shows?

R: I was really into the WWF at the time, and because I lived in Yorkshire it was the one ITV region that didn't get WCW. Very occasionally I'd be able to get tapes from a friend who lived at the top of the hill in the village and could pick it up. It was that ridiculous. Obviously Nitro came on in 1995 so I'd watch that. Because WCW was always hard to get it felt more magical in a way, and certainly it was more engaging than WWF with storylines. We had Sky so occasionally you could find things like Glow or stuff with German commentary on if you were lucky. It was very difficult in the 90s to know when things were on. I'd have friends telling me ECW was on but I had no idea - there wasn't twitter or whatever and Radio Times didn't cover all the channel listings. So if you didn't know already it would pass you by.

IN: So are you more of a TV fan or have you gone to live events too?

R: We go to quite a few shows, aside from NXT and NXT UK it's been a while since we have gone to main roster shows. We go to indies when we can, not now with the pandemic!

IN: What was your re-entry into British wrestling once things picked up here again?

R: The first one I saw on TV was UKW, which was a promotion ran out of Wakefield and Halifax. They had a TV deal and they had people like Lionheart and Robbie X, as well as Paige before she went to WWE. That was an 'in' because the rest of the wrestling here were tribute shows which weren't great - they might have Shadow from the Gladiators or something. I felt this was trying to be its own promotion, but sadly it lost the TV deal and was replaced by ICW. That ran for a few months, but they got kicked off for swearing. Then I saw lots of NGW shows around here, then migrated over to seeing PCW shows. They used to get a lot of imports over but they wouldn't be the main focus of the storylines. We've since expanded and saw shows with WCPW when it was still around, and Southside. It's probably politically not a good thing to say, but it was quite disappointing when RevPro took over. We'd been to their shows before but they were a double-hitter in Sheffield. They said at the intermission "you can't go outside it's too cold", and everyone laughed as no one had a coat anyway. Obviously a southern promotion didn't appreciate it was a warm day for us!

IN: What do you think has been the appeal of British wrestling now and in the past?

R: Historically the big thing was the difference in styles. Obviously there were the Admiral Lord Mountevans rules - they had the three falls, the public warnings - it was more focused on wrestling moves rather than punches and kicks. It does have a style of its own. Sometimes you watch American and Japanese matches and it can take you away from the believability somewhat. I've always been more driven by characters - it doesn't have to be the best match in the world. People will say Big Daddy against Giant Haystacks at Wembley was an awful match. It was, but does it really matter? It had the build and was the biggest thing. You could easily had a 5 star match on AEW Dark but no one would care as there's no build or promotion. I think the attraction of the British indies is the atmosphere. We went to a show in Mansfield where there was a hardcore match with duelling chants after between the cleaners with the dustpan and brush while they were cleaning the ring!

IN: It is true we have a certain atmosphere at wrestling shows here, some of which comes from football with the chanting. Where do you think that attitude at shows comes from culturally in Britain?

R: It definitely comes from Football. Before the Southside shows in Sheffield they'd always play the Sheffield United and Sheffield Wednesday songs, like John Denver's 'You Fill Up My Senses' which Sheffield United have a version of, and then they'd play the Sheffield Wednesday 'Hi Ho Silver Lining'. It got the crowd going and gee'd up those factions that were in that audience to begin with. They definitely play on that, and you just have to look at how much a draw Grant Holt was for WAW - there's potentially a big crossover, and that there are a lot of wrestling fans that are football fans.

IN: Specifically with football chants, why do you think it's so easily transferrable into wrestling audiences?

R: I think the other side of it is that because we are such a small country and football teams and local rivals are so close, you end up with people being able to go to a lot of away games. It's not just a stadium full of one set of fans. That promotes the environment of chanting and that seeps out into the other forms of entertainment. Maybe it's just part of the British psyche to shout at things. You look at things like pantomime, which is uniquely British, that's a whole genre of entertainment built around shouting and putting bad against good.

IN: What are your thoughts on the WOS relaunch on ITV semi-recently?

R: I think part of the problem was it was a very 'ITV show', so it went straight on after Ninja Warrior and was produced in the same way as ITV shows like that and the X Factor. It's their money, fair enough, but it wasn't friendly to the traditional wrestling audience - which got rid of the hardcore fan-base and had them complaining online about it and saying people were stupid for watching it. The other problem was it was back-to-back with Ninja Warrior. You've got one established show with a format people are used to seeing in that time slot, then you've got something trying to be that straight afterwards that just looked awful by comparison. It would have been better being moved away. A lot of people complained about the audience it aimed for, but wrestling has always been aimed at families. Were ITV ever going to create the next ECW? No, and you have to be realistic. We went to the live show at the Tower Ballroom and it was absolutely rocking! The people there loved it, and this was after the TV show had ended - which proves there was a market for it - but I think it was a combination of not appealing to the hardcore fan base, being in the wrong time slot and the wrong format. If you lose your core fan base, you've lost the battle.

IN: Do you think modern British wrestling is becoming too subcultural and niche with nothing to unify it? There are people that want that traditional, solid show of wrestling but we now have shows such as Schadenfreude that have their own niche approach to presenting wrestling.

R: I see it like the craft Beer industry. Years ago you just had Taylor's, Bass and John Smiths and that was it, and they were truly huge. Now you have more ranges of craft beer that you could shake a stick at which cater to every single possible taste, like a porter or a lager or an IPA, whatever. So now you have a huge range of companies, but because no one is going for a one-size-fits-all approach they're missing the big market. But while you've got a huge range catering for individual needs people won't flock back to the main stuff. It would be very hard to do because of all the people you'd alienate. Having said that, if you aim at the kids you can raise them as your own generation of fans. That's why it was one of the few ways WOS could have made it work. But there's NXT UK, which doesn't exist anymore now in the pandemic, but they're the longest 4 hours of your life. There's no storyline, and I actually got shushed because someone wanted to watch the matches in silence. We'd also bumped into some lads we knew who are huge fans, and one of them actually left early because they had heard there was an offer on for sausages at the local supermarket!

IN: So what is your opinion on WWE's involvement with the British scene?

R: I do agree yes there are more wrestlers that can afford a mortgage and have a guaranteed income, but some of them are earning less now than what they were on the indies because of not being tied down. It was very cynical of WWE; they came in to kill WOS. If WOS hadn't been there we wouldn't have NXT UK. I'm not sure if anyone looks better in NXT UK than before they joined. A lot of wrestlers came off better in their own promotions. With everything going on at the moment, you would have thought that a big company like WWE would have had the safeguards in place to stop everything that's been going on. Yeah, it happens in the indies, but when it happens in the biggest company in the world, which it has done, there needs to be changes. Whether it's an overarching governing body, whether its heads rolling at the WWE or both. One of the things they played on at the start was that duty of care thing where wrestlers need to be safe and the right medical facilities need to be in place at shows, and everyone was a bit cynical saying that was done to drive out the smaller promotions- but you can't be anything but cynical as there wasn't any safeguards in place in the first place!

IN: I see from your shirt you're an NJPW fan. There's been a huge swell of appreciation for Japanese wrestling by British fans recently. Obviously RevPro have helped that with their relationship with NJPW and bringing those Japanese stars over, but why do you think there has been this sudden growth in appreciation for them?

R: It might just be an appreciation of wrestling, I don't know. You do get the imports with RevPro, but I came to it the other way from NJPW and watched RevPro after. There was a driving force from getting people from the Bullet Club and a lot of western wrestlers going to Japan helped with that audience. People are more willing to be open to different styles of wrestling now and I don't know if that's necessarily a British thing or more generally being a hardcore wrestling fan. WWE is the gateway drug and then soft drugs lead to hard drugs, sort of thing. Before you know it you're watching Bolivian Cholitas, or whatever

IN: Now we have a drought of wrestling in a global pandemic, what do you miss most about it?

R: It is the atmosphere. Although after everything that has come out about the British indie scene I'm not sure what it will be like or how long it'll take to get to the stage where

people on the card are decent human beings. The amount of time, effort and money that I've put on people that have turned out to be disappointing. It's as daft as this - I had an El Ligerero T-shirt I was using for jobs around the house and I went to mow the lawn the other day and I'm like "now I've got to go throw away another T Shirt". The problem is sometimes you get these horrific people that might do or say good things, and maybe it's important those ideas aren't lost even though they've turned out to be a complete bastard.

IN: Going forward beyond the pandemic, what would you like to see in the future for British wrestling?

R: I think the way it has to evolve is through more focus on Women's wrestling. That's not just because of Women not necessarily getting the opportunities but also because I think it would be more believable that Women are decent people in comparison - people trust Women's wrestling a lot more at the moment. So that would need to feature quite heavily on the rebuild and I wouldn't be surprised if the first few shows we get are Women's wrestling. I think there will be some contraction because when you look at the numbers of people that have come out, especially when they've been affecting the biggest promotions - ICW and Progress - ICW have pretty much hidden under a rock and Progress have managed to say the wrong thing at every turn. Everything they've done has diminished the brand, and it wasn't in a good place before it all started as they asked for the furlough scheme and it then came out how much money the directors had taken out of the company. Rock and roll! I think there's a lot of damage, and British wrestling has a black eye and there needs to be a bit of rethink and a restart. For some promotions it may just end up as they're just a toxic brand and will have to start again. There will have to be a rebuilding process. It was a real shame because it felt like there were a couple of times when Whatculture was getting some traction, World of Sport came back and ICW got over 6000 fans at the Hydro - you sort of felt it was really on the cusp of breaking through. Then WWE came in and put the boot on the neck of it at that time, but this has put it all back a long way now everything has come out, not just Speaking Out but financial irregularities too.

IN: Should indie promotions work together more in Britain to prevent these problems and actually get things rolling again?

R: I guess Joint Promotions and things like the original NWA are the perfect ideal of how that arrangement works, but in the modern day it never seems to work like that. It always seems to be where one company 'invades' another and all the stories will float around that and they just end up combining

rosters - like the whole TNA and GFW invasion - they just seem to be a really damp squid. Even when you look at when WCCW and the AWA tried to come to an arrangement it never seemed to come off because you're diluting two talent pools. One of the problems is even if you had fifty percent of the best from both sides - someone has to lose and then they look like the worst guys. I always think it's funny when people say "AEW has the best roster in the world", or whatever they might say - well it's actually stupid having the best roster in the world because you need some jobbers at the bottom of the card to make the people at the top look good. There's no point in having the twenty best wrestlers in the world because after a month sixteen of them will look average. In terms of pooling together and sharing resources and bookings maybe it would work, but I'm not sure in terms of invasions. So much of the talent crosses over as well, it's not like you've got one set of people in NGW and one set of people in PCW - there's forty percent crossovers between the rosters anyway.

Appendix 6

Interviewer: David Boyd

Interviewee: Leigh Broxton

Interviewee profile: Wrestling Fan

Date of interview: 08/07/20

Location of interview: Online video calling software

List of acronyms: IN= Interviewer LB= Leigh Broxton

IN: What was your first experience of British wrestling? Why did you like it?

LB: It kind of crosses over with the American stuff. My first experience of British wrestling was World of Sport. That was my Grandmother sitting me on her lap at 5 or 6 years old on a Saturday afternoon watching Giant Haystacks and Big Daddy. I suspect that's where the majority of British fans come from in all honesty though at that time I wasn't paying a lot of attention to British wrestling at the time - I got heavily into WWF back in the day around '88-'89 and followed that through until about 2003-2004. Things like ECW, WCW I watched too, but at that point I'd never really been to any British wrestling. In about 2001 I moved to Nottingham and met a man called Chris Brooker who I believe has some connection to Future Shock up in Manchester. Chris and I became good friends and used to go to British wrestling shows, which at that time were really American stars coming over here to perform in front of forty seven people in a bingo hall. That was really it, and then in all honesty my interest in wrestling absolutely vanished in my thirties - until about Wrestlemania

29 or 30 where I just happened to be flicking channels and it was on. That ultimately brought me back in to it. Subsequently I met my wife about 12 months after, carried on watching WWE, picked up some Ring of Honour who were coming over here for the first time in ten years. This was around 2013-14. My daughter was really into WWE at the time and was in love with John Cena, so I managed to convince them to come with me to Ring of Honour in Nottingham, which was in a sports hall. After that my wife really fell in love with pro wrestling too. We then started punting around with wondering what British wrestling was like, as we couldn't just see wrestling when WWE was here, which was once in a blue moon. Ring of Honour said they'd be back but who knows if they will. So we started hunting around local promotions. We found one in Leicester, and then picked up Progress over the internet. That led to finding Attack, Riptide, Kamikaze in Coventry, Resurgence started in Nottingham and Leicester, Fight Club:Pro and so on. It's really gone from there, and now if you ask me what I watch, I watch overseas stuff a fraction of the time compared to British stuff - apart from New Japan which is my favourite brand ever and no one will change my thoughts on that. But it's mainly now following the British scene.

IN: What is it about New Japan that makes it your favourite?

LB: It's their style, their remarkable ability to tell a story without saying a single word. On the night before the G1 there will be two protagonists on either side and with no word spoken can make you absolutely want to be there and tune in to see what happens. To me New Japan is on an entirely different level. It is 'puro' as they call it, but it is pure wrestling to me. The storylines - they're not afraid to drag something out for two years and the payoff is always incredible. I look at WWE and even AEW - who I had hopes for - but I personally think they're falling into the same traps WWE are. I'll refer back to a story in British wrestling. I watched my daughter lose her mind over Damien Dunne - her favourite - winning a pretty low-key title match at Hope wrestling. The storyline had been going on for about eighteen months and he finally won the title, I watched my daughter drop to her knees and burst into tears. That length of storytelling and that payoff was just the best thing in the world. In wrestling there seems to have to be a new set of storylines and a payoff by the next pay-per-view - no you don't! Watching someone achieve something that's taken 12-18 months up to a few years - like Nito's journey we're talking 6-7 years' worth of storytelling here - to finally get that payoff is unlike anything you'll see anywhere else. If there was more long-term booking in wrestling there would be better stories told. I don't mind comedy characters, and I don't get offended by it. The Anti-fun Police are brilliant. It has a place. It's when you take

wrestlers who aren't comedy wrestlers and try and make them into one is where I have issue. New Japan, to me, has the right balance. Yes there's some silly stuff but ultimately when it comes down to those last 5 matches you know they're going to be must-see television. Every single show you've gone through 15 road-to's and you get to that main show you know, especially the second-half, will be banger after banger. It will make you want to tune-in the next day to see where everything is going, and I haven't seen it anywhere else as consistently in New Japan.

IN: What specifically draws you to British wrestling?

LV: It's all about the atmosphere. British fans are second to none. Even if you only have 50 people that crowd can still make a noise. We have a generation of British wrestlers, a core, that will go on to take over the world. Taking Will Ospreay's politics out of it, there's probably no one else like him - the consistency. Zack Sabre Jr is the best technical wrestler and has been for some time. I can watch Eddie Dennis do anything - I've seen him play to a room of only 30 people and absolutely destroy the microphone - he's so good at it. The whole Mark Andrews Eddie Dennis storyline in Progress was as good as storytelling gets. I think it's a perfect storm - a generation of fans that appreciate multiple styles of wrestling, a generation of wrestlers who have finally found their calling and are no longer only playing to 20 or so people in a bingo hall anymore. We've started to put bums on seats in places like Wembley Arena and the Hydro in Glasgow. Even in other companies - Riptide's production quality is off the charts. It's ridiculous. Resurgence putting on shows in art galleries is completely bonkers but it works! You cannot get that experience from any other form of entertainment. That feeling of being involved and the world around you fading out for that 3 hours is the best feeling in the world. For me, the very fact it only has a few hundred people actually makes it better. I don't want to go to a show with 60000 people where realistically I'm only going to see what's on the big screen. I can do that from home. But if I'm in a room with only a few hundred, I can hear every punch thrown and feel the crowd atmosphere - that is better than anything in the world.

IN: Now we have more of a hybrid-style here as opposed to the classic mat-based grappling style traditionally seen - where do you think British identity stylistically lies in modern wrestling?

LB: I think it's a hybrid style now. I still love watching traditional matches. There's a place for it but I think shows put on such a variety now that no match is the shame. One will

be a comedy match, one will have high-fliers, and so on. There's so much here now that there isn't a British style now.

IN: Is British identity with wrestling more about our relationship with it rather than style?

LB: I think so, yes. As you probably know, the very fact we can go up and chat to someone after the show - it's like a family. There have always been cliques, yes, but think it's more of a family than the American scene. At least the WWE crowd anyway. The British side feels like a community. Touching on recent events that is only going to be more so in the future as people will do more to look after each other. It feels like an exclusive club we're all a part of rather than a football match where you're just another number.

IN: The ways British fans participate at live events are arguably completely unique compared to the rest of the world. How would you compare British fans to others?

LB: The passion. It doesn't matter how dull a match is, there is always an atmosphere. I watch a WWE show and wonder if anyone is there - sometimes you can hear a pin drop. In Britain, it doesn't matter which promotion - there's an atmosphere in that room that can't be replicated anywhere else. We won't cheer for the good guys and boo the bad because we don't think like that. Chief Deputy Dunne was supposed to be a heel - nobody thinks that! It almost becomes football-like. The chanting, the atmosphere feels like a football crowd from my experience. That benefits from the smaller venues too. I've been to bigger shows in the UK where the atmosphere hasn't been as good as the smaller ones. I think the fans absolutely want to be part of the show and experience, and I don't think that's a negative thing. Some do. I think it adds something. Any wrestler coming will say that come over here say the audiences are completely different than anywhere else. We're not trying to hijack the show, you're just trying to be part of the show. Same as if you're cheering your team scoring a goal. There's an understanding in British wrestling that it's part of it. Even in shows where the crowd is a bit quiet the wrestlers will try to get the crowd going as they don't want to play to silence, they want to play to the banter, cheering and booing.

IN: Where do you think that particular tendency to participate comes from culturally?

LB: It probably is from the terraces. Even when I've gone to metal shows it's the same thing - fans here are just at that extra level. Even if you don't like football it's part of

society in this country. I suppose it could come from pantomime too.

I'm also a big gamer and find the same thing with that too. When you get a niche product the passion comes through. We accept we're not the norm, standard or generic but we'll shout from the rooftops about it. I think that's a British thing, finding your niche and rally around it, shout about it and tell everyone about it. I think with wrestling, outside of its circles it's always been treated a joke. "That's fake" and so on.

IN: What is your opinion on WWE getting involved with the British wrestling scene?

LB: I don't resent the wrestlers taking the opportunity, they've earned it. They don't owe us anything and if they can earn a decent wage doing what they love then all credit to them. I believe they brought NXT UK in to stop World of Sport gaining traction. It was a cynical ploy, and in all honesty I've watched very little NXT UK. I've seen the Takeover shows. Do I think they will do a better job with storytelling than the other promotions in the country? No. You're only seeing a fraction of what the wrestlers are capable of, but I'm not going to criticise them for signing that contract. Yes, WWE has helped with the medical side of things and forced some issues into the public domain that weren't seen as issues before - which is good. Do I think it has killed British wrestling? No. I think it has forced the other wrestlers to step up and fill that void, it's given other wrestlers a chance to shine. There will be casualties in terms of promotions, but the strong will survive. Will it change me wanting to go to shows once lockdown is over? No. There are a few promotions, such as Riptide and Attack, that I'm desperate to go to. I don't think it's destroyed British wrestling and anyone who does hasn't been paying attention. It has a very bright future and will more than cope.

IN: What are your opinions on the attempted return of World of Sport?

LB: I thought they had a good shot at it and assembled a good roster. It could have been a better roster but no doubt a lot of people were already in discussions with the WWE. I really wished they would have got a producer and director that actually worked on wrestling, especially with the migraine-inducing cuts they'd use in the editing. Overall, I thought it was a solid product, though. They tried to present it as a game show - it didn't work. If they presented it in a more traditional style and got people on board who have worked in wrestling involved - there are plenty of them - it would have been much better. I'm not sure the time slot was a great deal

of help. At 5 o'clock I was generally already on my way to see some wrestling, so I had to record them. If they're only counting live viewers, that's a problem from the word go. Was I sad to see it go? Yes I'd like to see more wrestling on TV, but overall I think there were some good matches. It was the production I had issue with but that was more down to how they seemed to want to present it like Gladiators or something and that was never going to work.

IN: Who are some of your favourite wrestlers and why are you drawn to them?

LB: Eddie Dennis, he's an all-round package and can do anything with a microphone. Cara Noir is a remarkable human being. Everything about that persona and ridiculous skills in the ring and I suspect he'll be signed by someone in the near future. Anti-fun Police is a personal thing for me and my family. My daughter has learning difficulties and worships them. There is plenty of video footage of my daughter standing and saluting them at shows and them saluting back. They've sent her extra things with merch, recorded messages for her wishing her luck on her first day of school, they've been amazing. On the indie scene a lot of my favourites were snapped up by the WWE, such as Flash Morgan Webster, Eddie Dennis and, up until a few weeks ago, Travis Banks. He's cancelled as far as I'm concerned. It's been a rough few weeks. Millie McKenzie is just incredible. I've only seen her once but will definitely watch again. Session Moth is as good a character as we will ever see. I think there will be a generation of black wrestlers who are going to revolutionise the scene in this country, such as Big T Justice and Roy Johnson. All luck to them because they bloody well deserve to. Spike Trivet is another one - I hate his character with so much passion more than anything in my life. Well done! He can do anything he wants in wrestling as far as I'm concerned.

IN: What's your take on wrestling shows with no audiences during Covid-19? What do you think is gained or lost with not having an audience?

LB: There was a show at the start of Covid with Will Ospreay. The wrestling was great, but I hated it. As a British wrestling fan it's all about the atmosphere and there wasn't. I've actually struggled to watch any live wrestling in lockdown because there's something not quite right with it. To be honest, even when football came back with no crowd sound I couldn't watch it. I was sitting there thinking "I don't care!". It feels like it's on a training pitch and there's something missing. The crowd sound put in helped, but I don't

think you can do that in wrestling. You can't put a generic sound over points where specific chanting is needed.

IN: What does an actual audience bring to the viewer?

LB: It's the lack of atmosphere. Like in British wrestling there will be some idiot standing up and starting a chant to take your shoes off if you hate Zack Gibson. It was brilliant. Without that interactivity - the amount of abuse he gets in the ring - he just laps it up and gives as good as it gets. If you try and do it without the audience, there that interactivity isn't there and feels a bit like playing a video game without the A.I doing anything back.

IN: What have you missed most about wrestling during lockdown?

LB: I've missed not being able to go to shows. I've wanted to be in the front row and having those 3 or 4 hours just forgetting everything. When you're a part of that crowd and have that atmosphere, you could be in the worst crisis in your life but be able to forget about it. There're not many things that can reach that level. All that matters is what's going on between those ropes. Almost exclusively, apart from some exceptions, they all seem like nice people and genuinely want your opinion. Everything about the experience I miss, the whole package.

IN: What do you think wrestling has learned during the pandemic with the lack of fan participation and events? What can it learn beyond lockdown?

LB: The main thing people will take out of it is how fragile it all is. We may be in danger of having too many promotions, there was a saturation of them that probably weren't all financially viable. Wrestling without fans doesn't work. Yes, the cinematic stuff WWE have done has been a great idea, but British wrestling doesn't have the budget for that. I think that British wrestling has a lot to learn about inclusivity. I think we've been pretending it has been accessible for all but I don't think it is. It's always had barriers like any niche has. We have to accept there are a lot of female fans out there, and British wrestling has learned we need to get rid of a lot of dead weight that has been dragging things down for a long time. This has revealed a very unpleasant aspect of wrestling which needs to go and go now. We've got an opportunity to reset everything and it needs to be grasped by everyone involved.

IN: Outside of Covid-19, what do you think British wrestling gets right and wrong in general?

LB: We've got the talent, but I'd like to see more female wrestlers on cards than we are getting. Certain fans need to keep their prejudices at the door. There are some that have a drink and decide to try and grope a wrestler, which has to stop. British wrestling needs a TV presence, but I don't know how it could be done. It doesn't help with companies like ITV - World of Sport was also snooker, football as well as wrestling - it was a package. You didn't just tune in for wrestling, you watched World of Sport. I think part of the problem is that anything outside of mainstream sport doesn't get viewers. I've seen the figures of things like Hamilton and the figures have been very low in this country. It's not about seeing it on a screen, it's about being there watching it. Same goes for wrestling. Also, putting it on at 5 o'clock on a Saturday night, when everyone is already on a train or bus to a live wrestling show, seems like a really poor idea. Another thing that irritated me about it was how the crowd was almost being told when to cheer and boo. There didn't seem to be any natural reaction to anything or feel organic.

Appendix 7

Interviewer: David Boyd

Interviewee: Oisín Delaney

Interviewee profile: Professional Wrestler, Owner/Trainer at 'Knucklelocks'

Date of interview: 17/07/20

Location of interview: Online video calling software

List of acronyms: IN= Interviewer OD= Oisín Delaney

IN: So what first got you into wrestling, both as a fan and a professional?

OD: I remember when I was young there were two channels on TV, and on Saturday morning there would be a bit of wrestling TV. It was WWF and there would be people like Hulk Hogan, The Ultimate Warrior, The Big Boss Man, The Mounty, Earthquake - all those early 90s characters. I loved it as kid and ever since, and me and my brother would watch it and try to mimic it in the garden. When we were a bit older we got Sky and started to watch WCW right as the NOW was forming. They had an amazing roster of talent, like all the guys who left WWE, the ones they brought in from Mexico and the independent and so on. My favourite from that era and even now was Chris Jericho. His run as the WCW Cruiserweight champion was just amazing. We watched that for years and then started watching WWF again once the attitude era kicking off. For teenage boys it was the

coolest thing ever - they'd swear, the wrestling was like real fights and the crowd was hot for everything. I stopped watching when I went to college and occasionally would catch or show and still catch Wrestlemania each year. Once I was older I started watching again and picked up on the Wyatt family versus The Shield. My frame of context has always been from American wrestling. I was aware of other companies like ROH and NJPW. I used to read Powerslam magazines in my teens and read about the indies and Japan - it was very difficult to catch that stuff outside of tape trading. The I moved over here to London in 2015. Just before that a friend, a massive wrestling fan, said the OTT wrestling school in Dublin were doing a beginner's class as asked if I wanted to go. We went along and I did two classes before I moved. Joe was grand, he was really nice about it teaching us the basics.

When I first got here I didn't really do anything with wrestling as I was focusing on my job and building a life, but it got to the point where I really wanted to go back and train as I enjoyed those other sessions so much. It was funny because I looked up schools in London and found the ProJo, which was a Progress wrestling school. This was November/December of 2015. I had no idea what Progress was and looked them up to see and saw they had a show coming up. Despite the shows always being sold out I managed to get a ticket to it. There was a dark match showcasing their trainees for a tournament, followed by their usual stars like Mark Haskins, Marty Scurll and so on. It was the most highest quality indie wrestling show you could hope for. So I went and started training and watched the wrestling my friends would tell me are high quality like ROH and NJPW, as they have lots of different styles. I watch a lot of New Japan now, which is usually the hipster answer, but it's a really good product. I do still watch old stuff on the WWE Network and some old TNA. My first live show I ever went to was the WWA, which was a super-indie which toured the world. Bret Hart was there as a commissioner and insulted Vince McMahon, and Disco Inferno was there as a commentator with his voice piped out for everyone to hear which is uncommon. I also went to New York to see a WWE house show, and then another one in Dublin.

IN: What was it like training to become a wrestler? How difficult was it?

OD: I trained at Mainstage Wrestling which was owned by OTT. I co-own Knucklelocks now, and I do the same thing as then and ask people if they've done any sports. Any sport you usually have to learn footwork and things like that. When I was growing up I played Gaelic football, hurling, soccer, basketball, running and then played Rugby where I broke my leg- I rehabbed and came back to play a few more seasons. So

since I was 5 I've been doing contact sports, so for me I took to wrestling well enough - I won't say I'm a natural as when you're learning to take bumps you do have to train yourself to forget to catch yourself when you fall. When you're wrestling you have to land as flat as possible so you don't hurt yourself. But the fitness stuff I took to it pretty well - that's a big thing in wrestling and people take it for granted. Wrestling is predetermined and we're working together, but if you can't lift someone and hold them up you'll get in trouble like dropping someone awkwardly and hurting them or hurt yourself. So because I was used to strength and cardio training from sports, I took to it better. Wrestling requires a lot of cardio. I took to it well but for the first 6 to 8 months I just didn't think I was good enough because I had difficulty with some things. But it just comes down to training. A lot of successful guys on the scene I put down to them training 2-3 times a week. Some people might be only able to train once a month but training a couple of times a week - that's where you make improvements because it's down to the amount of repetitions. We have footwork drills, cardio blow-up sessions where you run the ropes and vault. Because it's a lot of movement and turning it can be difficult, but it's just down to doing it over and over again. So for me, I had 'backyarded' with my brother so I knew how to do some moves but was then taught how to do them better and safer. So I took to it fairly well, and not saying I'm a complete wrestler - when I watch my matches back I still need to work on ring positioning. But I do think because of playing sports before I did have an advantage over others, I think people need that.

IN: Do you think there is an issue with a lack of gatekeeping with wrestling training?

OD: Gatekeeping can be seen as a bad thing and can be. A lot of what has been said over the last few years is that wrestling is for everybody - and I agree with that. Wrestling is this weird form of entertainment between sports and theatre, so people that have no interest in sports but enjoy theatre and enjoy wrestling and vice versa. So when it becomes to being a wrestler, it isn't for everybody. Sometimes people just physically can't do it. It's not like a gatekeeping way where if someone comes in and they're a certain weight, they can't be a wrestler - that's not what it is at all. It's just down to being able to learn to do something safely. If you apply yourself and listen, and able to learn, anyone can be a wrestler. One of the most famous stories of wrestling gatekeeping is when a young Hulk Hogan, Terry Bolea, walks into a training school and they just broke his leg. The idea was if he really wants to come back, he will. That's kind of

shit would never fly now; everyone is in on wrestling now. When you come in you're told about physical fitness - that's a big thing at Knucklelocks - and then doing ring drills which is foot drills and ring positioning, then ring psychology and executing moves. We don't have any gatekeeping where we think we should keep certain people out, but it's just sometimes when people get into wrestling they think the physical side of it is as predetermined as the outcome, so they think it will be easy. So at a training session where we do hundreds of press ups and crunches, that can be too much for people. That's what goes on at the NXT Performance Centre - you don't get a body like Finn Balor without being physically fit and putting yourself through a deck of cards every day. Gatekeeping is a bit redundant at this stage as everyone is welcome to try it. Like when I went to the Rugby club they welcomed me with open arms. I didn't have to pay a tonne, but I was terrible! I'd never played before and I was 26, but I learned and got good enough for the B squad but was nowhere near ready to be on the A squad. If you want try it then go for it, and if you're not good at it - I wish I was a better singer but when I do people get upset.

IN: Is there an issue with overcrowding in the British scene now with so many wrestlers and promotions around?

OD: There are a lot for opportunities now than there were 10 years ago. I used to read the magazines years ago and read about these indies in the UK and across Europe, and as far as I knew there was nothing in Ireland. There was, it was in Dublin but this was almost pre-internet so there was no way to know or look it up. There are definitely way more opportunities and schools now. The veterans now will talk about how there were only a few schools, but now there are loads, such as 2 in Portsmouth and multiple schools in the midlands and up north. It's because wrestling naturally became bigger and more mainstream, so more people involved set up schools to generate interest. It can be hard to get on shows. As a wrestler who tries to get bookings - there are a lot of talented people on the scene so it can be hard to get on the shows you want. Me and my brother want to be in front of big crowds at big shows, but you have to be good to get on them. When wrestlers start of there are smaller shows that are easier to get on, you cut your teeth and pay your dues but you're learning to wrestle in front of the crowd. It's ok in the gym, but when you're in front of people it feels completely different. If you mess up in the gym it's no big deal, but on a show it makes things quite hard. I've been lucky to wrestle for Progress and Rev Pro at big shows. I just put it down to me training a lot. We both have good gym routines. Part of wrestling is looking the part, although not everyone has to be a body builder - it's not 1993. We go to as

many shows as we can and get to the point where we are ready for big shows. Guys like the OJMO - he took to it quick and is a very charismatic guy. He rose seemingly fast, but he trained 3 days a week, consuming wrestling 7 days a week, going to shows on his own dime to meet people, getting to know promoters and helping at shows to set up rings. It took him years to get to the level of fame he's at now, and it wasn't easy. Not by a long shot. Yes he's very good and talented by he worked his arse off. That's the thing - if you work hard you'll get places and if you're good you'll really get places. I do think it's easier than before to get involved in wrestling but it's certainly not easier to rise to a certain level.

IN: What influenced the creation of the NIC and what do you see for the future of your tag team?

OD: Myself and Charlie were training to be singles wrestlers - that's how most people start. The school we had in-house shows with the trainees and we'd invite promoters and have matches in-gear. We had a match, which was fine, then afterwards someone said we're the same height and build and had good chemistry, and if we thought about being a tag team. The two of us thought it was a great idea, so we started training as a tag team and promoting ourselves as one. It's gone really well as we've really focused on being a tag team. Like a lot of teams where they throw two people together and they don't function as a team sometimes, then you get teams like The Revival who are at a different level. The two of us separately will watch a lot of specific tag team wrestling - we're huge fans of the Steiner Brothers because they were awesome, the Legion of Doom. Those teams are big influences for us. We're nowhere near as giant or jacked - those guys are like 6 foot 3 or 4, 280 pounds and made of diesel and meat - we take a lot of inspiration from there. With indie wrestling now people think people need to do all these crazy moves, but we just wanted to do a classic hard-hitting style with influence from the Steiners and the Legion of Doom. I watched a load of The Quebecers recently - fantastic tag team wrestling, great heels, great workers, great tag team interactions. We've had a nice bit of success so far and we want to do so much more like wrestle around Europe a bit. We want to keep the momentum before lockdown going. Everything for us is baby steps, there's no point in saying you want to be on Wrestlemania by next year because there are smaller steps to get there. We want to continue our run in Progress and RevPro. We'd like to wrestle in ales and Scotland - small goals like that. Our goals are to keep wrestling, get better and have fun. It's meant to be fun.

IN: Now we have more of a hybrid, internationally inspired style of wrestling in Britain now, how do you think we can still define the britishness of wrestling in modern times?

OD: I think the British style is still the World of Sport era stuff, classic grappling where you tussle and try to take control of a body part. What modern guys have done is that they learn that and then can-do high-flying stuff too. The assumption of British style is they have a really good technical base of wrestling. They know good ways of getting into holds, positions of control and how to get out of them with reversals - smooth sequences involving that classic style where you can control someone's wrists for 10 minutes if you need to wear down their arm and shoulder. I think the best people on our scene have that but also a mix of something else. Will Ospreay doesn't get a lot of credit for it - he has a good base of technical wrestling and can hang with Zack Sabre Jr who is widely regarded for being the modern best of that style. You look at their series of matches last year, in terms of the classic style Will was going hold for hold with Zack. Zack knows everything you could possibly know, inside-out, about technical wrestling and adds an extra layer of a vicious style heavily focused on submissions. Years ago with World of Sport it wasn't focused on submission wrestling, it was more about getting the advantage for the pin. Zack is more about getting into a submission position and tying someone in a knot. British wrestling is a good base of that, but, like you're saying, some lucha and Japanese influence, but it always comes back to teaching the basics and teaching them well, making sense. Some people will do some technical wrestling just for the sake of it, whereas the British style teaches to have a reason to do that at the start. You're not grabbing the arm for the sake of it, you're doing it to do damage and wear the arm down. So from the start you're making a point. That's the key of the British style.

IN: What makes British fans unique and why do you think we enjoy wrestling in the way we do?

OD: With the chants and singing it's like going to a football match. Sometimes it's amazing, like when the crowd is singing about how much they love or hate you is fantastic. Sometimes it can add to a match, sometimes it can be distracting - but it's up to you as a wrestler to make it about yourself again. You have the power to control the crowd - that's a good worker. There's loads of guys on the scene that can do that. If fans want to focus on something in the match, or the wrestler has a piece of gear the audience want to make fun of - good workers will get around that. They'll either own it or change the direction. That's what British fans are known for. If they're enjoying it, they'll let you know, and if you

participate too they give it back in kind. Whether you're loved or hated, as a heel if you're getting booed it's the same as if you're getting cheered as a babyface - it's the same thing. I think British fans really do enjoy the interactive nature of wrestling. The songs and the chants - you watch Japanese crowds and they're known for being very respectful by applauding rather than cheering. Americans are loud with the reactions to moves, but the British fans - alongside Irish fans - it's like football in particular in that it's like "this is my football team and this is my song about how much I love Arsenal", and then it translates to "wrestling is my thing and this song is how much I love Zack Sabre Jr" - there's definitely the working-class, football terrace influence I think.

IN: Do you think it might also come from our history with theatre and live performance? Where do you think it comes from culturally?

OS: Because wrestling is that mix of theatre and sports and has a long history here - I know someone who works at Goldsmiths who focuses on historical wrestling around London. Back then it was like a legitimate contest and was just done in dark smoky rooms with no ring. It was underground, alternative and a very masculine activity with men who came from nothing. Super working-class. When you look at people like Mick Foley - he lived in his car when he started. Steve Austin tells how he used to eat raw potatoes in his car because he was struggling for money. That's a really working-class thing as it's about having nothing and building yourself up through dedication. I think the theatre has a huge influence on it too. I know people who have no interest in wrestling, but they love theatre. They come to wrestling and they'll be like "oh it's the same thing!" - and it is. There's a story to be told and there's a stage fight. It's like in Hamlet where there's a sword fight - you know it's not real or a real sword but you admire the story they tell and it's very accessible. For me I see it as a very working-class historical thing. It's like my friend's research - it'll be forty guys in a room above a pub watching two guys wrestle, and it could go on for an hour and a half and the people watching will be drinking whiskey and smoking cigars. While it's changed a lot since then, the core of it is the same. You look at guys like Big Daddy - you could put his character into a pantomime, and nothing will change. There's a joke in British wrestling called "shall I?". As kid you've probably seen it, where a babyface will grab the heel after trying to cheat and shout "shall I?" with a closed fist to the crowd and they will shout for him to do it - that's pantomime. Purely boiling down to the whole "Oh yes he is! Oh no he isn't!" thing.

IN: What do you think British wrestling gets right, and what does it need to improve on?

OD: I think what it gets right is that it's very accessible. There's a focus on reaching a wide audience. I've never seen someone tried to exclude a group or type of people. There are promotions by whole companies trying to be a safe space for everyone. That's something that has been correct as the more shows you can put on and the bigger audience you have the more money you can make. Something it has had to work on is making sure people are looked after. There have been a lot of controversies recently and because it's an unregulated industry - it's not a sport, it's not theatre so neither regulating body will touch it, it's purely outlaw. People running promotions set their own standards and sometimes that let people down badly, and that needed to change. That's starting to change now, where more people in positions of power now are doing safeguarding courses, getting DBS checks, setting codes of conduct. The more professional you want to be, the more you have to be. If you go into a Japanese dojo it is your job, you get a salary, that's the life you live. When you're out eating at a restaurant, you're representing your dojo. When you're helping at a show, you're representing your dojo. Even your social media presence is considered an extension of your dojo you're part of and the company you are signed to because dojos will lead into a particular company - whereas schools here are independent. People from the RevPro school can wrestle where they want. Because it's on a small independent system that's how it works. Now that a lot of people didn't have safeguarding in place, people were let down. I'm hoping, and I'm a part of this, that we will get that right. That was pre-lockdown. In a way lockdown was a good thing as everything stops, and when everything stops it's easier to make change.

IN: What have you missed the most about wrestling during lockdown?

OD: Almost everything. I love training. It can be hard but it's enjoyable. I have friends in wrestling and I've only seen them once or twice and that's only in the last few weeks. Performing on shows is what it's all about. When you're in the ring having a match and the crowd are reacting to what you're doing. It's the feeling you want when you become a wrestler, it's that feeling in a match when there's a crowd around the ring and you have them in the palm of your hand. That's the biggest thing. Road trips with your friends when you're setting out from London and going to Wolverhampton, Cardiff or Brighton - anywhere in the southeast. The southeast is a hotspot for wrestling. Everything involved in that - the

friendships, the road trips. Performing is the number one thing as right now all we're doing is watching as fans as certain companies are able to put on shows, so you're studying matches you enjoy and it's all the psychological stuff we can enjoy but we're missing out on the good stuff which is training, performing and hanging around our friends. Road trips, being backstage and meeting people from all over the country. I've been in locker rooms with Americans, South Africans, Japanese, and so on. It's a great place to get perspective on things.

IN: Is there anything we've learned about wrestling during lockdown? Will things change for the better?

OD: Since lockdown the speaking out movement happened. It needed to happen and I'm glad it did in the sense that people were able to speak and people listened. British wrestling needs to learn to be more professional and treat it more like a job. We can't adopt the Japanese dojo system as they have sponsors and more money, and culturally it's very different. I've been talking to a lot of people on the scene, and we are trying to introduce codes of conduct and policies that we hope people will adhere to. There's no governing body so nobody can be forced to be better, but I think a lot of people after seeing everything from the speaking out movement want it to be a safer place, particularly for female wrestlers. Young people too, there's been problems with that, and fans as well. So I think a big lesson learned will be for wrestlers to treat things more professionally and if you see bad behaviour you'll have somewhere to go to talk about it. Before it was just very informal and all rumours - whereas now people are introducing ways for people to talk about things. I think that's the big thing to change is that people involved are going to be on guard more as they should. If you behave anywhere else in a company, they have a HR department. We don't have that, but if you misbehave or do bad things there will be consequences. People with allegations from the speaking out movement are finally getting consequences. I've always treated wrestling as professionally as I could, I started at 30. I wanted to do it as right as I could and not get involved in a party lifestyle. I don't drink anyway, so the idea of mixing with drunk people is nails on a chalkboard for me. I think a lot of people will try to eliminate that side of things. If fans want to do it that's fine, but we need to move away from that as we need to be professional. We all want it to be our job.

IN: What are your thoughts on the WWE involvement in the UK scene?

OD: It's really positive as it's WWE on our doorstep. The UK Performance Centre is in north London and they will do a show every 6-8 weeks in a different venue around the UK. It makes being able to wrestle for the WWE at our fingertips and so close. I've wrestled people contracted to WWE multiple times now. When I was young I thought you had to be 6 foot 4 and built like Arnold Schwarzenegger to even be considered to wrestle for WWE, but now I've wrestled guys who have been contracted. It makes it attainable for people. It's taken a lot of slack because people get signed and are on less indie shows, but very few of them are on none at all. You can still see Eddie Dennis on a few shows here and there - yes it's less but it means there are more room for people in my position, where we're not signed and building a career. I know Toni Storm has done a few since she was signed. While fans have less opportunity to see them live they will still be able to see them on the weekly show. If they want to see them live they can go to the NXT UK tapings which happen periodically. So there's good and bad, a lot of people are upset they can't see their favourites every week. You'll get people seeing 2 shows a week sometimes. Some fans are so dedicated, it's wild. The negative side is they don't see them as often, but it adds more value when you do. They have contracts and have money there; they can live a normal life rather than an independent wrestler where you are constantly hustling trying to drum up work. When you're contracted you have job security, health benefits. The NXT UK Performance Centre - it's like when someone gets signed to a premier league club, the training facilities are phenomenal. They have strength, movement and interview coaches and every aspect of wrestling, when you're an independent wrestlers we try to teach those the best we can, but you can't get a class with Shawn Michaels. Whereas in NXT they do, they learn from the best. A big thing they introduced that had good and bad reactions, which I think is one of the best things they've influenced, is that they said to the indies if they want to use WWE talent they have to have a medic, not just a first aider but a particular medic with a qualification. It meant extra costs for the show, but it meant their talent would get care if anything went wrong and it would be by a proper professional. So a lot of places have introduced it, so even if there isn't WWE talent on the show you'll still find they'll have a proper medic there. Through NXT UK insisting in that, a lot of wrestlers thought it was a good idea as if a guy gets knocked out on a show, you have a medic trained to spot concussion, or trained to properly wrap or bandage something up. I think they've done much more good, and a lot of the criticism I understand is from frustration and some don't like the NXT UK style, but it's a style they're building. They've signed a lot of established independent wrestlers and trying to put them in the WWE mould and style, but they can still be themselves. It's a long-term project for

them. It's not like they're going to sign everyone and then leave. It's been a few years since the first UK tournament, people thought it was just to get rid of World of Sport. It may have been, but WWE saw the passion from the crowds and the wrestlers doing their absolute best. I do think everything they're doing is a long-term goal. I've spoken to some people who are signed, they want to keep it all going. To me it's a good thing, there's a chance I could wrestler for WWE and if someone had told me that at 24 I would have laughed. Not everyone's goal is WWE - AEW are talking of coming over to do UK shows, New Japan coming over through RevPro - we're in an incredible position as we have connections on our doorstep to the biggest companies in the world because the scene here - so many people become wrestlers and become really good to achieve amazing things. Gabriel Kidd, I've wrestled him. Lovely fella, one of the most genuine, hardworking guys you'll meet. He worked his arse off and went over to the LA Dojo for New Japan. They brought him over to Japan as a young boy. They all love him over there because of his professionalism. He knows where he comes from and is a lovely guy. That opportunity wasn't there a few years ago. Shibata saw him wrestle and was impressed, got him into the LA Dojo and now he's wrestling on TV for New Japan and deserves it, 1000 percent.

IN: What were your thoughts on the controversial rebrand of WOS?

OD: The pilot special was presented as Gladiators. At first I thought it was like the old NWA studio wrestling and was into it, but the pacing of the show was much like Gladiators with the backstage interviews and other things. But as a wrestler you could see how they edited the matches, heavily edited them. So the show came off as out of kilter. There were parts missing. Then the weekly show had the same problems. The amount of talent they had was excellent, and they were putting on the best matches they could put on, but the product itself didn't present them in the best way. It was presented to much as a kids show, and there's nothing wrong with those shows, but it didn't quite lean into the wrestling and sports side and was more the entertainment side. Again, there's no right or wrong way, but the way it was produced and edited it seemed like there was something missing. The crowd reactions maybe weren't there because of the edits. It's a shame, as they had a lot of talented wrestlers and if it had been a success and became a weekly, show things would be a lot different. I know someone who went to the live show in London, perhaps York Hall, and apparently it was amazing, and people wondered why they didn't put THIS on TV. It's a different atmosphere being in a hall that has been built for presenting sport or live music versus the studio they shot in. Where they edited it for TV is where they lost a lot of people. When you watch a

wrestling show live you're totally immersed in it and it's a better experience than watching on TV. There's been talks of a second series, but NXT just launched and have signed most of the wrestlers they used. It's a real shame World of Sport didn't work out as it could give a lot of guys an opportunity that perhaps wouldn't get one in NXT UK.

IN: Why is wrestling important to you?

OD: There have been times I've felt like walking away from it, especially since all the stuff has come out over the past few weeks, but I've watched wrestling since I was 5 years old. I had a poster as tall as I was of Hulk Hogan on my wall. When I was a teenager I loved the Hardy Boys - I've always had characters I've looked up to or have wanted to emulate. Now when you look at AEW they have more of a focus on the wrestling show itself, rather than the romantic storyline tropes and so on. It's just important for me as it's a form of entertainment that combines both things I love - sport and performing. I was never a theatre kid or was into acting, but I really enjoy that combination. It fulfils my desires, like I said I grew up playing sports but now I go to the gym and I wrestle. It's harder on the body, but there's so much enjoyment to get out of it, and there's so much to consume online. Whenever I want to be entertained I know I can always turn to wrestling. When I go to a wrestling show as a fan, whether it's WWE, AEW, Progress, RevPro or whoever - I know I'll be entertained. The over the top nature of it really appeals to me. It's like when you compare watching a Sunday league game - I'm a Manchester United fan - so when I go to Old Trafford it's like that feeling of watching the best people who do what they do. Like when the Olympics are on TV, which only comes around every 4 years. I love shotput because it's people who train to throw the shotput as far they can, and it's all they train for - it's their sole focus. So I watch that as it's like "this guy from Eastern Russia is the best at throwing shotput in the world - of course I want to watch that!". That's how I feel about top level wrestling, if I want to watch amazing wrestling I'll watch The Revival, The Young Bucks, The Usos or The New Day. You can also watch a show down the road that's just a bunch of people trying to learn how to do it, and you can find wrestling now in almost every postcode - it's ridiculous, it's everywhere.

Appendix 8

Interviewer: David Boyd

Interviewee: Dean Ayass

Interviewee profile: Writer/Journalist, Experiences Professional Wrestling Manager, Commentator

Date of interview: 21/07/20

Location of interview: Online video calling software

List of acronyms: IN= Interviewer DA= Dean Ayass

IN: So what first got you into British wrestling?

DA: Well there really isn't anything in the world quite like it, and by that I don't just mean British wrestling but wrestling full stop. If you think about it, in the 80's it was on World of Sport which is a sporting program with football, cricket, speedway and everything. Then you've got wrestling, it's the characters that draw you in as well as the costumes and how it was larger than life. There was nothing else that compared to it - yes you had some characters in football - but generally everyone was pretty serious such as snooker which was big at the time. Nothing compared to wrestling. It helped that my Dad was a wrestling fan, and I can't really remember the first match I saw as I can only really ever remember wrestling being on.

IN: Who were some of your favourite wrestling characters from that time?

I loved Giant Haystacks. Loved stroke terrified of him but found him fascinating. My mum tells a story of when we went to a live show in Brighton and we were near the front. I don't remember as I was very small. Someone found a poster of a show I described I went to when I was younger once and it was from 1982, so I would have been 5 years old going to my first shows. Giant Haystacks walked past us and, apparently, I threw myself into my mother's arms and buried my head in her lap as I was so terrified of him. He was literally a giant - a huge, huge man. So him and Big Daddy were always who people were drawn to because of the look. I loved Rollerball Rocco because of the things he did. A bit like how a comedian would make their jokes more 'blue', Rollerball Rocco would always be a bit more violent and unpredictable at untelevised shows. I remember seeing Sammy Lee and 'Kwik Kick' Lee come over from Japan who my brother really liked because of all the martial arts stuff. The technical wrestlers that I now watch as an adult and admire are who my dad really liked. I found them

boring at the time as I was just a kid and wanted the characters and entertainment.

IN: Would you say the crowds then have any similarities to the types of audiences British wrestling has now? Were there "fan" crowds?

No not at all. It was the old-school family, mad old dears in the front row with their knitting needles sort of thing. I'm sure there were 'smart' fans but I think it was more 1 in a 1000. You'd get people who would go to shows and send results off to other people. Nowadays there are massive networks of people online where you get posts of posters in days within history and people will post what the results were. But generally it was anyone and everyone, kids to old dears and anyone in between, and leaning towards working class people - which I think it has always been. Also, people that believed in it. Either believed it was real or knew it wasn't but were prepared to switch off their disbelief when watching. You'd be able to get tremendous heat. My mum, who was never a big fan, would enjoy watching the crowd more and how they reacted. This was another thing about British wrestling, you wouldn't get it anywhere else where others would use barriers everywhere else like America, we didn't have that at all or any gap. You'd get people leaping up and walking to the ring to bang their hand on the apron. There's the famous moment with the Caribbean Sunshine Boys, Johnny Kincaid and Dave Bond, where they were split up for causing too much heat. There's footage of a fan starting on Johnny Kincaid - and if there's one person you don't want to start on its him, and he's a lovely guy but even now in his 70s he looks like he could rip my head off. I've had it where I've been attacked by fans and threatened, so that's something you have to be aware of. Even though Britain does seem like a polite society, when it came to wrestling people seemed to lose or forget themselves.

IN: Do you think that's a way of defining Britishness in wrestling is our love for wanting to participate in the show?

DA: Yes, because even now the way the crowds sing football-style songs and they are part of the show. You're right, they've always wanted to be part of it. Even in the World of Sport era I have memories of the crowd, who would be largely quiet, but you would often get someone shouting something out and the whole crowd would laugh - like a comedian being heckled.

IN: Where do you think that comes from culturally? Does it come from our history with things like pantomime or live theatre?

I think, as a sort of national psyche, we as British people don't take ourselves that seriously compared to other countries. It's like if you said to an American "your country is a bit shit" they'd want to fight you and say "how dare you! God bless America", but if you said that to a British person they'd say something like "yes we are a bit shit aren't we? But we muddle through". You're laughing now but that's our attitude - we don't take ourselves too seriously and we can laugh at ourselves. I think that's the difference. You look through different types of wrestlers and we have always had great comedy wrestlers and an affinity for comedy in wrestling.

IN: You started in the wrestling industry in the 90s. People refer to it as the 'dark period' because of a lack of televised shows. What was it like being part of it all in that period?

DA: British wrestling, since it came of TV and became more global, it sort of followed the cycle of worldwide or America wrestling. When American wrestling is hot, so is British wrestling. When it's down, we're down. If you think 93-95 wasn't a good time in wrestling full-stop - you had Hulk Hogan taking over WCW, you had very weak headliners until they started getting Bret Hart to the top. It wasn't a good time anyway. Then in Britain TV had been gone for 5 or 6 years at that point. About a year into that there was an increase in house show attendance as people realised the only place people could see wrestling was live. What you had was old TV stars, some with new attitudes like Marty Jones turning heel and Giant Haystacks turning face because of Big Daddy retiring. You had those guys hanging on and foreign wrestlers coming for some experience. Stylistically it was changing a little because of the American influence and the only wrestling people could see on Sky was WWF, so gone were the days of the 5 minute headlock, the wrist lock and matches with only a few bumps. They were pretty much rejected. In Hammerlock we would occasionally start a blue-eye versus blue-eye clean technical match fought over rounds to warm people up and people arriving late wouldn't miss too much. The American style was creeping in but British wrestling was still trying to hold on to its identity but was confused. You'd have All Star doing ladder matches between Rob Brookside and Doc Dean because they'd split up. In Hammerlock we were doing the odd ladder match - we had an ECW influence as I'd get the tapes in and distribute them to the boys. We were trying to present something different and with different people than the established ones. Hammerlock was the first place to open itself up to the public in terms of training as it was always a closed shop before then.

IN: What are your good and bad memories of the 90s wrestling circuit?

DA: Crowds were tiny and there was literally no money. I only started making money because we started a premium rate phone line. So I had the thinking of doing the shows for free and that would give me something to talk about for 3 or 4 weeks and I'd make more money from that than the standard rate of pay for a wrestling show anyway. If you got 300 people that would be a massive house - which is small and disappointing now. I remember doing shows in front of 70 people - and that wasn't because of lack of promotion, there just wasn't the interest there. Most of us were green as grass which didn't help, so it wasn't the best product for a few years. We eventually got better, and the shows improved with some big name American stars coming over. That's what we had to do as there weren't many British stars really, apart from people at All Star that wouldn't work for us. Then, as far as other shows like All Star or Premier, it was hits and misses - but more misses. We had the tribute shows in the later 90s. I never went to one but I saw the people on them like the 'Legend of Doom' and the UK Undertaker. Even with All Star, despite calling him the UK Undertaker they'd still put a picture of Mark Callaway on the poster! Then with Premier they were more of a traditional promotion with the longer matches, holds, scientific sort of stuff. They were trying to keep that going. Because of that, even to this day when I do shows for Premier, especially in Worthing - you've still got the old-school atmosphere from the crowd there where they're sat back, they're taking it more seriously. You can get away with a more technical bout. They react to the characters more. If you're going to get a mini-riot anywhere it's Worthing. I've had rubbish thrown at me and had to be escorted to the back by security, and things like that. We did a show at the Winter Garden in Margate, one of my favourite venues, and that was very much an old-school crown. I can't remember the time or year but it must have been a holiday period. Someone put a simple Boston Crab on and the crowd went crazy! Then later at another show there the same thing happened and I realised these were locals that were more old fashioned. Different venues had different atmospheres even when they were only a few miles apart. But in terms of money it was on its arse!

IN: What was it that kept you involved and wanting to still be a part of it?

DA: The fact we were doing shows and I could step in the ring and talk to an audience. I was an M.C at this point. I could feedback on the matches, and it was a really close bonded team. There are a few people from Hammerlock I still see and talk to - we're still great friends in and out of wrestling.

We had a really close bond; we all were a similar age and had similar big ambitions. It wasn't like we wanted to go off to Japan or anything, we just wanted to get British wrestling back on its feet again as we loved it.

IN: Nowadays we do still see that classic British style, but we also are seeing more of a mashup of different international influences coming into the British scene. What in your mind still makes wrestling British in the current climate?

DA: You're quite right, the in-ring stuff - you could put a British match on now, turn the sound off and you wouldn't necessarily know which country you're watching the wrestling from. I think that's simply comes from how the world has globalised. In the World of Sport era that was what people knew and they didn't see anything else. There wasn't that influence coming in or out, and it was only when people did tours of Germany or Japan they'd pick up techniques from other wrestlers. There was one guy, Barry Douglas, who apparently people hated working with because he spent a lot of time in continental Europe. If you notice in this country and America we always work on the left, so if you look - whenever someone is working the arm or leg it's always on the left side. In Mexico and continental Europe they work the right. It sounds like a minor detail, but if someone is going for a clothesline on you, you know they're coming in with the left arm so you prepare for that. They then come in with their right arm and knock you loopy because you weren't expecting it. The styles now have all merged as one, and someone like Zack, or Nigel McGuinness - that style has now become a gimmick. It's the British throwback style. Jordan Breaks is another one who is very much an old-school style. There's a guy called Callum Newman trained by William Ospreay, and you can see his influence in him which isn't the traditional style and has morphed into a bit of everything. I think the British side of wrestling now is the atmosphere the crowd and the banter with the back-and-forth you get. Again, that's all down to people not taking themselves seriously. I've seen footage of American shows where someone is getting into a pull-apart fight with a fan. I've been to shows in America with matches like Jericho versus The Rock. If we were in Britain and you and I happened to be sitting next to each other, I'm cheering Jericho and you're cheering the Rock - We'd have a bit of a laugh with chanting for our favourites. Whereas in America, and I've witnessed this on more than one occasion, you'd get people starting a fight in the stands because they're supporting different people. Again, it goes back to the British not taking themselves seriously. So what you get when the American shows come here - I remember one example was the NXT Takeover in London where the crowd were singing to Bayley. You can see at first she's like "what the fuck is going on here?", and

then starts getting into it and working towards the crowd and working with them on it. I think that's because we have the football song culture. I remember the UK title tournament that aired from Britain to worldwide, American viewers were confused as to how all the crowd knew the tune. It's this British culture of if you go to a football match, whichever ground you went to there will be different songs sung to the same tune. They're all tunes people will be familiar with like 'Yellow Submarine' or La Donna Mobile or whatever - people know them. So someone starts singing a familiar tune about a wrestler, and I've heard some where they're not very good and they don't catch on, but someone else tries and it's good, someone else sings along too and it all snowballs from there. It's all about fans wanting to be a part of the show and wrestlers working with them and playing to it accordingly. A wrestler absolutely loves that as if they've got 12 minutes for a match and they're spending a few minutes a match arguing with a crowd, that's less time left they have to spend having taking bumps. Everyone's different, as some want to get all their stuff in, but we always find the older you get the less bumps you want to take and the smarter you work. It's all part of the show. If I'm working the show and you start shouting at me, I respond, and everyone is chanting along with you and I'm reacting to it - you're going to want to come back to the next show. It's all about putting bums on seats.

IN: I got back into wrestling through going to IPW shows and enjoyed your commentary for the recordings. What do you think IPW got right and wrong with their shows?

DA: What they did right was, at times, bringing over good imports at the right time and putting them in matches people wanted to see. The FWA used to do that in the mid 00's, and it ended up evolving into "here's the great independent wrestler 1, 2 or 3" - like Jerry Lynn, A J Styles or Christopher Daniels, but they'd always invariably put them against Doug every time. Don't get me wrong, it was a good match, but people got bored with it by the end. What IPW were able to do was bring people in for different scenarios, like you'd get a comedy guy like Eugene teaming up with Grado, then Kyle o' Reilly or someone like that in a scientific match who is completely different and draw a different crowd than someone like Eugene. They knew what to do in that sense. I think they booked the first ever Will Ospreay Cody Rhodes match, which drew a huge crowd in Rochester at the Casino rooms. So they were very good at making the import match seem like a big deal but also having their own UK home storylines running alongside it. It wasn't just a one-off exhibition, like if someone had a good win over an import, or even if they lost but had a really good match - you'd bring that up next time in the commentary and that would elevate that person and bring them up the

ladder a bit. In hindsight, what they got wrong was there was too much of heels never getting their comeuppance. We had so many matches ending on a downer as something would happen with the heels. That's alright once in a while, but it was happening all the time. They'd get bad reactions from fans on Twitter and the numbers were down. The numbers would go up again when they'd bring in a big import again - that was costing them a lot. I don't know what their finances were as that's none of my business, but the heels were dominating for too long. What I've always known in my experience working as a heel is you can have that for a while but eventually the heel must have their comeuppance. When you've got the circumstance when people think finally it's going to happen, people will come to the show. But what happened in IPW was, and I'm talking about Jimmy Havoc as the champion, he was allowed to dominate so much that people ended up cheering him as I was working against him as a babyface manager - which is a poisoned chalice anyway - and people wouldn't boo him. He was successful and winning all the time. So they kind of killed their heel off there. They did also do a good job of bringing people up, like Kip Sabian. Billy took over and pulled the trigger on Kip, which I thought was too early but I was wrong as it ended up being really good. Even things like the three-way between Kip, Haskins and PAC. That was made a three-way match because PAC was the Dragongate champion at the time so couldn't lose. So having it that way he wasn't pinned and you didn't have to worry about the politics. In my experience Japanese office politics is an absolute fucking nightmare with what you can and can't do with their guys. There were times where, this happens all the time anyway, the promoter's mate was the one that was pushed. Eventually fans turn on them because they recognise that.

IN: Do you think politics is a problem on the British scene? How could it all be improved?

It's not just wrestling, that's the way things go everywhere - in other sports, in work, universities, wherever. There's politics everywhere you go and the people in charge have people they prefer. I'm a manager of people in my job and there are people I rate highly. If someone else took over they may disagree. There's a bit of personal preference. Billy was very good, he'd come to the shows, do what he needed to do, thank everyone and then go home. He didn't go out drinking with everyone afterwards and kept business and leisure separate which isn't what promoters always do. So when you read these Speaking Out stories you find a lot of them lead from promoters drinking with the wrestlers afterwards.

IN: What do you miss the most about wrestling now we are in a global pandemic?

DA: Crowds. Simply the crowds, the atmosphere, the responses. I don't know how they do it in front of an empty arena. They have small audiences to make it better, but I watched Slammiversary over the weekend, and all I can say is if I was in that situation where there is literally no audience, I would find it really difficult. I'd just want to stop and say "this is all bollocks isn't it?" as there's no one there. At least with AEW and WWE there are some people there, and you don't need a massive crowd. I've done shows with 10 or 20 fans in attendance. They can still be good as that small number of fans are really enthusiastic. Sometimes you just need that small number of people to give you a reaction. Even if they did with the premier league of piping in crowd noise, they've been doing it on televised for wrestling for years. It's just that atmosphere - the whole thing with wrestling is that you are getting a reaction out of people, performing to people to entertain them. Whether you're a face or a heel, the worst thing is indifference. If I'm cutting a promo and people are just sitting there, it's the worst thing you could have. It must be very difficult for them now.

IN: What do you think wrestling has learned during the pandemic?

DA: There are people that have really missed it, and others that have realised they actually don't. I know someone who has realised he enjoys his life outside of wrestling more than he thought and is retiring, but there are others clambering to get back. It's also been interesting to see people who know how to use social media to keep themselves in the public eye. Also, the aftermath of the Speaking Out movement we have seen how people are dealing with it. I haven't said anything as I don't want to say anything that will prejudice any possible police investigation - in that respect silence is the best thing.

IN: What has the lockdown exposed about the industry and what needs to be improved upon?

DA: It has got people thinking. There's a real dichotomy because you've got people saying there needs to be change, but not agreeing how it should change. People have said there should be a governing body, others saying people outside of wrestling shouldn't be involved. My view is how can I get someone off the street who doesn't know anything about wrestling to give a shit about it to try and change things? It doesn't work. Like with Trust wrestling being launched and people complaining - If you don't like the changes being made then nothing will change. So I think it's going to be a different scene when it does come back. I think female talent

is going to be treated with more respect and given better facilities. For me, if I'm concerned about something I will say. With the benefit of hindsight there have been things I've been around that I didn't realise. I didn't bother to ask, and I might have been told things were OK but at least I should help when I can. I think the whole promoter going out with the wrestlers will go and people will be more wary. I think training schools are the biggest problem - say if I run a school and you're my head trainer, if someone alleges something is wrong they can come to me as an owner and I can investigate and fire you as I'm the boss. However if someone alleges I've done something wrong, there's no one for me to be reported to apart from the police, but these things are often one word against another and you need irrefutable evidence. So there's nothing in place there. I had a suggestion of a voluntary scheme for training schools where you had to reach certain criteria like the British Standards Kite mark. You could put that up on your wall with your DBS and insurance certificate. If someone was looking for a training school and saw you had that and others didn't you could see what it was all about. It would have to be a voluntary scheme as I don't think you're ever going to get a governing body in wrestling because, first of all, you look at someone like John Freemantle with Premier wrestling down in Sussex coast here. He's been promoting since 1987 here - there's never been any hint or word about any impropriety. He's the tightest man alive but as far as being inappropriate there's nothing of the sort - he's as honest as the day is long. If I then said to him he had to sign up to a governing body, pay a fee and sign up to this thing to carry on promoting wrestling, he's just going to say "no I'm just going to carry on", so it's not going to work. Someone made a good point that unlike Boxing and Football - wrestling isn't a sport, it's entertainment. So you've got Equity for the arts. I'm part of a trade union, but I can't see how one would cut it all out. They're interested in swelling numbers. You look at the number of people outed as wrongdoers here and abroad in entertainment - that doesn't work either. People want change but don't have the answers.

IN: What's your take on WWE's involvement in the British wrestling scene?

DA: There's good and bad. The good is that there are people who I've known for years and I know how hard they work - now they're getting paid a decent wage. It's not the best, I earn more in my day job, but it's a liveable wage and they can supplement it with merch and other gigs. It gives them some stability and standard of living rather than living out of a suitcase going town-to-town. Also it's a path into the main WWE or NXT - we've seen people like Zack Gibson, James Drake,

Pete Dunne, Trent Seven Tyler Bate and those people getting into NXT and the Takeovers. It gives people a path that wasn't there before. Before you had Davey Boy, Dynamite Kid and Regal - that was about it until the next generation came through. It gives people something specific to aim for so that brings people to training schools, shows, leads to people wanting to improve and wanting to get their footage out there for WWE to see. Believe me they see everything - I know for a fact they know about me. I'll never work for them, but they know all about me. They have fingers in all the pies and spies on the ground or whatever you want to call it. What you also have to remember about all this NXT UK situation is that it was set up purely on a negative basis - it was set up to stop World of Sport being a success as they thought it would be a big deal - which it would have been if ITV wouldn't have fucked it up so royally. They signed Jim Ross to a contract without any idea what to do with him other than not to commentate on World of Sport again. They don't care about the UK independent scene. You know there will always be a scene of sorts where you can get more people coming up, but they're not bothered what the other promoters are doing. It didn't happen because of the pandemic, but I think they were running Glasgow the same weekend ICW had a show booked, and they're supposed to be partners! If I had a promotion the last thing I'd do is sign with WWE as your promotion won't exist after a while. Unless you sell up and make your money it's not going to work. We saw it happen with Evolve, and that was accelerated with the pandemic and Wrestlemania weekend not happening, but that was going to happen anyway as all the Evolve roster and so many of the headliners went to NXT - so they just stripped it of all its assets. The WWE cares about themselves and that's it. There's good and bad.

IN: Speaking of WOS, what are your views on how it was managed?

DA: It was great that they got that time slot on the main ITV channel, and it looked great from that respect, but everything was rushed. The problem was they had a finite window of 10 episodes, and they tried to cram too much stuff in, they didn't give you any emotional connection to the wrestlers. What surprised me was that this was ITV. You look out how they do X factor. They get someone going in for audition - I've been to an audition as part of the crowd and just from being there you realise what an enormous work the whole thing is. They interview some of the auditionees before they even auditioned them. Lo and behold they were put through and that interview I saw recorded was put on the show and someone that didn't sing too well was allowed to sing a few different songs. Then there was someone who was just there as fodder to make the others look better asked for a different song and was

told no. ITV know how to push a storyline and get the emotional connection with the audience. The sob stories - "singing was my escape" and so on. They didn't do that with the wrestling. You saw Will Ospreay come down, and you and I know Will Ospreay is one of the best aerial wrestlers in the world today - but Fred Bloggs watching the wrestling before Ant and Dec come one doesn't know who that is. If they would have put together packages of talking to him about his background and the spectacular moves he can do - that would get people interested. They had too many people coming in cold and rushed too many storylines. They had a ladder match but couldn't show anyone being hit with a ladder because of the time of broadcast. The camera work wasn't right for wrestling - I remember seeing a woman in a headlock and they were focusing on the woman grimacing putting on the headlock rather than the person actually in the move, too many crowd shots and too many cuts. I didn't bother watching the last episode, so if I'm not watching then the casual fans definitely wouldn't come back.

IN: It's argued that the original World of Sport was cancelled due to a generally sneering attitude towards the working class from a Thatcher-influenced ITV wanting to aim programming towards yuppies rather than ordinary people. Do you think that's still the case with the attempted rebrand in that they didn't really understand the audience or really care to put any real effort in?

DA: There was a little bit of that. World of Sport finished and the wrestling carried on as a standalone program. That did start off on the 4 o' clock time slot, then it moved to the lunchtime slot. It seemed to change virtually every week as sometimes it was 12, sometimes half past 1 - so it never had the same 4 o'clock slot wrestling always had. You also had the Joint Promotions shows looking terribly dated, which hadn't evolved at all. Whereas the All Star shows were doing all right. I think, with hindsight, if they carried on with All Star only it would have been a better product. The real death knell was when they started showing some WWF, because you'd have one week of wrestling from Rickmansworth Civic Hall and the next week you'd have Hulk Hogan and Randy Savage in front of 22000 of people at Madison Square Garden. All of a sudden you're like "Wow what's this? This is different" - it just didn't compare. Next week you're back to Rickmansworth Civic Hall with two fellas who look like your next-door neighbour. With All Star they tried to have the larger-than-life characters which were a bit more over the top. I didn't see much of it but after ITV pulled the plug there was a satellite channel called Screensport that had All Star wrestling on, and

from what I gather that was a cult classic, over the top and ahead of its time.

IN: What is most important to you about professional wrestling?

There are several aspects. The role I have is something I'm good at and enjoy. Even now the wrestling I'm watching and commentating on is very different to the wrestling I was watching 20 plus years ago, but I still appreciate it. Yes, I don't like the way people don't sell things like they used to but I have to accept it. I can be like Jim Cornette and sit here bitching about how it used to be great in my day and these guys don't know what they're doing, or I can just accept that's how it is. I can tell a person in their 20s if they sell a move more they don't need to take as many bumps and it'll mean more to the audience - but they're not going to listen to me because when I was their age I didn't listen to the previous generation. That's just human nature and it goes in circles. So there's that and just being part of this unique form of entertainment, I still have a love for wrestling as it's nothing like anything else in the world. There's also the social side, there are friends of mine I haven't seen in months and months. The camaraderie and the buzz - I still get that buzz of adrenaline before a show, and when I don't get that it's time to walk off. But I still enjoy doing it and I like being part of this world and my weekends feel very dull at the moment. None of us are doing an awful lot at the moment anyway. I don't have those wrestling shows to break up the calendar at the moment, so I just miss having people around me. We're all very solitary because of the pandemic, so I'm just looking forward to that.

Appendix 9

Interviewer: David Boyd

Interviewee: Robin Lekime

Interviewee profile: Professional Wrestler

Date of interview: 12/08/20

Location of interview: Online video calling software

List of acronyms: IN= Interviewer RL: Robin Lekime

IN: What made you want to train as a wrestler and what was the experience like?

RL: When I was 12 I saw my first wrestling match which was the then intercontinental champion the Ultimate Warrior, and I

think he destroyed the Brooklyn Brawler in a few seconds or something. I was hooked and wanted to do it. Belgium was a country where wrestling was popular throughout the 70s and 80s but they ruined it for themselves by putting on the same matches over and over again, the same finishes and so on. So when I got old enough to train I couldn't find anywhere. So it took me up until '99 when I finally saw a documentary on Belgian TV about a guy who owned his own pub and occasionally did shows around Brussels. I contacted the TV station and they put me in touch with him, and he said they trained every Sunday and I should come along - so that's how I got started. I had 3 months of bump training and running the ropes. They saw I already knew how to do a clothesline, suplex and body slam they took me on the road with them. From then on I wrestled almost every week, twice at weekends for local carnivals and things like that.

IN: When was the first time wrestling in Britain?

RL: It was around 2008 with John Freemantle at Premier Promotions down in Worthing. It was actually Johnny Kidd who put me forward as I'd done a seminar of his in Holland before. He saw that I loved wrestling and the ins and outs, different holds, he kind of took a liking to me and had me as his assistant. He asked if I'd like to come to the UK and put a word in for me, then in April in 2008 I did my first 2 weeks there combined with some shows for Brian Dixon. I liked Premier Promotions because it was the old school way of wrestling - everything was in rounds, tag matches were 2 out of 3 falls, a DDT or a piledriver was a knockout. I could wrestle a guy and he could catch a fall on me and be one up, but then I could hit him with a DDT or a piledriver on him and I'd win as he couldn't continue. Freemantle was really good for me. Then I went back to Belgium and Europe, then Ireland where I wrestled once against Sheamus. Then I returned to the UK in 2010 on Brian Dixon's summer run because there were some British wrestlers in France where I was working full time, and one of my opponents was a British guy called Domino - who passed away a few years ago - he put in a word for me with Brian Dixon and that's how we got started, me and my wife who wrestles too. We started working for Brian quite a lot then, like the summer runs, the holidays, we did Butlins, the Havens, all the house shows and everything.

IN: So you've been wrestling for a while in Britain - and a lot has happened in the past decade. What are the main changes you have noticed in the British wrestling industry?

RL: The old saying - "it's not what you know, it's who you know". That's the problem these days, you notice that even though the newer generation that doesn't work for Brian or

just want to focus on NXT or Progress - they talk down about Brian Dixon or Ricky Knight in Norwich who I work for a lot, but they keep on running no matter who pops up around them. Brian has been going for 50 years, Ricky about 30. They stick to a certain way of promoting and it works for them. We've seen a lot of others pop up but then a lot of them have gone down. WCPW had a big boom when it started but now it's done, IPW has had so many owners already. A lot come and go.

IN: How would you compare the promotion style of companies such as All Star and LDN to that of modern companies like Progress and RevPro?

RL: Brian Dixon, Ricky Knight and those kinds of promoters cater for the casual fans - such as the local guy in the pub, the mum in the supermarket with the kids. They want to be entertained for the night. You can see the high-flyers, the power guys, I don't want to call them fat but also the out-of-shape freaks. There's something for everyone. I don't want to pick on Progress as they've had success, but promotions like that focus more on a niche product where they want to have the internet fans. Progress had success, but other companies try to imitate that and fail because it's just doing the same style as everyone else. I once did a ring job for PCW when they were big. There were 6 matches that night and 5 of them were basically the same. After a while you could see the crowd were not reacting as they wanted. I noticed when I came to take the ring down, people came up to me for autographs and said I should have been wrestling as I actually looked like a wrestler. A lot of these new companies don't understand. Another thing is with Brian Dixon, when you go to his shows, you're placed higher than the fans. That's how it should be, you should be seen as a star and not be on the same level as the fans and they should want to come up and ask for your autograph. So, when you do the backstage passes with him, the people are queued up, and the wrestlers are all lined up for them, so it looks special. The smaller companies want to go for the internet fans and thing they are the 'hot shit' because they have loads of Twitter followers.

IN: Do you think the relationship between wrestlers and fans now is too cosy?

RL: Yes, and the thing is these fans realise it but don't want to admit it - they don't enjoy it as much anymore because they get too close to it and know, well, "know", everything about it. They think there aren't any secrets anymore, but if someone with my style goes to work for one of those companies I get told I'm really good - and I do half of what they do and get away with doing so much less. But for some reason, because of not having the Twitter followers or whatever, or I'm not

too cosy with the fans - people like me don't get the bookings we should have. The fans still want to be pulled into it and believe - there's still room for kayfabe. People say kayfabe is dead but it's still there. I work a certain style that believable, so the guy in the pub after the show can say he knows it's fake, but you wouldn't want to mess with that guy. That's what I want from my matches. I don't need the 5 star ratings; I just want that reaction of the fans after the show saying "damn I saw that guy take the other guy's head off with a clothesline!".

IN: We spoke about this before - about the idea of 'stiff' wrestling as opposed to working 'snug'. This has caused some friction between you and other wrestlers in the past, despite you not intending to harm them and making it look as real as possible. How would you explain the difference?

RL: First of all, I don't do leg slaps. When I hit someone with a forearm it's meat-on-meat. They'll feel it, it will hurt a bit, but the next day you'll be fine, you can wrestle somewhere else, you won't be injured. You might not even have a bruise, but the sound would have been there and that's what people react to. They want the contact. If you look at someone like Greg Valentine back in the day, not a flashy guy but you knew when someone was getting it. You also saw the reaction from the fans and the sweat flying. That's where the youngsters think that working light is not touching each other anymore - which is completely wrong. I like it when there's contact, but as long as it's in a professional way. 'Snug' is when you hit someone in a safe way, meat-on-meat. 'Stiff' is when you hit someone with a bone - that's where you are unprofessional. That's a problem as not a lot of these youngsters are trained properly, and on the second day of training they're already trying back-flips off the top rope. That's fine, at cirque-du-soleil you can do the same thing, but it doesn't mean you're a wrestler. If I'm in the ring with you and you do those moves, that's fine, I'll try putting them in the match. But if you hit me, and it's constantly hitting me with the bone, I know you're unprofessional. I'm going to then give you a snug shot and put you on your arse to let you know how it's supposed to be, and you might complain after, but that's how it's supposed to be. "This ain't ballet!" as they say. I don't like the word "fake" - I've got a day job now because of the pandemic. They know I'm a wrestler, and occasionally I show them how it works. There was one guy, he's 6 foot 3 and about 240 pounds, and I put him on the floor just with a wristlock with 2 fingers - because I know what to do. He now believes a lot more in wrestling because of that than by having to jump off the top rope or chop someone in the chest until they bleed. I think that's missing in a lot of training schools - they focus too much on the fancy moves and

not enough on the basic fundamentals. I can get the same reaction with a simple clothesline than some young wrestlers get from doing dives.

IN: Historically the British style of wrestling could be clearly defined, but nowadays it is more of a hybrid, international style. How would you say the 'Britishness' of wrestling could be defined now?

RL: It's still there, but I think the people here are so used to seeing the WWE on TV that everyone caters to it. I remember in 2008 at the holiday camps we could get a huge reaction just from arm locks, but now they expect the bigger moves like in WWE. So now the British stuff is now off to the side. I don't work for Ricky Knight anymore, but he still does his shows in the more traditional way. A lot of his guys do technical wrestling and work the crowds more. It's difficult to define the British style these days.

IN: Would you say British wrestling has an identity crisis now?

RL: Yes. I talked about that in my last tour in Canada with the guys from Ring of Honour and they agreed. I said back in the day, say a Belgian wrestler, if you wanted to learn a certain style you had to go to a certain country. If you wanted to learn Japanese style you went to Japan, if you wanted to learn Lucha you went to Mexico, if you wanted to learn the British style and learn all the holds, you went to Britain. Then you had the European style - and the German style was different to the French style, and so on. So if you were someone who travelled a lot, you picked up a lot of styles and became a hybrid-style wrestler who could work with anyone put in front of you. You could be in Japan working a luchador, for instance, and both people could get over. Now you have what I call the 'Ring of Honor' style. They popularised it. Everyone does the same. The young British wrestlers don't seem to have the pride of their own heritage anymore. They feel they have to do exactly what NXT, AEW, ROH or what New Japan are doing. It's a problem in Japan too. I had to stop watching New Japan because the last match I watched it was just all American guys. That's not Japanese wrestling anymore to me. It became too universal.

IN: What can be gained from British wrestling connecting to the past better?

RL: Standing out. People complain about WWE and how the matches are the same and the wrestlers are the same. Watch AEW - every match has dives in. Put someone like Joel Redman in there who has a great physique and can really wrestle. That match will stand out and that wrestler will be looked at as a

superstar. Like Timothy Thatcher - he has become popular in NXT because his style is so different compared to everyone else and it's because he studied the grappling style. They call it the MMA influence, but it's actually the old catch-as-catch-can style which people can still learn from. If you're a young wrestler starting out, why do the same as everyone else? It's like when Rey Mysterio became popular, all of a sudden everyone had a mask. He was popular because no one else had a mask. He stood out because of his style and look. I always give the example of the WWF in the late 80s and early 90s - why were they so successful? Because they had one of each, not five of each. Everyone had their own identity, and that's where it's getting lost now. Everyone looks the same, works the same, everyone does ten piledrivers and then kicks out. Why can't it just be an inside cradle? A nice snug back and forth match. A few nice bumps, maybe even a dive, whatever, but a nice finishing move. Not many matches finish in a submission anymore. I like to use an STF as if you really sink that in, people WILL tap out, it is a dangerous hold. I occasionally do a standing figure-of-four - which is an old move that Johnny Kidd taught me. It allows me to stand out. Everyone knows now that the young guys plan it all out from A to Z. No matter how the crowd reacts they'll still go through with the plan. I'm someone who listens to the crowd - if I have an idea and use it, and it gets a bad reaction, I'll step away from it and try to figure out what they'll react to. I'll peak through the curtain at shows and try to see if it's a crowd that reacts to big moves, or a crowd who reacts to verbal attacks. That's how you can have an idea of your match based on the crowd and what they react to. That's another thing that people don't do anymore - they have their match and their moves and that's it. Even if people shit on the match or not react, they finished that match and got their moves in so they think it was a good match. Just because they got people on Twitter to react, they think they had a great match. I like to satisfy the people there that paid to come and see us.

IN: On the flipside, there has been criticism of traditional booking of wrestling failing to modernise and relying heavily on stereotypes, such as All Star vilifying Islamic characters and receiving complaints and a newspaper article against them. Do those traditional promotions need to modernise their approach?

RL: You have to find the line in terms of how far you can go. Again, looking at the type of crowd. If it's a crowd that is 90 percent housewives and kids, I'm going to make sure I don't get busted open. If you have a certain character, a Muslim or a typical French guy or something - the British don't like the French and vice versa - you should know how far you can go. You could just get away with waving a French flag, but then if

you start yelling in French or calling them names in French and you offend them, you went too far. Butlins is family-oriented, so you can get away with just waving a flag. I know that as I used to wave the Belgian flag and that's all I needed. They used to shout "speak English!" and I'd refuse. That's all I needed to do.

IN: Do you mean that wrestling merely uncovers the audience's bigotry, as opposed to showing the ideology of the promotion?

RL: There will always be 'snowflakes' in the audience. Always. Normally I try not to swear on the microphone as it's unprofessional. My first tour in Canada there were about 500 people in the hall, and there was this one guy egging me on. He was getting to me, and normally that doesn't happen. So I got the microphone and shouted "if you really fancy it, get in the ring, try me on and I'll knock you the fuck out!". I said the F word on the microphone. 500 people were like "WHAT!?", but I had a great reaction, and they were really into the match from then on. They were so behind my opponent to kick my ass because of what I said. They enjoyed it more. So it's kind of weird with the crowd, they always say don't do that, but I sold more merchandise being a heel at the table flipping people off and swearing at them, rather than if I shook their hands and dropped my character. You have to figure out what kind of crowd you have. That's what the youngsters don't do anymore. They have the match in their head when they arrive the arena, most of the time they're on their phones and don't watch the other matches. You can't do that if you need to learn what crowd you're in front of.

IN: What do you miss most about working as a wrestler in the time of a global pandemic where opportunities to work are very limited?

RL: I was supposed to be on a tour in Canada, which I missed. It's a style I really like over there. Most of what I miss is being in the ring, the grappling. My hands are getting itchy thinking about it. I miss pissing people off as a heel. I'm a heel in real life, I enjoy pissing people off. It's not in a harsh way but an amusing way. That's what I miss is having hundreds of people booing me, when I come up with something where you get the reaction from the crowd.

IN: What do you think professional wrestling has learned during the pandemic? What's good or bad about wrestling without audiences?

RL: Look at the big companies and their ratings - they're going down. We need an audience. Wrestlers need to feed off them. You can plant an audience, but most of them are trainees

or family and are told who to boo. It has to happen organically. I have a friend in NXT UK who says that too. Because he can't work to a crowd, the matches don't feel good. You don't have that audience to work from and the matches have already been laid out. Not everyone will boo Seth Rollins, some will still like him despite him being a heel so you have to reflect that. What we've learned is we should promote wrestling to a wider audience. Bring in the kids and the old ladies again. Those are your bread and butter and will always stick to the wrestling. Social media fans come and go, but it's the families you have to get back in. They're the ones who spend money on merch and give the reactions. It shows in the ratings - ten years ago 10 million were watching on TV, and now it's only about 1.5 million on a Wednesday. Where have all these people gone? It's not even because of Covid-19, it came way before that. It's been catered towards a certain audience and not a broad one. That's what I think we've learned - we need audiences, we need audiences from all kinds of people. You can have the smart marks, but you need the families, the kids, the grandparents. You need hot girls! There aren't hot girls at shows anymore that would swoon over someone like Joe Redman because he's good looking. Take Ricky Morton - he was popular with the girls and they bought his merchandise, his food, and so on. He could just live off of that and just have to sell in the ring. That's all that is missing. We need to get back to building those audiences up and not just for niche products, we need to get everyone back in those halls.

IN: Speaking of audiences, pre-Covid, how would you define British audiences? Is there anything unique about British wrestling in comparison to elsewhere?

RL: The stuff they yell, it's typical to the UK. The rest - no. It's similar to France and Germany. I usually work for the companies aimed towards kids and families. The smart marks react the same everywhere, and so do the grandparents. If you're the villain, they WILL react to you. If you believe in yourself, they'll react. People don't want to mess with you, so that's half the job done. They already see you look the part or think you look like a dickhead so they'll boo you. The basics are the same, whether in the states or here. Japan are slightly more introverted. But it's the same if you do the job properly.

IN: You're aiming towards basic human instinct, right?

RL: Yes, you can tell when people want to lash out at you. For them, they could have had a bad week and want to watch the wrestling and enjoy themselves - but they can let all their anger out on me. Let's say I lose the match they'll be so

satisfied, and it's like therapy for them without knowing it. That's how I see how wrestling works for people.

IN: What do you think is being done well and done poorly in modern British wrestling?

RL: A lot of companies neglect the casual fan. They've been really good at promoting on social media to get the attention of the big American companies - WWE and stuff, so there are eyes on the British product, but there are only eyes on certain people. There are loads of hidden talents going out each week performing to casual fans who get much bigger reactions. It's a double-edged sword. They've neglected casual fans but attracted smart fans.

IN: On the flipside what good things could you say about those "smart" fan companies who focus on the internet more, such as RevPro or Progress?

RL: They're great at promoting. A lot of the workers are very athletic but could benefit from studying the old stuff - both to save their bodies, have a longer career and make it look new every time they get in the ring. They have a lot of potential and run big buildings, big crowds and are good at getting themselves out there. RevPro grew big and quick. But there are others that didn't last and most have financial difficulties. They're good at social media and promotion, but on the other hand it's a niche product and not for casual fans. For example, in Norwich, I could go into a shop and someone would recognise me as part of WAW and I'd get discounts. I doubt any progress wrestler would get the same. There's the difference. They're good at promoting the product, but places like WAW are good at promoting wrestlers and making them superstars.

IN: Lastly, what are your thoughts on WWE getting involved in the British scene? Good or bad?

RL: More bad than good. Good for the ones who are signed as it's a good pay cheque, but then you'll hear from some of them that they'd be sitting for weeks not being allowed to wrestle, while a lot of them still love it and want to perform - they're now being paid to sit at home. Easy money, but if you really love it, it gets itchy after a while and you want to perform. Also, WWE doesn't care where they run. When I came to Norwich back in the day, it was a promoter's territory. He stuck to his area and didn't go into anyone else's. It's like the old understanding. WWE doesn't care about that, just money. I'm not a fan of them coming over. Since they have, a lot of companies have disappeared and shut down. It's like the old territory system in the states - you had all these

companies all over the country and then Vince came in and put them all out of business. I'd say to WWE to stay in the states, put your stuff on our TV but stay out of our halls. Let our guys learn here. Bring in European, Japanese or Mexican wrestlers - but let our guys work here. It's also a way so they don't have to do paperwork or get guys a green card if they can just put on a show here.

I've made it my profession since 2010, I was working full time as a wrestler. There were good and bad times, but I never needed a day job until about 2 years ago because it became harder to find work, but now it's really hard to find a promoter that pays decently. It's ok if you have a spot with a friend from who they know, not what they know, but it's not good at the moment. It needs to get back to how it used to be where wrestlers could work every day. I'd rather work a whole week and earn 500 bucks than the whole week for 500 bucks. I want to be out there, busy and performing.

Appendix 10

Interviewer: David Boyd

Interviewee: Sha Samuels

Interviewee profile: Professional Wrestler

Date of interview: 18/08/20

Location of interview: Online video calling software

List of acronyms: IN= Interviewer SS= Sha Samuels

IN: What made you want to train to be a wrestler and what was the process like?

SS: It was a fluke - When I was in sixth form in college I was a big wrestling fan, around 2002, and someone had a Rock tattoo. I noticed it and got talking to them about wrestling and found out they were training in Essex, so I thought I'd try it out. I went with him one week and never left. I had no idea at the time there was any training, as nowadays it's publicised a lot more, there's a lot of schools around, the internet is a big thing and everyone has a phone they can look things up with. In 2002 nothing was advertised and there were only a handful of schools in the whole country, like one in Portsmouth, one in Kent, and so on. So I wouldn't have known if I didn't meet that guy, it was fate really. A lot of stuff they teach at first is how to fall properly. The guys that trained me were old blokes from the World of Sport days so when they were showing you they were very particular and would take a while to let you move on to the next thing. It was

quite tiresome at first, as when you're young you want to mess about and do what you see on TV, but they wouldn't let you do that. They wouldn't let you have any free time and would make you learn falls first then we'll teach you how to lock up and go from there. You had to be really patient to stick with it. It was a nice little community there, but it was hard as we didn't have a ring. We had to bump on judo mats - which is a silly thing now we know more about injuries, but it did condition your body.

IN: Have you noticed any differences over time with how training has changed or developed since you started?

SS: I think it's better and more advanced now. It was hard to approach wrestlers for advice before, people weren't approachable back then. Everyone was more selfish. Now it's a team effort, we all want each other to get better. If they get better, so do I. No one wanted to train people before, it was a different mentality. Whereas now at Knucklelocks, it's the same people all the time, it's a nice community. We have group chats afterwards - it's a constant thing. It's not just trainee-trainer relationship anymore, we're all friends. We're all in it together with the same passions and want to help each other. So now there's a really good vibe and spirit which is good, and a lot better than when I was coming up. There was more of a bullying culture then.

IN: On the flipside, I've heard criticism that there is a bit of a gatekeeping problem. Now the industry is more open, what would be the benefits of the older system putting people off rather than now where a lot more people can get into it?

SS: The only benefit I can see is that it's easier for people to be in training, and if people are just there to pass time rather than taking it seriously, those people will always be around. The only people that stay around with the older system are the really passionate ones. If I can turn up every week for training despite not getting any advice, it must mean I really want it. Whereas if people just turn up for the sake of it and waste everyone's time, those people will just fade away. I still think it's not fair for that kind of attitude - who are we to say if people are taking it seriously or not. People have their own way of loving wrestling. You have people saying you can or can't do something in a certain way - everyone has the right to try something and if they're not good at it, hopefully they'll realise it. If I wanted to start golfing tomorrow and wanted to be a PGA level player, I can at least try.

IN: How did you come up with the character of Sha Samuels?

SS: Back in the day everyone was a bit stereotypical. I'm half Iranian, so everyone gave me a gimmick like the Iron Sheik. So bad, so 1980s. Very stereotypical. So because you're half Iranian you have to have a foreign gimmick. I wanted to get away from that, it pissed me off a bit. To assume I can only do that. I wanted to show them the complete opposite end of the spectrum, like Grant or Phil Mitchell from EastEnders just to prove them wrong. My name is Shaheen, so Sha is short for that and Samuels is my middle name. I thought that'll do. Then I loved the gimmick so much, and watching old hooligan films like Football Factory, Lock stock and Two Smoking Barrels, Snatch - I was trying to mix all of this stuff together. It changed from doing it to prove people wrong to genuinely loving it. When you sent me the message about British culture, I thought it was important to have British values in a British gimmick within British wrestling. A lot of guys are brought up on American or Japanese wrestling. No-one is brought up on British wrestling anymore. So when we think of a character we don't really think of a British gimmick, we relate our characters more to the American and Japanese stuff. I fell in love with my character and never looked back. You still have to adapt and change - when I first started there was nothing comedic about it, but over the time I realised if, say, I'm going up north and they've got a different accent, they might find me funny sometimes. So you can become likeable. Instead of being that backwards thinking person, now you're the person they want to have a drink with down the pub. It's still the same core gimmick though.

IN: Before Covid-19, what did you like and dislike about the modern state of the British wrestling industry

SS: Everyone was doing well. You had NXT UK starting up, so for the first time since I can remember there was that goal in place. Wrestling being a full time job again was an attainable goal. Before they only wanted the big guys like Wade Barrett and Sheamus. Now RevPro have a relationship with Japan, so there's a root there now and guys have way more opportunities now. Even without those big companies, the British independents were doing well. I can safely say I was making good money on a weekend, and having my income supplemented with other stuff, whereas before it was just a hobby. But now Covid happened, a big chunk of money is gone and you notice it. We were making money on merch, on average 3 days a week. It's a shame, but take Covid out of it, people were making money. Backstage at every show I was on there was a great atmosphere and team spirit to make it a good show. There was good interaction with the fans and it was a really positive place to be. It may not be like that everywhere, but it was

where I worked. There was good stuff happening, and everyone was busy. If you're a wrestler and you're busy, you're sorted.

IN: Now wrestling is completely gone in Britain during the pandemic - what do you most miss about wrestling?

SS: I'd say the boys and girls. I miss seeing them. I miss seeing the team. You take things for granted as well, like when I said I went out for a pint on Saturday - it's rare I go out when I'm at home because I don't see my friends at home anymore. Every week, Friday, Saturday, Sunday I'm travelling round the country. If I'm at home on a Saturday I'm with the family so I can't go out. So you don't realise how much you saw them all before and that's lost - you miss the camaraderie. There's an atmosphere at a show where you want to work hard and you're on the same page to make it good. You miss that. Creatively your head seems a bit mushy. I was injured anyway just before Covid, so it's been so long since I've wrestled that I'm second guessing myself. If it does start back, say January Covid is gone and we find a vaccine and wrestling restarts - I'm going to have anxiety which I've never had before - like, can I still do this? That anxiety, fear about wrestling is always on your mind. Creatively I'm thinking am I as creative as I was? When you're in that wrestling bubble your head is always thinking. Now I've not done a show in ages there's nothing really going on. So I miss that - the boys, girls, being creative. They're the two things I miss.

IN: What do you think British wrestling has learned during Covid now there aren't audiences or shows?

SS: Obviously it's good for people speaking out. It was a shock for me. I've been a wrestler for a long time and seeing all these girls, not just girls but boys having stories too - you do feel there is stuff going on that you're not aware of. I'm trying to be the best I can be, but you forget - fair enough there are good people but there are so many shows going around the country that you forget there are other things happen. It's taught us a lesson now to step back when shows happen again that we have to police and look out for stuff more- it's no longer just about the wrestling. People need to have that conversation with each other and take the first step. What I've learned as well is that it's hard for people to share their stories, they're so brave to tell them which a tough thing to do - that's amazing first of all. Second, we need to find stuff out. It was a shock for me, people were accused and lost their jobs I knew for years. You look at yourself and wonder how you didn't notice it going on? What I'm learning it's not just about wrestling anymore but people's lives, so we need a more active approach. We can do

something about it. Sometimes life is bigger than wrestling. If it does come back, and us as an industry have worked hard for it not to go away - for all the stories out, there are still a lot of good people involved and it would be a shame for them to not achieve their dreams because of others being arseholes. So as an industry we need active steps, and people bringing in safeguards are a good thing, but there needs to be people outside of wrestling involved that won't know anyone.

IN: What are your thoughts of unionising British wrestling and having companies work together more?

SS: Definitely. I know business is business, but bigger picture - if they all worked together... I know I did a few shows for ICW and Progress. At their peak both companies blew up - now imagine if those companies put their resources together and how big they could have been. There's a reason those two promotions were interested by WWE - because they're doing so well without them. Now, imagine they came together instead, fair enough they still made a lot, but if they worked together instead of having a go at each other and running shows against each other and splitting people's work in half - why couldn't you have a system in place to work together so both could have run a lot better. That's frustrating - the ego of promoters. I love them both, and long may they continue, but I reckon it's cutting off your nose to spite your face. One ran Wembley arena and the other the Hydro. Even bigger things could have happened.

IN: What are your opinions of WWE's involvement in the UK scene with NXT UK? It has caused quite a divide in fan opinion.

SS: They did it out of necessity really. ITV did World of Sport - I'm wearing their shirt right now - when we did that, that's when WWE put an active interest into British wrestling. It's no secret I know and love a lot of people there. My experience with them is that they are very professional people, but any wrestling around the world, if anyone is doing a little bit well, they want to get involved and cut their legs off beneath them, perhaps to have a foothold so it's not wrestling, it's "WWE". It's like MMA being referred to as UFC. That's what they want. So any country that does even a little bit well with wrestling and get up that ladder - either WWE will do business together with them or cut their legs off and sign all their talent. But they've always done business like that since the 80s. I think that's how they always will do business. The only negative thing I can see is a group of people will make more money, but it won't trickle down because the industry could die. There needs to be made sure things are

still happening in the scene. Since Progress and ICW got into business with them I feel business has gone down a bit.

IN: Absolutely. I like NXT UK, it's good stuff, and I think it's great for UK wrestlers now have something big to aspire to - which sadly Progress and ICW could have been anyway, but I disagree with how talent are controlled as in where they can wrestle. So that skill level doesn't really trickle down everywhere like you say, only selected areas and it definitely has affected business for the indies.

SS: I love RevPro and I'm very close with Andy. Out of nowhere Andy was doing really well and managed to get ties with New Japan - so WWE decided not to do business with them which is a shame, as well as for the fans. Luckily, we have a big talent pool here and plenty of people that can replace the signed stars - but like you say, where's that experience going? Say in 10 years' time, when the gulf gets bigger and more guys go to WWE - there's no in-between. They're told they can only work certain places, so they won't be able to get enough of that valuable experience. Long-term it won't be could, but hopefully it'll change.

IN: What about the performance centre, do you think there's a positive to it being setup and having a place with so many facilities?

SS: A good advantage is when you see a facility like that, everyone has seen it and how hard you have to train - everyone wants to get to that next level - but because there's a performance centre here now, it does trickle down as training gets better elsewhere. You have Eddie Dennis there. He'll teach at, say, Knucklelocks. People want to train harder because of what they've seen. They'll train harder to get there. The only negative I can think of is that it takes creativity away from indies as now there's a clear-cut WWE way in the UK. So people think "this is what they like". You're missing out on the magic of the indies where you can do whatever you want - your character, your way - as the fans aren't worried the WWE way, they've come to see that independent show. I think that's a disadvantage as everyone has had their head turned to NXT UK, they forget the magic of the indies. It was so good in 2014-2016 because every wrestler was free to do what they wanted, there was no WWE way or guidelines. Everyone was creative and it showed with packed houses. It's still a great thing to aim for to get a job, as there was never financial freedom before. Another positive thing that trickles down is professionalism - it translates to other people and they act differently.

IN: You mentioned the WOS reboot - it did find some success but was criticised...

SS: Heart-breaking, really heart breaking...

IN: What was it like to work on and the issues you saw being part of it?

SS: What was great about it was being part of a team - like when I started, the thought of wrestling returning to ITV was impossible. The fact it happened is an achievement. It could be the worst wrestling show on the planet, and to some it was - that's not the point. The point is we got it back on ITV which is an achievement and I'll always be proud of it. We got a pilot and one series and I'm proud of that. The boys and girls on the show worked their arses off, we worked HARD. The amount of matches we had to do in a short period of time. 10 weeks of TV in 3 days, which is a lot and we all worked hard. Again, it was for British wrestling, and we were willing to work hard for it. Unfortunately, who were we to say to TV people who have worked for ITV and been in charge of popular mainstream TV shows - who am I to say "this isn't what is done in wrestling?". They won't listen to me, you know? They know TV, but they don't know wrestling. The way they cut it. As an example, in a wrestling match, if I'm a bad guy I've got to beat up the baby face for him to get sympathy and for the audience to care about him. What we didn't know until after they edited it is that we couldn't have too much of a beatdown, the heel can't get heat as it would be seen as too one-sided. So they cut all the heat out, and that's why the cuts are all over the place as they were putting the matches together differently and it made no sense. It was frustrating, very frustrating. When they aired it, it was embarrassing as it wasn't what we did. I had some really good matches on that show and the way they were put out were the worst shit I'd ever seen. Embarrassing. But there were positives, I think the fact we all got experience in working TV and in a studio setting, it was a great experience, and I can't fault it. It's just a shame they were TV people with their own views and not listening to us silly old wrestlers.

IN: So basically it would have been better if they would have had wrestling-associated people editing and working on the show as they'd know the shots to get, and so on?

SS: Yeah, we said to them when you're editing the show you should have a wrestler with you so they can explain why the moment makes sense. They did something with Rampage Brown's entrance where they flashed and changed shots six times from the same angle at the same time. It was silly! We did tell them but they didn't listen. I think we were going to get a

second series - this is funny, well it's not funny, it's heart-breaking as people missed out on work - but as we were going towards a second series they had agreed we were going to have a team of wrestlers to give advice, but in the early stages of talking about series two, AEW offered them their show and they went with them as it cost nothing to film or edit.

IN: Then they buried it in the late night Sunday schedule anyway...

SS: Yeah, but again - they wanted to get involved in the wrestling business. One of the top ITV people, the man that handles Jeremy Kyle - His son loves wrestling so that's why he suggested it and wanted to revive the WOS brand and so on, but as soon as AEW came along they were happy enough to just have that. So what could we do? It accelerated the NXT plans to come here.

IN: Sadly I never had the chance to come up and see any of the WOS house shows that were put on after the shows aired...

SS: They were amazing!

IN: I've heard from some fans that they were much different to the show and much better as wrestling shows, and perhaps if they filmed those it would have been a much better representation of British wrestling?

SS: We had no TV people there, I think the Blackpool show they were there as it was their big one and it was great, but I remember we would wrestle anywhere. That's why the show was so good. Yeah, if they filmed that, and they have got the footage of some of the shows and I think there's some music videos around they made, it was a missed opportunity! They just want content for their channel now and AEW does it for them, unfortunately for us.

IN: We said earlier if WWE didn't get involved, Progress and others could have got much bigger...

SS: There was heat between the two, you could feel it. They were in competition with each other. It was frustrating.

IN: With that said, is there any hope of companies working together to create something for British wrestlers to aspire to that isn't WWE? Like in the old days where companies came together to form their own industry with Joint Promotions, essentially.

SS: It's always possible. If I can go back to that period of time like I was saying, it would do really well in wrestling.

There were so many good shows, we were making good money on merch, 8x10s, interacting with fans - it was great. It just got better and better. The fact there wasn't anything to push for, like you said, in the UK - made everyone work harder. So I think the natural progression would have been so big, but I don't think it would have been the end game. We had Progress, ICW, RevPro - even up north PCW was good for a time. Then all these other promotions came up that were doing well. OTT in Ireland! Thrown in WXW in Germany, another amazing place. If these places came together... That could have been a territory in Europe. Who knows. I reckon there was a good chance.

IN: Traditionally British wrestling has been about the catch-as-catch-can style, rounds match content and so on. Now we're seeing a more hybrid-style alongside that of things like Mexican Lucha Libre and Japanese wrestling...

SS: Definitely a lot more of the Japanese influence I would say...

IN: Absolutely. How would you define British wrestling in current times and what sets us apart nowadays?

SS: I reckon what sets us apart from anywhere else, and I can say this because I've had this discussion with American and Japanese wrestlers that have come over - is, although like you say the in-ring stuff is a hybrid now and it's not a set 'British way', it's about the fan interaction. Our fans, it translates when you see a Wrestlemania or when NXT came over here. The way the crowd acts they don't have that in America or Japan! The funny songs, the chants - the whole 'shoes off if you hate Gibson' stuff. That's all British - the 'show'. So what you get from British wrestling is not only a night of action but a good night out. You have the good in-ring action with great fan interaction which equals a great night out. That's what British wrestling is. Our shows, the big ones anyway, are for the younger demographic who like a drink and are loud. That's a great atmosphere. You watch American indies now and the crowd are sitting on their hands despite the action being good. Japan have always been known for that with their respectful culture. We have the hybrid style from the American indies, a bit of Lucha, still a bit of the old British stuff, some Japanese strong-style - we have that all mixed together, but we can all have a good time. A match in front of a silent crowd might be a 4 out of 10, but with a great crowd it can be boosted to a 7 or 8 out of 10 because of the atmosphere. That's where I think British wrestling is at now.

IN: Where do you think that comes from? We see a lot of football chants and theatrical heckling like at comedy shows.

SS: It's our culture, like you said. Football is embedded in our culture. Heckling is a BIG thing. I've been heckled so many times, but I try and be witty with it. Even wrestlers can start chants to. Get the crowd going. The crowd start the chants then we build off of it. They used to called me "Fat Cantona" or "Shit Danny Dyer". I was sung that all the time and I'd react off it. Imagine if I didn't? It'd be rubbish, but the fact we react off it makes it good. But I reckon it's just embedded in our culture - the heckling, football chants, singing. Even fans wanting to say stuff wanting to get involved. You want to get involved. You might go to a football game or something - I want to get involved! It's just a part of our culture. It surprises a lot of Japanese and American wrestlers when we come here. I'm not saying we don't work hard, but we're lucky - we work hard and wrestle, but we have the crowd to play off that we can take into account that we know how the crowd works and reacts that we can do this here. They might say this, and we get a good few minutes of fan interaction - and that will be fun and everyone will be buzzing - whereas Americans don't have that kind of mentality. If they come here and you tell them that, they're like "How...what...?" and you're just like "trust me, this is what's going to happen" and it blows their mind! So I think that's what British wrestling is, the good interaction with fans and we're more character based over here.

IN: So would you say the relationship between wrestler and fan is much closer here? As opposed to the 'us and them' relationship traditionally?

SS: There is, I think it's a wrestling community now. Some people might argue that's a bad thing, there's a barrier there for a reason - I've heard those arguments. But what makes wrestling fun is that it's a night out. If I'm a bad guy, and I've done this many times, if I'm a bad guy I'd go out and sell merch and have a laugh with the fans and film stuff with them - we're having a good time, it's a good night out. Why should there be that awkward moment with me staying in character and being an arsehole? That's not going to make someone's night if I slag them off, that's just going to piss them off. I'm past that stage now. We're having a good time and letting fans enjoy themselves. A lot of us have that same mentality. We're all there to have a good time so let's make sure everyone has a great night.

IN: How does the age of the internet and instant information affect how easy or hard it is to be a modern wrestler?

SS: I reckon people become lazy researching stuff in my opinion. Not just wrestling but everywhere. If someone does something wrong, I tell someone something it trickles down and the information changes. If something bad happens on the show, instead of doing their research of what happened they jump on the bandwagon and say "oh he's an arsehole, let's ruin him". Just research what happened! That's the only problem I see, and it's for all types of entertainment. But having social media makes you approachable, accessible. Like we've been saying, the lack of content out there I haven't been on social media for a while - but the positives are someone like you can get in touch and we can organise something like this.

IN: It all reminds me of the RevPro Aaron Wild incident, which I think exposed some real problems with fans on the internet in this era like you're talking about...

SS: That's what I was trying to hint at. Everyone doesn't know the full facts. Someone spoke out and thought he got done over, but he didn't! I know he didn't, I know what happened. We spoke to him after and we had a laugh. He's getting beaten up by Zack and Suzuki - he's having the time of his life in the ring! But of course he blames the people that are not as well-known. We made a mistake, shit happens. The problem wasn't the mistake but being a professional I slammed him ever so softly and then I wanted to - just because it was a clear fuck up and I'm always about protecting it all - and we got there! Luckily everyone knew what I was doing and the crowd was happy - bish bash bosh. Spoke to him after - fine. Saw him the day after - fine. Saw him after that - fine, all good. He waits a week and then says something. This is what I mean when I say it trickles down. He says that and people think I assaulted him, which I haven't. There was the bit with Josh Bodom - I was busy getting a mic. I'll be honest I don't speak with Josh anymore. If Josh wanted to hurt someone he would. It was worked. But I'm not sticking up for him, what happened - happened. But what I didn't appreciate was he did say something online, and because anything that's sensitive or negative - instead of looking or asking what happened, people assumed I assaulted this guy - it was very bad, I was getting a lot of abuse, saying stuff about my kids, unnecessary stuff - just because they don't know the full story. It's all in the past now, and I did release a statement telling the truth and that's the last time I spoke about it. Ironically it's not the people at the show, it's the people who weren't even at the show were giving me grief and making a story out of nothing. Made it a bigger deal.

IN: Does that make it very difficult to be a villain in modern wrestling when you're trying to get heat in a classic way? They say we're all 'smart marks' now, but if people genuinely

still believe things are real and react so negatively online, does that make it hard now?

SS: Yeah, it's the easiest way to work them now. If I wanted to I could get the most heat I could ever want to, but the bad thing is promoters are scared and are like "if he's getting that heat online I don't want part of it". They just want to keep the fans happy and that takes the magic away. I know I said earlier we're having a good time at shows, but that's why no one wants to play heel anymore. I don't have to get personal to be a heel, but there are ways to become one and get heat. They say the way fans react now you can manipulate. Do something at the show and use the 'cancel culture' on a show to get heat. But you have to have backing from the promoter and at the end of the day as wrestlers we can't trust them. They say they have your back and then they won't book you again. So then I'm out of work. It's so easy to lose everything with the internet, unfortunately. Which is good in a way as some don't deserve it, but there are people who don't deserve it who are given a bad name, unfortunately. That's what the internet is bad for.

IN: It kind of goes to prove that people who say everyone is a smart fan now and marks don't exist are wrong. People forget wrestlers do things for a reason and they become very gullible.

SS: Yeah, I think they're still gullible. But there's nothing wrong with being a mark! I was talking about this the other day with a friend - when we were wrestling fans, and I still am, I want to sit down and watch. I'm not like "oh he should have done this; oh I don't like what he did there". I'm not slagging it off, I'm enjoying it. When I was watching as a kid Austin coming down in a beer truck and spraying Vince McMahon, I wasn't like "oh that's shit, they shouldn't have used that type of beer" - Just enjoy it! Like you said, we have access to everything on our phones all the time, maybe that's got something to do with it. 9 times out of 10 - the fans that are the worst are the ones that don't come to the shows - so are they even fans? 9 times out of 10 the fans at the shows that come up to you are nice. I reckon the people that are arseholes are just not deep-down fans, they just want - in any form of entertainment. A film, football, wrestling - they just want to slag it off. We're seeing these people, they exist now. I've never seen fans in football as they are now - anything that happens now. Unfortunately, because of social media it's created a new breed of "fan". They're everywhere now.

IN: I think they call it "performative outrage now" don't they? *laughs*

SS: *laughs* It's no way to live!

IN: What would you say the future holds for British wrestling going forward when Covid eventually goes?

SS: I think it's here for a while, Covid. Which is frustrating, I think every part of our lives will take a dip. I think wrestling will come back and take a downturn, and then once we have that initial downturn, we'll all come together and work hard not worrying about ourselves over British wrestling overall. Not worrying about our merch, and so on. We'll keep working hard and when the tough times are gone we can reach for the stars again. I don't know when we'll be able to run again. Is it October? I know RevPro are doing closed shows. Again, people were losing their shit over that, and let me tell you - no one had a gun to their head to be on that show. It was done very professionally, but people forget that the wrestlers have complete control - no one is forcing anyone to wrestle here. There's not a voice for this, but I think there are still people out there who want to still see content made but safely. But people were acting like wrestlers were forced to be there, which was a shame. But like I said - doing closed shows takes away our biggest asset which is fan interaction as we spoke of earlier, so maybe it's not the best thing to do. Fans are such an important part. But if we all come together like we did before - there were a core group of guys wrestling everywhere we could, and it was never about us as individuals. Now we've created a scene to be proud of and allowing people to make more money. We wouldn't have had that scene without working hard in front of 30-40 people. Now it's 4-500 people. The new wrestlers are like "oh there's only 400 in". Only 400!? You've got that because of what we'll all have to do after Covid, working hard. It's about the industry, a transitional period and making sure we keep our core fanbase here and then once it gets safe, fans will be back and the scene will get better. We can't be selfish in the next phase of British wrestling, and we need to look after each other. Stop being fixated on the wrestling - it's important but look after your fellow professional and ask if they have any problems. It's up to us to see something going on and notice it, and maybe in ourselves go above and beyond to research things like this, such as causes and changes in personality. You have to look after each other more and the scene. That's what I reckon, and over time and a lot of the stuff that has come to light because of Covid and Speaking Out experiences, it has educated a lot of people and forced us to wise up. As an industry you have to look after each other and everyone can be safe.

IN: There's an argument that perhaps we're not doing a good enough job of inheriting our own past of wrestling. You've been trained and worked with the older guys and have connections to that past and traditions. Do you think perhaps, seeing as we have almost two different wrestling industries - the holiday camp style like ASW and LDN and the stuff for modern fans like RevPro and Progress - do you think there's a way those two sides could perhaps work together a little more?

SS: I think the problem is because there's such a big gamp in our industry, we can pay homage to the past but I don't think the fans understand that style. We should always praise the legends and those before us - obviously your Johnny Saints, Steve Greys, Mal Sanders, Johnny Kidd's - all these amazing wrestlers should be held on a pedestal and they're getting recognition again now - but to learn that style is hard. We haven't had the time for our style to adjust. We had World of Sport style, nothing, us trying to copy Americans - then suddenly we made our own style and it took off. That's what has been neglected as there was that huge gap. If British wrestling stayed on TV in the 80s, the style would have changed gradually, and the British style would be different. But because we didn't have anything for a while, we sort of lost our identity because of it. You can have one or two matches, possibly, but I don't think the audience has the patience for that type of match or can't get involved as much. I think the fans looking for a night out wouldn't enjoy it as much.

IN: Is there a way we can educate fans, perhaps?

SS: Yeah, I reckon it would take one match on each show. What's great about those guys is they can still work. You can have Johnny Kidd on a show against someone like Mark Andrews and it'd be amazing, Kidd will show the British style, but Mark is good enough to put his spin on it. That could maybe educate fans, and hopefully it then gets passed on to others. But always put these guys on a pedestal, they've done amazing things and are respected all around the world. British wrestling has always been respected, but it was a shame we didn't have an industry here from 1988 or so until about 2002.

IN: The reason why I ask this is whenever I speak to people about old British wrestling they immediately go to the Big Daddy Giant Haystacks stuff and focus on the cheesy, pantomime aspects. But there's the whole other side of British wrestling of those amazing matches with the likes of Rollerball Rocco, Johnny saint, Fit Finlay and so on.

SS: I reckon when I was at the NXT performance centre, you can tell they're very reliant on the old British way and they want to celebrate the British way - especially Regal coming from that world. So the trainers know that style, they bring in guests like Adrian Street, Dave Taylor - they're always going to have that and as industry leader that will hopefully trickle down like we spoke about earlier. People tend to want to imitate what they're doing, so that's possible. We should always celebrate our heritage, but I think the in-ring style they did was great but I don't think we can duplicate that. I don't think it would be lost on all, but most fans. Colt Cabana was great and came over and learned our style - he worked with James Mason once and it was flawless, but they also got the fans involved and it was so good! There's a way to do it. I'm set in my ways with my character and how I work, but if I worked someone who could do that style I know I could do it, but I couldn't set the pace. It's been too long. If I worked Kidd I could be the heel and do all the selling, but we could merge it together somehow.

Appendix 11

Interviewer: David Boyd

Interviewee: Kasey Owens

Interviewee profile: Professional Wrestler

Date of interview: 17/09/20

Location of interview: Online video calling software

List of acronyms: IN= Interviewer KO= Kasey Owens

IN: What inspired you to become a wrestler and what was your training like?

KO: Ok, so wrestling I've been watching since I was, like, teeny teeny teeny with my older brother. I was never one for Barbies or anything like that. My brother had stacks and stacks of WWF action figures, and all the rest. We played with those, putting matches together with my brother. There have been many a broken sofa due to all the suplexes we would do to each other much to our parents' annoyance! They say don't try it at home but we all do!

IN: That's how they get their new stars!!

KO: Exactly! So with regards to training, I pretty much started when I was 18...17 or 18. I just started college and had a load of mates really into wrestling as well. We kind of got

together with others and putting random shows on, so I guess you could call it 'backyarding' if you're in the states. But unlike some we had a boxing ring! Somehow legitimate! A lot worse than a wrestling ring, I'll give you that. You can imagine. Through that one of my fellow trainees met Alan Cunningham, one half of the Kings of the North, so we started training with him 2009 to 2010. Within 3 months of that we started working as crew on shows for Wrestling.IE and down in Brae for Limerick Wrestling. It kind of went off from there and within 6 months I had my first intergender tag match tagging with Machine versus Jordan Devlin and a girl called Rachel Sinclair who did valeting for Omen. From then on it just skyrocketed from there and onwards from that. Thanks to Machine and all that I actually learned how to bump and sell correctly. A lot of our training to begin with was legitimate MMA training, so how you would actually put the hold on so we knew how to work it and not injure anyone. So there were a good 9 or 10 months of that and then more work on strikes, and dare I say my awful, awful promo skills *laughs* - which, many thanks to Molly Spartan has got much better over the years. As they say, the rest is history.

IN: What was the most difficult part of training? The physical or psychological?

KO: For me, because I was always a really active child and always wrestling with my brother and all that, the physical stuff wasn't daunting for me. There were mind-blanking things like the first time coming off the top rope and things like that. I was always really interested in the storyline telling of things and the psychology, how the brain works. So why are you doing this and what point are you getting to? So a lot of my matches, some can be spotty or high-spotty, but only if it makes sense to me. I'll let the other person do what they want to do, I've got an open mindset and think everyone should get an equal opportunity in the match and not one person running things. Mainly promoting yourself and doing promos, that has always been my stickler. I always find trouble with it because for so many years I was tagging with Leah and she was the talker, I wasn't. I pushed that over to her and I just went on and wrestled. But becoming a singles wrestler over the past few years made me have to do that, and that's where Molly Spartan came in, because she was backstage interview for ICW. There'd be times I would be ranting about something and she'd very slowly stick the camera in front of me. "Keep going...keep going...". I've kind of got over my promo skills but there's a lot to work on there. So the promo side of wrestling is where I'm still stuck on, but wrestling is fine. Stick me in a wristlock for 10 minutes, I'm alright, or have me jump of a balcony I'll be fine! *laughs*

IN: As for character development, how did you develop your character?

KO: When I first came out I was the ipso facto heel because there wasn't many girls at the time in Ireland for that character. I was the better-than-you heel like everyone does, just put a snarl on your face and scream at people and you'll be alright! It was a lot longer for me to figure out who Kasey Owens was. We all went through that phase, going through as a heel, then a face, then "let's be the crazy chick!", and so on so forth. Training in Glasgow working with BT Gunn, Kaylee Ray, Stevie Boy Xavier, Wolfgang and Molly Spartan, we tend to stick together as we're all best mates. Having them by your side you're going to find something and they're going to help you. So watching Kaylee over the years and see her gradually train showed me it doesn't have to be immediate. Find out who you are and amp it up to 10, be comfortable with who it is. Over the last few years, I'm more comfortable being heel as that's the first thing I did. It was just the "put your smile on and be Harley Quinn" sort of thing that everyone was into. But finding who are is a difficult thing, and for some it takes much longer like myself. I always had Leah there, so for so long it was the Twins, that was who we were. Whereas when I was tagging with her I was trying to be myself rather than just part of a full package. It took a while for that as I had worked as a twin all my life and will be a twin all my life. So watching BT Gunn who has had so many different personas over the years. The face one for family shows, you've got the Oddity. All different stages of the Oddity - how he morphed over that. Same with Kaylee, Molly, Stevie and Wolfgang. I was like "right, OK, I can see where I'm going and how I'm going to change it", as well as how you out yourself across in promos, how do I want people to see me? I don't want to be a carbon copy of Kaylee Ray or Harley Quinn, or "let's be the hardcore frickin' Lita!". It's one of those things where, for me, I kind of have found who Kasey is. I have fun and if anyone gets hurt, I had my fun. So yeah!

IN: You've worked a few times on the WOS relaunch show. There has been much criticism of that show, so how was your experience working on it and what were your feelings on how the handled the relaunch?

KO: For me, I wish everybody saw the live shows as they were rather than the "let's cut to this, then cut to that bit!", because it was a great time! The tours were fantastic, all I was getting from Stevie or BT was them saying how great fun it was and how great the crowds were, and how they could have done something with it for another season. But for me and a lot of the guys, they edited it like a TV show rather than a wrestling show. If they had someone on board during the

process who knew how to edit [wrestling] shows, I think it would have seen more success as they totally missed the boat. The talent on the show was second to none. They had Ospreay, Kirby, Lionheart, BT and Stevie, Kaylee, Bea Priestley, Viper - how could you go wrong with that? It was just purely down to the editing. When I was watching it I was like "what have they done!?"

IN: What would you say would make a good wrestling TV show? What could they have done to make it more successful?

KO: Don't make it a soap opera. Don't make it like EastEnders, Coronation Street. Yes we have our storylines but we tell that in the ring. That's what people need to see, that emotion in the ring. Promos done better and that sort of thing. It was all just thrown together. I remember being backstage and they asked me and Kaylee to do a promo, and they're like "you two are best mates and you really want the title off her, blah blah blah" - come on guys, this is so cheesy. Let's put a bit more meat to this story, rather than just going "right, you're the girls so you'll do a typical female's match people will love it". No. If you look at our work for the past few years, not just me and Kaylee but her and Viper and everyone else, it's not a typical women's match when you get us in there. The boundaries are always pushed. I think they missed a lot with seeing how the girls - not just the girls but the guys - a lot of the guys kind of had kind of a little bit free reign but it was like "can you take that back; can you take that back". Give them the chance to show people what they want to see as a lot of the fans know us and you would have got bigger reactions. But I get they already had ideas in mind and we delivered what they needed, but I think more free reign for the guys to discuss and editing at the end of the day.

IN: You said about the live shows - I unfortunately didn't get to go to any - do you have an idea what went on at those shows and what sort of matches, the buzz and so on? I heard they were good, like you say.

KO: Every weekend BT would come home he'd be excited about it. The guys were having fun, it wasn't a job during that time. They had the matches with stories and then matches that were more camp style. You had the family crowd, so they'd do those matches and not the indie style. There are people in that indie scene that are expected to do crazy things, but you saw them tail it back for the family crowds, and that's what people loved. Read your crowds and do it for that. They all looked like they had so much fun.

IN: You had a few appearances on NXT UK which I personally really enjoyed. What was that experience like and what's your

take on the WWE involvement in the UK, considering it has caused a divide with fans?

KO: For most people when they're given that opportunity to work for WWE, they're like "finally they're not just going to see me in a YouTube video or highlight reel for an indie company, and people will know who I am!". I still mark out. At the end of the day I'm a fan. I'm a fan first, wrestler second. I'm one of those marks that took it too far, and I'm the biggest mark of all because I'm actually doing it now. It was unreal. I'll tell you what happened when I got the email from Glen the week before to do some extra work on the UK Takeovers. I was at work and checked my phone quickly while the boss went out for a smoke, and I had an email - looked and it said WWE NXT UK. Leah came through the back - we work in the same store - I was like "uhhhh..." - literally I couldn't say a word and showed her. She was like "Oh my god, do it! Do it!". I had to tell my boss I wouldn't be there next weekend and showed her the email. She told me to go. So my boss, as much as it annoys her to give me time off to do shows, as the shop comes first and everything else second - but for me wrestling comes first. They know I love wrestling. So I got the opportunity and made it there. Me and Molly came down the night before to sit in the audience and watch Takeover. So we're sitting there at the end of the show which I really enjoyed - it was the one where Toni [Storm] won the belt. Yay Toni! I was one of her first matches when she came over here so it was really good to see her transition from what we were way back when to become NXT UK women's champion. So the nerves started kicking in and then HHH's music played. I didn't think of that - "what if he's here tomorrow!?". So it put the fear of God into me, like "this is actually real!". Got there the next day and I calmed down a lot because Kaylee was there. She reminded me I'd done this so many times before and wrestled in front of thousands before. I had my match with Jenny, and I think it was the first time we'd ever wrestled. So it was a big opportunity to show what I could do and put Jenny over. Something didn't quite go right in the match, which was edited out. It wasn't anything too big, but for me - it was the first time they'd seen me live and to know Shawn Michaels is backstage watching... I was backstage crying thinking I'd ruined my chance, but Brookside came to meet Kaylee - she was the first one backstage which meant a lot. I look up to Kaylee a lot and she is the epitome of women's wrestling along with Io Shirai and a lot of others. But she's always been the one there to help, and she helped me mould into who I am. So she told me I didn't fuck up and I did my job. Robbie Brookside grabbed my wrist, walked me past gorilla and took me in to what would have been HHH's office and sat me down. He said "you did your job and you did it fucking well - Jenny looked great because of you. Why are you crying?". I said to him "you

know what it's like, everyone's watching you so you want to put on the best match you can and make the most of the opportunity". He said "you did!" and took me back out to go speak with Shawn. So I go to speak with him where Jenny is already getting feedback. I said "hello sir!" and went to shake his hand. He told me I did a good job and that it was the best match Jenny had so far. That felt so good to hear that and meant so frickin' much coming from Shawn Michaels. It could have been anybody backstage - Matt Bloom, Johnny Moss - anybody. So for me it was a big opportunity, thought I fucked it, and then I came back for another two tapings. Worked a few shows for Progress as Jim and everybody wanted to see what I could do and who Kasey is. So they know who I am and what I'm about and have me in the back burner. I don't know what will happen but fingers crossed.

IN: What are your feelings on the WWE involvement in the scene? Some fans say it is hurting the scene but others say the performance centre is having a positive effect.

KO: For me it's only a good thing because their presence here makes the reality of being able to work for WWE a lot bigger. 10 or 11 years ago it was never an opportunity. You could go to Japan or maybe Mexico but a WWE try-out was always too far away. But now with guys training at the performance centre - I'll always go back to them because they're my mates - Wolfgang, Kaylee Ray and Viper. Especially Wolfgang and Kaylee as they are trainers in Glasgow. They can take what they're learning at the performance centre and bring it back to our guys to give them a few extra steps and a bit of extra knowledge to get them to where they need to be. It's not killing the UK indie scene; it's helping it as the quality of wrestling before the WWE came here with NXT UK was second to none and that's why they opened. They were missing an opportunity. America is a big country so there are hundreds and thousands of shows over there, they're always swamped. But there's few and far between good schools and great schools. Whereas here people are competing to be the best school they can possibly be. Especially with the Glasgow Pro Wrestling Asylum, they were one of the first to bring in the induction system. People aren't just walking ten-pound-notes, they're actually investing in these guys, and if you feel you're not quite ready for the next stage you can restart and go back through the induction stages and work on getting better to move on to the next stage and possibly be on the shows. They'll give you all the tools and help you need to get where you want to be or get booked on different shows, that sort of thing. You saw with ICW a lot of the new crop are from GPWA - Leighton Buzzard, Kez Evans - who has had great matches with BT Gunn. Crowbar and Stevie of The Purge are working with Wolfgang and BT of Bad Company right now and the opportunities

they've had has been unreal. Aivil, who I've had an 18 month storyline with - she's up there. To me, it's given everybody a big kick up the arse and just not go stay in their bubble as such, like just working ICW. There are options for me to go work Progress, WXW - a lot of our boys went and trained out there at the WXW academy. I say to our guys - don't be afraid to go to seminars elsewhere, you're not betraying anyone. I trained at WAW, I've been out in Japan - I've done everything to mould who I am today. It's only a good thing.

IN: Do you think female wrestlers in Britain have had enough opportunities to succeed, and have you had any struggles getting to where you are now?

KO: The last 4 or 5 years there has been a huge amount of opportunities for women. I feel like the women in the UK are actually in some cases putting some of the guys to shame. They've got more hunger, but there's still the stigma of women having more to prove, as there are a lot of people who aren't fans of women's wrestling - and that's fine, don't watch. I don't lose sleep over it. I don't want to say it's just me and Molly Spartan, but within Future Shock, TNT - me, Molly and Lana upped their women's division, as it was always Lana versus "insert wrestler here", she was always the one there. We thought it wasn't enough and we needed to do something. So with us doing what we did, especially with Future Shock, we were only there 12 months, but with the Queen Bees there was a lot more talk about the women's division, a lot more options and things going on with the women's division. I put that down to Molly. She is a great mind for storylines and longevity. She thinks in the long run. It's the same with TNT - when we first started there the idea was she went down with Wolfgang and BT for a show and she was on merch. It was me versus Lana who was in a gauntlet match. While she was there she was talking away saying we think we can do something with your women's division like in Future Shock and boost it. Lana can go, and I know she can - every time I'm in the ring with her she pushes me to the limit and I wanted to showcase that. So with that, we thought we could come in a tag team and pick on Lana. We'll have tag matches, singles, really give her the opportunities here. I think her heel turn after 14 months, I think it was, was probably one of the biggest reactions in TNT in a long time. It was so left field, so out of the blue, they wanted to do it much earlier but we said to hold off. This isn't us just holding off because we want more bookings but it will mean more. When it happened they were wowed and saw it works. I think through girls being more active on that side of things, not just happy getting bookings and putting on matches and showing what they can do - if more girls put more thought in and spoke to promoters with ideas for storylines, I think that will help a lot more. Without Molly I don't think I would

have had half the opportunities or reactions that I've had over the past few years. So thanks Molly!

IN: Earlier you spoke about intergender wrestling. There's a lot of criticism against it. What would you say to the critics and defend it?

KO: This is quite a controversial answer, but only if it makes sense and if there's a storyline involved. It could just be a one show in-match story - as long as it makes sense - I don't have a problem at all. But say if you put me in with Wolfgang, the reality is I need to dodge and dive and hit him with a million things before I could take him. Realistically one punch from him and I'm down. I like Mia Yim and Keith Lee because they kind of played it that way - Big guy versus wee guy, Rey Mysterio versus Undertaker. As long as they play it that way it's fine. A lot of people don't see it that way and just see Man versus Woman. It speaks more about how they feel outside of wrestling, but wrestling is where they can get away with what they can. In real life for me, if a woman hits a man, the man has the right to defend himself. Put it that way. Yes, they are stronger beings so they need to think of a way to defend themselves without hurting the person, but if it's shoving them away they have every right to defend themselves. Some women think "ha ha you can't hit me" and keep pushing it further. You hear about a lot of abuse stories involving male to females, but you rarely hear about the other side. I think that's unfair. Being on the end of an abusive relationship myself many years ago, I think that's where I get the sympathy for men being abused as god help the men who don't have people sticking up for them and having to put that strong man face on when they leave the house, but secretly being hit by an awful, vile woman. People are too scared to talk about that kind of thing. Women are strong, women are weak - they're always going to say that, but women can be strong as well! As long as it all makes sense it's ok, but if it's a bigger man and a smaller woman, who's going to win in a real fight? As long as it makes sense, it can be redeemable. Like I said, one of my first matches was an intergender tag. We were working the heat on Jordan, and he's only a bit bigger than me but I tagged out quite fast with Machine and working on him that way, Machine making the bigger moves. Again, it was a family crowd so we couldn't really do a lot of the more indie stuff you see people do. One of my favourite intergender matches I've seen recently was on TNT at their deathmatch show. It was Charli Evans Versus Rickey Shane Page. They worked it so well, he's a lot bigger than her but she still has that fire in her to try and take him down. At the end of the day he still won. The stuff they were doing was great, but at the end of the day the guy was a lot bigger and won, but they didn't go down without a fight. It's more realistic. This is our limits, we're not

going to do stupid stuff. Charlie Evans wouldn't go for a suplex on Page as that realistically wouldn't happen.

IN: Traditionally British wrestling has been defined in terms of the catch-as-catch-can style with mat-based wrestling and so on. Now we're seeing more of a hybrid style with lots of Lucha and Japanese influences coming in. With that being said, what do you think makes British wrestling 'British' in the modern climate?

KO: For me, I've always loved British-style wrestling. But like a lot of other people you get taken away and you start watching more Japanese and Mexican stuff. Because you're growing up with WWE and WCW on TV, you're very much...not indoctrinated but you're more inclined to the American style. So when I first started training with Machine and getting into more wrestling I did watch a lot more British-style. I think it's on the way for a comeback. A lot of my training at the moment is doing warmups and then literally just wrestle about for a few hours. No high spots, just telling a story and working a body part. There is a lot of it around I've noticed, and it comes from the NXT UK lot bring the training back - because you're working with Johnny Saint, Johnny Moss, Robbie Brookside, Marty Jones and all the rest - so you're going to have that influence. Watching a lot more World of Sport where you see... In America they always work the left side, but if you watch the British style it's "give me a body part and I'll manipulate it to my advantage". You'll still have your headlocks on the left hand side, you'll always have your wristlocks on the left, but if you give them your arm you're away. That's what I love about it, it's very unpredictable. It's not your run-of-the-mill American wrestling. Whereas in Mexico they work the right hand side, so when you work there, which I have a couple of times, it's like "oh shit it's this way not the other way!". But I think wrestling is wrestling. And as long as you're entertaining someone, it's wrestling. Yes, everywhere has it's one way of doing things, but for me as long as I'm entertaining I'm happy.

IN: It's said British audiences are quite unique in comparison to other cultures at live events. What are your experiences with British fans and where do you think their unique attitude comes from culturally?

KO: It goes back to when you watch World of Sport, when they thought it was real. It's always ingrained in that, like "oh my god they want me to get involved and need me to help!". So an interactive audience is a better audience. But it doesn't take away from Japanese audiences who are very respectful about it and watching what is going on. There are some audiences in the UK that I think could tone it back a little

bit and stop making it about themselves and about the wrestling a wee bit and about the performers. But they get that way with a few drinks down them. Freedom of speech, fair enough, but remember we're here to entertain you and you're there to be entertained, but there are some there that are there to watch what's going on. But I think it goes back, yes World of Sport but also you're football audience idea with all the chanting. I think that's what got me caught for ICW, because the fans there are second to none. They're creative with chants, it's amazing. They have gotten a little bit lazy in the last few years, but I know they're going to come up with some beltors when we're back from the pandemic, because they've been sat thinking about it. I think, at the end of the day, an active happy audience makes our job a lot easier.

IN: With all the bad stuff that has come out with Speaking Out, some of the promotions are starting to implement safeguards for the future. What would you like to see when wrestling comes back after the pandemic? What should be put in place?

KO: Well working for ICW there's a lot of things going on behind the scenes and they've released statements, same as TNT. They were very efficient to start talking about safeguarding techniques, whereas a lot of others needed more time. I know people want answers right away, but there's a lot that needs to be done first. We need to give them a chance. It can take up to a year to get some stuff really set in place and make sure it's right. Yes, there'll be stuff that's easier, like getting rid of certain people and bringing in safeguards, but I think in the future disclosure is the way to go. I had a disclosure as I used to work in a Primary School. To safeguard everyone in the future, not only current performers or staff, trainees and training schools need disclosures and background checks - just so everyone when training is as safe as they can possibly be. I don't foresee shows really coming back to full capacity until at least 2021-2022. I don't want companies coming back sooner just because they are afraid they won't be relevant. You'll always have your fanbase there and they will wait until it's safe. There needs to be a lot more transparency from management and performers alike, as well as fans. At the end of the day, yes fans like to be involved and think they're involved in the wrestling side of things, but this is our job and we have private lives. For the likes of me, BT, Wolfie and everybody - our private lives are ours and we don't post about it. It's between us and not everyone else. I think transparency and performing, fans and management, as well as new safeguarding techniques. Make people feel at home. With me and, and I'm going to use her real name - Louise at TNT being named safeguards, a lot of people backfired on that, like why are

you using performers as safeguarders? We said we'll do it, but we'd been doing it anyway. One of the last shows we had, it went from when I first started working at TNT being like 3 or 4 of us backstage. Lana, Louise and me, and so on. You'll always get us plus someone else. It went from that to Angel Hayze, Jaya Adams, Millie McKenzie, Charli Evans, Lana, Lizzy, me and Louise, and Martina. So that went from 3 people to 9. I remember the girls chatting amongst ourselves, and we always have our own locker room away from the guys, saying this is the most inclusive women's locker room I'd been in, and how comfortable we all felt. I think, in a way, me and Louise see ourselves as the 'Mums'! *laughs*. But it's not even just that, it's making sure the girls get the opportunities, and there are a lot of storylines we put to the management and asking to bring in certain people as they'd work really well for their crowds and styles, we could have some cracking matches with them and they're lovely girls. Let's do that. It's never once felt backstage at a TNT show that we were intimidated. We were seen as equals. Kudos to Jay and the management at TNT for making us feel like that, and thanks for all the girls for trusting in me and Louise! You do get shows where it's very much masculine locker rooms and the girls are tucked away in the corner. But I've never felt...then again I've been in it a long time. I just get on with it, I'm there to do a job. You get the younger girls coming along where I'm like "come here, I'll take care of you", and it shouldn't have to be like that. There's a lot of girls feel like they can come to me or the other older girls and be ok with it. Even before the Speaking Out thing, there was a problem with a fan with regards to [Pro Wrestling] Eve. Dan Reed messaged every single person in that locker room and went "look, we've had this issue with so and so, what do you think should be done? Do you want him there or banned from shows?". I was like "look, I can handle it". It's not me they're talking about, it's Kasey, she doesn't really exist. But the younger girls don't have the water off a duck's back mentality yet. It shouldn't be the case but you're going to get it no matter what industry you're in. You need to be stronger. But at the end of the day, I thought whatever the consensus was I'd go along with it, and it ended up with this person getting banned. I don't know if you want to put this in, but I'm just letting you know this is what happened. He ended up putting a post in the Eve roster page saying about it. So that sort of active side of things from management should be a lot more universally used throughout a lot more promotions, because at the end of the day we're here to entertain people and not take shit from them, unless it's character stuff and audiences at the match. We don't want to get messages after a show, private messages, and that sort of thing. There's this foggy line between a lot of fans and wrestlers, and it's problems on both fronts. Wrestlers being too friendly with fans or vice versa.

We need to hold it as a profession and not a way to meet people, that sort of thing.

IN: Do you think we need more women in positions of power - promoters as opposed to just wrestlers?

KO: I do believe there should be more women's voices and being involved. But knowing first-hand the reasons why Emily isn't working with Eve anymore makes it hard, as some of the abuse she suffered was really unfortunate because of what people perceived she meant as opposed what she actually meant. That's the worst thing, as sometimes you get what you've said perceived in a totally different way. I get some people might read what I said about intergender wrestling and thinking I hate it, but that's not what I said. I love it, as long as it's done right - and not right in my way but in a universal way so it doesn't offend people and not make sense. So it is tough, it is a tough industry where a lot of things aren't perceived how you want. But definitely more women need to be involved, not just booking and promoting but just having an opinion. When Speaking Out happened I had a lot of promoters like Jay, like ICW, BCW and other promotions saying if I wanted to be involved in their new panel to get things on the right track, per se. I said yes if they need my opinion then let me know, because that's what needs to be as a lot of people still say it's a very male dominated business. But women are here it's not like we're still fighting for that spot. We're here. People know how good women's wrestling is, and our voices are being heard, we're not fighting for that spot anymore. We might be fighting each other, but we're not fighting for a spot with the men.

IN: Why is wrestling important to you?

KO: It gives me an escape from the monotony of everyday. Know what I mean? It's something I can't see myself not being involved in the future. For me to just go back working 5 days a week and have nothing to do at weekends and not seeing my mates - I couldn't do that. It becomes a family, it becomes that other half of you. I've got Kelly Robinson who works at Ann Summers and has a great time working there. There's almost a correlation between my day job and wrestling. With Ann Summers it's about empowering women and making them feel great, but not only that, with Ann Summers it's very much Men are coming in and becoming empowered because it's still seen as a seedy little sex shop which it's really not! We're there to make sure everyone feels great, goes out feeling great, looks great and has the best time of their life. We have customers come in for the first time at 55 years old who have a laugh at certain things, but it's that sort of way I think that side of my life helps the wrestling side as I'm there to

make sure people leave happy and have a great time. If it means me getting hit over the head a million times with a chair, I don't care! *laughs* As long as they leave happy! Or if it's me getting in their face because they're yelling at me, where I jump over the barrier saying "say it again!". I've a bad habit of doing that recently, but it gets them involved with saying something derogatory. I love the fact both aspects of my life empower everything, but wrestling is my first love and always will be. It's something we all want, that main event at Wrestlemania. Win that women's championship. Emulate people like Gail Kim, Lita, Chyna, Trish, Victoria - all the women I watched growing up. Then throughout the years becoming more aware of the likes of Manami Toyota, the Jumping Bomb Angels and all that, feeling like I need to do justice for Madusa who we all know dropped that belt in the bin, do it for her. That's why I do it, I want to empower women but we're already empowered! I just want to take it to that next level!

IN: What would you like to see for the future of British wrestling?

KO: We are being seen as amazingly talented people, but I want a Wrestlemania hosted here in the UK so they can say "holy shit!" when they see how great the crowds are. I want them to be here for a few weeks and experience the British wrestling and indie companies, rather than us going over there and seeing the companies we've all seen a thousand times - we see their guys all the time. Come over here and see us! They've only seen ICW and Progress, they need to see the likes of TNT. Even family shows! That's where you see another side of those wrestlers. So I think give us that so they can see actually how we are at another level and they need to catch up.

Appendix 12

Interviewer: David Boyd

Interviewee: Dante Richardson

Interviewee profile: Ex-Professional Wrestler, Ex-Promoter, Editor for 'Inside the Ropes' Magazine

Date of interview: 03/08/21

Location of interview: Online video calling software

List of acronyms: IN= Interviewer DR= Dante Richardson

IN: What were your first experiences of watching professional wrestling in Britain?

DR: My first experience of viewing it was a show promoted by a guy called Phil Loather in 1998, Middlesbrough town hall. I

never got to go when I was a kid to WWF when it was popular in 92-93, as it was always so far away and couldn't afford it. But it was '98 and it had Alex 'The Pug' Porteau who was in WWF for about a day *laughs*. He was the 'big star' advertised. Sure enough he wasn't there, but that's where I first saw Doug Williams, Jonny Storm, Jody Fleisch, Mark Sloan and a bunch of others I can't remember - all I ended up going on the wrestle later on which is pretty cool. I had only just discovered ECW a year earlier and seeing Jody thinking he was like Sabu. I remember telling him that, thinking I was cool. He was just like "yeah...great" *laughs*. Like I was 'Mr Insider' because I knew who Sabu was. In 2001...no 2002, I started to train to wrestle in South Shields and my first ever match was with Doug Williams, which was interesting. It was in the training school but it was a proper match. It was pretty ropery but he carried me well. That was when Doug was at the top of the industry, just around the time he was in Japan the first time. My first show I did Butlins in Skegness for Brian Dixon, and the first people I saw walk in the room were Bryan Danielson, the guy who used to be PN News, Avalanche, or Big Grizzly I think he was called. My trainer, who didn't really know what he was doing, told us "just go in, keep your head down, don't say anything to anyone". Now that's the opposite of what you're supposed to do, and Big Grizzly - a 450 pound guy - shouted "You guys have no locker room etiquette!", and then, you know, we were in a battle royale on the show with all of them, and there were a few 'potatoes' thrown - a potato farm. So those were my first experiences with it all.

IN: So you started around the late 90s and have witnessed the changes as things went along. Did you witness the development from the tribute shows, to the ECW-esque revival then towards that huge boom period with Progress, ICW and so on?

DR: No it was gradual. They take the credit but they're standing on the shoulders of a lot of people who built the scene prior to them. When I wrestled full time, 2003-2009, just before Progress, RevPro, ICW *laughs*...which is irritating...It was when it was the FWA, IPW:UK, 1PW, all who I worked for. FWA brought a lot of talent over from the states - Jerry Lynn and the Ring of Honour guys, AJ Styles and people like that. They ran big shows, which was the first kind of time since it went off TV that British Wrestling had been held in front of a big audience. They did their revival show on Bravo with Eddie Guerrero and Dynamite Kid. So they'd kind of started that then 1PW came along I think in 2004 or 2005 with everyone you could possibly get. I wrote a book about it which might help you, it's long! *laughs* It's a guide of what not to do. But at the time they were drawing 1500 people a show at a time where other promotions I were working for would have 200 on a good day. But they were spending thousands and tens

of thousands to do that. I ended up taking over 1PW for a little bit in 2008 for about a year. It was tough - the recession hit and that hurt British Wrestling a bit, but after that everything sort of bounced. It was a combination of social media, YouTube and the general availability. The world became smaller. So worldwide you'd see talents like PAC, who were fantastic and would go off and do stuff elsewhere. Then you'd see Jonny and Jody who had been doing stuff for a while. Zack Sabre Jr who was starting to get over. They were getting the eyes on them, visibility had changed. It wasn't the industry, that side of things changed. Then some smart businessmen - the Progress guys, Coulden, Mark Dallas - saw everything happening and thought they would do it for themselves. If you ever talked to Dallas - ICW to start with was in the shitter for a good few years. It did struggle until they found something that really worked. It was a lot more gradual, it wasn't them. They did good work, but there was a lot of good work that came before.

IN: Do you think the fact that the later companies, Progress, ICW and RevPro, and so on, found success due to the fact they were using more homegrown talent as opposed to relying imports?

DR: RevPro was relying on imports, and still is. With the other two, they were very smart in building the promotions like a cult - and I don't mean that in a negative way. What they did is amass a following of people who wanted to be part of something. 1PW did the same thing to a degree, but yeah - with those, Progress and ICW especially, they created a cult following - "we are ICW", you know, it's 'our' promotion, we're part of this special club. Everyone wants be part of something and it's a way of finding acceptance for a lot of fans. I've been in all the positions, as I've said. You do notice the sort of people who go to shows. People who don't have a lot of friends, sometimes, don't like social situations. That's not a knock, but wrestling tends to attract those people. Not exclusively, but people like that tend to be drawn to wrestling because you can live vicariously through it. Then you have all these like-minded people coming together and creating these bonds. It becomes more than just going to wrestling, you're going for the experience in addition to that. I think that helped Progress a lot, and as we've sort of seen, when they became corporate and the guys running it went to WWE and it became a shadow of what it was, as well as the scandals last year and stuff - all of that really quickly eroded that good will. They were like "Hang on a minute, this punk rock underground thing we were a part of was actually corporate America..." *laughs*. That's not a knock though, why wouldn't you take a deal? It's smart from a business

perspective, but you can't do both. You can't be punk rock and be signed to the biggest label.

IN: What are your opinions on the WWE and NXT UK involvement in the UK wrestling industry?

laughs It's changed over the years. I used to be the booker for WCPW, which later became Defiant. We did the same sort of thing but over a smaller period of time. We exploded like a supernova and then we went away. But with that, we were really badly affected by NXT UK because what essentially happened is we built up a bunch of people which got signed. We built up a bunch more and they all got signed, so then there was nothing left. I've been involved in a lot of different shows across the country, and you see the talent. There is a change in the level of names. It got to the point last year where Rampage Brown left, Matt Kirby retired - you did notice the difference and the crowds winding down as a result. But I think it was a combination of that and the bubble just burst. There is a saturation point over here, there got to be way too many promotions. A lot of the same talent working the same towns. Then all the companies expanded and were on each other's turf. How many times can you see the same people in the same city for slightly different rings and staging? I think it was a combination of the two. At the time it was really difficult, it was really difficult for a promoter. In hindsight now, I think the British industry would have collapsed on itself eventually anyway. It's not ran like a business by the people in it, it never has been. It's ran more like a hobby. There's very little business acumen in British wrestling - some, but not a lot. So it would have always collapsed and Speaking Out would have happened regardless. We probably would have seen worse if NXT UK wasn't around actually. So thinking back NXT UK probably didn't have as much of a detrimental effect as people might think, it definitely accelerated things for Progress, sure. Now you have 40 or 50 people now on guaranteed money in British wrestling, which has never happened. You had people making money in the 80s, but guaranteed money in WWE? Fantastic. Even if they get released, they're always ex-WWE stars and that brings a degree of cash. I think it's a positive. Especially in the pandemic. Imagine how it would have been for those guys working 3 or 4 times a week to pay the bills and had no other job, they would have been screwed. I think the show is the shits, but that's a different matter! *laughs*

IN: It's said British wrestling audiences are quite unique to others due to the way they act at shows with singing and chanting, and we've seen that kind of enjoyment travel across the pond and be adopted in some cases. Where do you think that British attitude comes from in terms of culture?

DR: Football, definitely football. It's huge over here, right? If you look at the country's where wrestling is really popular, the only one that really loves football is this one. Canada? No. America? No. Japan? Not really. Japanese fans don't chant anyway. Australia? Again, not really. England, or Britain is the only place where football and wrestling are comparable. Obviously wrestling isn't as big, but there are an awful lot of people who go to wrestling that like football. Is part of our culture. British people - we're all quiet and polite but it's not really true anymore I don't think. Certainly these days, people are more outspoken and influenced by Americanisms, which allows people to be more free. It's a lot easier for people to be free without judgement I think, as people are accepted to a degree, certainly compared to twenty years ago. So I think the combination of the two - they never used to chant 20 years ago, very little. So it is a recent thing.

IN: Why do you think that is? There definitely was that shift. Where did that change from? The kind of people watching?

DR: Yeah the audience make-up has changed., Wrestling used to be a family thing right up to the 2000s. In wrestling parlance it would be family shows - which means do very little and the yay-boo easy-easy stuff. But there weren't many indie shows. There were Triple X in Coventry where they once had Danielson and Zack Sabre Jr in a room above a pub. They used to only get 30 or 40 people in but they'd all have notepads on them and be from the UK fan forums. Not one of them would make noise. I used to try and fight them to get heat! *laughs*. But yeah, it was just impossible to get a reaction of them, but I think like we said earlier it became a community and collective. Suddenly these people who wouldn't start a chant on their own, even at a football match, but when they're around people and have had a few drinks and are more comfortable in their own skin it's a lot easier to let yourself go. It only takes one, and then it's a ripple effect. It's a combination of all of those things, the football influence, the cult audience and the general acceptance of being a wrestling fan you don't need to hide from anymore.

IN: As we've only just started to come out of the global pandemic, I refer to modern British wrestling in general - what do you think it has done well, and what needs to be improved for it to succeed in future?

DR: So what it does well is there's a lot of awfully good talent nowadays, and everyone looks after themselves and is in good shape, works out properly, knows nutrition and health. You'll see wrestlers with cupping marks as they have it done

backstage, they have access to that now. Whereas before you'd turn up and be lucky if there was a dressing room, shower or a medical team. Wrestlers generally look better aesthetically now, whereas it didn't matter in 2004, 5, 6. There was Doug Williams who looked good, everyone else looked like the shits. Skinny kids. You still get that, but the ratio has changed for sure. People have discovered things like DDP yoga and workout programs and CrossFit. There's a lot more easily accessed education out there, a lot more schools and not the blind leading the blind anymore. Rampage's being the best I'd say. But really good schools everywhere. So when you're getting that guidance you're getting rid of the bad habits early on. The general level of talent inside the ring and what people can do now has definitely got better. Look at guys like Ospreay - you'd never have had talent like that. PAC was up there, for sure, but it's rare. Now you get guys often coming along, not as good as Wil, but could be as good. The general level of talent. You go to a British wrestling show it'll be good, with people who know what they're doing, good matches that are logical. I can't overstate how terrible most shows were in the early 00s, with some exceptions, the generic social pub shows, town shows - they were awful. Embarrassing, backyard-level bad. It was shambolic. The negative now is that most British wrestling shows look shit, I think. Not Progress and RevPro, but on the level below that, the aesthetics are not brilliant. When we were at WhatCulture we were big on the aesthetic, so we bought a big screen and made sure each show had its own logo and barriers, ring canvases - to make it feel like something special rather than a generic dirty ring in the middle of a hall. A lot of shows can be like that, and it's a problem. It's hard to do anything about that as we don't really have the buildings here to do that. You either go really small or huge, there's no in-between. We don't really have armouries like in the states, things like that. There's no ideal 4 or 500 seater building like you'd want, or a 1000 seater like the ECW arena. There's nothing like that which fits the middle ground. I think the biggest issue is the industry isn't ran like a business and too easy for anybody to get into. Untrained wrestlers can get in and open their own schools, which happens all the time. As we saw last year, this industry isn't regulated here and that's the result - Speaking Out and everything with it. It's the wild west - anyone can do what they want. Anybody on the street could rock up and put on a wrestling show, no license needed, no insurance really as you can get away with it. The talent won't say no - pin me pay me! They don't look for moral turpitude from the wrestlers - which people did during Speaking Out - "oh you knew about this and this!?". It's like what are you asking? Do you not want them on the show? You want them to grass up this person because they *might* know something? What are you asking for? It's difficult, because that probably won't ever change.

You'll always get your shysters being able to run shows. I know the government kind of stepped in but now they don't care anymore, they did a little review and only advised what needed to change and that was it. They just won't do it, promoters just want to save money. That's the problem, it's not professional.

IN: From what I see there are two sides of the British wrestling industry - the family side with All Star Wrestling and LDN, and the Indie side for the 'Smart Fans' with things like Progress, and so on. Both sides seem to be going at each other in terms of criticising how each side does business. Do you think they could both learn from each other. For example, there have been complaints about racial stereotypes in family shows, yet companies like ASW have long-standing success as businesses.

DR: All Star's success comes from some dodgy practices, though. Like fly-postering, steaming in on territories, things like that. There is already a promotion doing both sides and it's NXT UK if you think about it. Because I've been to a couple of shows, WWE has been nice enough to let me in sometimes *laughs*, they'll throw me a bone as they want me to cover it in the mag. It was a different magazine, not this one. When you go there it is a big mixture, you have your Progress-type fans and ICW-type fans, they want to support the scene and are alright with the corporate scene, but you've also got the kids who like Cena who can't afford the big tickets so they go to NXT UK shows so they can still be a part of it, it's cheaper and perhaps a bit more local. Is a kid in York going to get to go to Newcastle? It's quite a trek, especially if the parents don't like wrestling. So perhaps that is the answer. There's definitely things to learn from both. How to promote and actually get people in the building, from All Star - yes. But they did a pretty good job in Progress and ICW. A lot of promotions did a good job of drawing people. There are different promotion methods, but it's quite hard to mix the two as if you took an old school wrestling fan, or a parent of a kid who hadn't seen wrestling since the 90s but was taking their kid to Progress, they won't know what the fuck is going on. It's very insider - a very 'pop the boys' kind of wrestling, and a million illogical things after another in the matches with too many moves. "Why did he get up at 1 there? Why's he landing on his head then moving to him? One guy did 5 twists then the other one did 5 twists, who did the move?". That kind of thing. I was always very mindful of that at WhatCulture shows when families were there sometimes. I wondered if they knew what was going on, as it is hard to keep up with in terms of there's no logical progression to the stuff going on in the ring sometimes, so I think that could be a difficult bridge or barrier to overcome.

IN: What did you miss most about wrestling during lockdown, where content was very limited?

DR: The crowds. Definitely the crowds. Nothing felt like...and it was the same with football - nothing felt like it mattered. It felt pretend, like training. Every football match felt like a friendly. I didn't watch a single game, and I love football. Wrestling was similar - I didn't care enough to stay up anymore to watch it as it just felt everything was in a holding pattern. Some good stuff happened, some entertaining stuff. WWE did well with some pay-per-views, as well as AEW, but it was hard to get into as they'd try big surprises but no one was there. That's a big part for me is the crowd reaction. My favourite part, whether wrestling, booking or watching- is when something pops that crowd and people lose their shit with a big surprise. We did that a lot in WhatCulture, we were big on that, doing big surprises. We'd announce Bret Hart by video message or something, we'd be like "it's coming home" and there's PAC coming to Newcastle. People would lose their shit, and you'd want to be part of the crowd. I'd make sure to be in the crowd when it happened, as there's an energy there. Wrestling is all about that energy, the wrestlers feed off it as well. It must have been tough for them. I've wrestled matches in front of nobody in training or very few people at some shows. It's awful, you can't get hyped up for it. That comes across in a similar way to people watching. Just look at the book we're starting to go into now with AEW - it's been on fire for the last few weeks. WWE is certainly getting better, and Summerslam has 45000 people already. There's a buzz about it, a hype. People care. We've seen our website and mag doing better, which is great. Now it's proper wrestling again.

IN: Speaking of crowds being intrinsic to the enjoyment of wrestling, do you think there was an issue with the introduction of Thunderdome where WWE could essentially control the crowd, who could be in it and how they act. Is that a huge issue for wrestling?

DR: It's a huge issue...but a good thing for them! They got to do whatever they wanted to do and get people to react exactly how they wanted. The last 15 years Cena started getting booed, the crowds have been doing what it wants. It never used to happen, they never used to turn on stuff. First time I saw it was 2002 with Hogan and Rock, and later with Brock and Rock. It just didn't happen, they didn't turn. Now it's like WWE is the enemy that we're all here to cheer our favourites in spite of them being here - it's the weirdest thing. WWE seems to take a lot of pleasure in punishing its audience, and the fans take pleasure in hating everything it does - yet they all still play to each other. It's bizarre! I think the

Thunderdome was the final sterilisation of WWE, and I'm almost surprised that they brought the fans back as Vince must have been over the moon as he could do whatever he wanted and get cheers. "It's good shit!" *laughs*. It was better than an empty building, but it was soulless, very sterile.

IN: I tried to get on it so many times for the NXT UK one, but to this day I still think it was rigged.

DR: Yes, the NXT ones were rigged - just reappropriated from the main ones.

IN: Now we're starting to see the end of lockdowns and things are opening up again, and we've learned what we've learned - what do you see for the future of British wrestling?

DR: I think it's going to be tough. Lockdown killed any remaining momentum British wrestling had, and it was already struggling to be honest. It might serve to be a good reset that was needed, but I don't think it will because Speaking Out was so big that that's really killed a lot of trust in it. A lot of people passionately supporting people like David Starr, who's not British but a big part of the scene, there were A LOT of people - the issue is even some people who weren't guilty and got named on some lists and turned out they didn't do anything, it didn't matter. They're tarnished for life. They'll never be back. Well, some of them might be for Brian Dixon *laughs*, he doesn't care! Once you've betrayed trust - It's like if you cheat on your spouse, right? There's always going to be that element of "are they going to do that again? Can we trust them?". I think that's what is happening with British wrestling, I think it will be very hard to build that trust back. "Is that guy a sex pest?". I think that will always be close to people's lips, and that's hard to come back from. That's ironic really, as in wrestling we all champion someone like Ric Flair where that was basically his gimmick, as well as Shawn Michaels. We tell road stories and everyone has a laugh, but the world has changed since. People expect better. The problem is people put British wrestlers on a pedestal they didn't deserve to be on or equipped to be. What ends up happening is if you're in that role and you're not squeaky clean, the fall is going to be rapid and severe. It used to be that people in British wrestling were used to things they were doing not making a damned bit of difference. It used to be worse than this! There was always something going on. Back in the day when there were 'ring rats' as they were known. I mean they were happy to be there, it was a mutual thing at least. No one was being raped or forced against their will, but it was still very much a seedy situation. That's been the case and it used to be worse. You couldn't do a lot of the stuff then now, you couldn't get away with it. There

was stuff in Speaking Out that was A LOT worse, but it's not new. It's weird to me that people didn't know, like what did you think? They were never great people. Did they just like the gimmick? David Starr, he's a gimmick. He's exactly that behind the scenes, a pain in the arse! Gobshite! *laughs*. It's no surprise! We used to see him chatting up girls. Are we in the wrong for not stepping in? It was just 2 people having a conversation. Travis and Millie, I knew they were a couple. They seemed a happy couple. Travis got Millie on the shows for example. We didn't really know how Travis was or she was when they started dating, they just showed up as a couple. She was of age at that point, what do we know? But after the fact, we thought maybe we were wrong. "Hang on a minute, mate, you're 30 and she's 17...". Legally there's nothing wrong with that, but should we have asked how old she was when they met? What do people expect? The point is, people DO expect that to have happened, stepped in, and why the industry shouldn't have been better - but it wouldn't have been feasible. I don't know how that could have happened. Now I think the general consensus is British wrestling is full of nonces, sex pests, bad people - that's a hard thing to turn around I think. The only way it can come back is if the women's scene carries it through. It will probably be reliant on that. The issue there is most of them are in WWE now. Millie, Bea and so on. A lot of promoters, I think, are wondering if they really want to be part of it to risk being tarred with that brush. The only real hope for British wrestling in the next couple of years to thrive again, it will still exist but to thrive again, is for NXT UK to take off. To be honest, with how they keep cutting everyone, and I've heard some things, people in NXT aren't very confident that they'll still be around in a year. WWE has achieved what it set out to do which was to stifle the growth of the scene.

IN: Didn't they set up NXT UK to go against the WOS rebrand on ITV?

DR: I was part of that as well, there was a good reason why that failed and it was partly ITV and partly people we had behind the scenes. But I won't go on record on who's to blame, you can probably work it out for yourself. World of Sport could have been something and the answer. The numbers it did were actually pretty good - not compared to other things on ITV but other wrestling. It could have been something, they should have done it differently and not like a gameshow. I was a producer, like the road agent. The shows we filmed and the show you saw were different. At the end of filming, I've never seen a wrestling locker room with that much camaraderie and good will, with everyone working together with the common goal of making it success. In British wrestling there are no egos. When they showed us the trailer, every wrestler on that show

cried, everyone. The manliest men, and all that masculine nonsense, ALL of them cried. Willingly and openly wept out of happiness, and ITV fucked it beyond all recognition. Awful.

IN: I've spoken to others that were involved and they have said the same, and thought the live shows were really good in comparison. As a fan I felt ITV had their hands in it too much.

DR: ITV are a shambles. It could have been the answer, it really could have been. It won't be now. It can't be. Now we have to rely on WWE, which is twat they wanted. Unless AEW comes over, but I don't think they'll do an AEW offshoot.

Appendix 13

Interviewer: David Boyd

Interviewee: Frank 'Chic' Cullen

Interviewee profile: Ex-Professional Wrestler (featured on ITV/World of Sport) Trainer.

Date of interview: 04/08/21

Location of interview: Online video calling software

List of acronyms: IN= Interviewer FC= Frank Cullen

IN: What was it like first breaking into the business of wrestling in Britain? How tough was your training?

FC: Breaking in back then was very different to how it is now. There were no training schools, no one wanted to help anybody else for fear of losing their own position. So I was an amateur wrestler since 8 years, and at 16 years old I wanted to be a professional wrestler. I knew it was different. I was in the right place at the right time where I harassed to death Orig Williams, El Bandito, from North Wales. He was promoting shows in Scotland. When I say I harassed him to death, I really did to the point he told me to 'eff off quite a few times. On the 5th or 6th occasion he said "OK, you want to come and be a wrestler? Take me to your parents". So I jumped in his big Mercedes and we went down 2 or 3 miles from the hall to where I lived and he put the case over to my mum that he'd take me to North Wales. He hadn't even finished talking and my mum was up the stairs packing my bags. I was 16 then and haven't looked back since. They gave me all the training I could handle with all different people that were coming and going. The British Wrestling Federation, at the time his company was known as, it was hard. It was tough. The

equipment, the rings, were falling to bits. That's what it was like back then. We're talking 45 years ago!

IN: So it was more the case that the insiders of the industry were trying to drive people out and protect their industry from outsiders than let people in?

FC: Absolutely. It was usually 2nd or 3rd generation wrestlers back then, so anyone coming in was considered a threat, a spy or you were going to un-kayfabe the business. They tried to deter you, but I wasn't easily deterred.

IN: You've wrestled here, there and everywhere over the years. Who were your favourite people to work with and why?

FC: You're right, there were many. Sometimes I'd go through phases of having a favourite, but I'd say the favourites stuck in my mind - there were different types, some wrestlers could work heel, some babyface, some could do what was called a 'wrestling match' which is a babyface versus a babyface. I was very fortunate that I was well trained to be able to do all 3. So my favourite heel to work was either Finlay or Rocco. My favourite babyface match was facing either Johnny Saint or Danny Collins. When I worked heel I had an alter-ego called the Aztec Warrior, which was a masked outfit. I really enjoyed doing that. I enjoyed wrestling Dynamite Kid, it was a learning experience. It was good. To me it was a night off to work either Johnny Saint or Danny Collins because we were all on the same page and they were good matches. We enjoyed every minute of it.

IN: I've heard audience reactions for matches tended to differ from place to place. Do you have a favourite place in the UK that you wrestled in for the reactions?

FC: Same as the last question, there were many and I would say if I picked one in each country I'd say Scotland it was Kelvin Hall in Glasgow was, for me, it was a particularly exciting place to wrestle because I was on home turf and some of the guys I wrestled were fighting for their lives sometimes to get in and out of the ring, no thanks to me for inciting the riots. Same can be said for Norwich down in England, that was a place where they hated heels and loved their babyfaces. We've had some riots there too. Fairfield Halls in Croydon was a bit more conservative but still a great atmosphere for that type of building - there were a few fans around the three sides of the ring but the bulk were in front of it. It was more of a theatre arena. It was similar with Kelvin Hall, but with Norwich there was no escape for the bad guys, they were on all four sides. In Wales, there used to be the old Sophia Gardens in Cardiff, that was always a good atmosphere too.

Kings Hall in Belfast was another great place. It was all about the atmosphere, not about the fact they liked me more in some places than other. Generally they were always sold out or big crowds, so those places were for atmosphere and every wrestler loved working in a big, vibrant atmosphere.

IN: It seems thar audiences have changed a lot over the years for British wrestling, with the rise of the internet and so on attracting the indie audiences, as opposed to the previous eras being argued as more family-oriented. Have you noticed those changes?

FC: You're right, the demographic has changed hugely, but I'd say there were more kids and families now than there was back then. It was a night out for adults back then more so than kids. Adults could be the kids if they wanted, they could go crazy and make a total fool of themselves. It was acceptable, right? If they walked into the supermarket doing that they'd be arrested. There are more kids now, and that's not a bad thing as it tells you the young are interested, but whatever product they're interested in is another story. But it tells you young people are interested and are probably the fans of the future. I'd say that was a healthy thing in many ways.

IN: Do you have any crazy stories of fans at shows back then? I've heard elderly women were particularly brutal to the heels! *laughs*

FC: Oh there are always stories, and when we talked about the age demographics before my time - if you look at the footage and still pictures of the audiences before my time in the 60s when Prince Phillip was in the front row at the Albert Hall for examples, it was mostly adults and the men were in suits, shirts and ties on! So that was before my time and it has changed along the way. So I mentioned Sophia Gardens earlier - we were in it one week and the building collapsed a week later from all the snow on the roof. Thankfully that happened the week after. I wrestled Finlay there one time and him and Miss Paula were doing their usual dastardly deeds inciting riots and so on, to the point where people were jumping in the ring to fight. At one time there were about 11 or 12 people in the ring, including Finlay, I and Paula. We were wrestling each other to begin with but then ended up fighting on each other's side because we were fighting all these people in the ring and members of the public to get them out. So it was a good old shindig until the security got there. Kelvin Hall there was a funny story - we did Scotland versus England. Of course that's ready-made riot material. Myself, Spinner McKenzie, Drew McDonald and some other guys. The other team had Rocco, Marty Jones and Jimmy Breaks. So we'd done all the singles matches and at the end was an 8-man tag match. People were at fever

pitch and ready to kill all the English people. So the Scots get in the ring and the English come out and I notice there's only 3 of them. I asked where Jim Breaks was, and Rocco said he was still out back pissing himself saying "there's no way I'm going in there!", like a gladiator going into a lion's den. So the audience never knew why he'd turn up, as he made it earlier for his match but didn't make it to the tag match because he was too scared to go to ring from all the fever pitch and height of excitement that we had caused at the end. There's a lot of footage of people coming out to the ring, jumping the barrier and taking a pop. Mark Henry from WWE is a huge guy, and I was sitting at a show in Canada as a fan with my wife. Some guy jumped over the barrier and into the ring and hit Mark Henry, who was about 6 foot 2 or 3 and 300 pounds. Mark got out the ring and got over the barrier before the guy could get away and punched the shit out of him. If someone takes a pop at you it's fair game, right? But it's just the way a guy like Mark Henry could move that fast and the small skinny guy couldn't believe what hit him. If the heel doesn't do that, he's not doing his job right. If you can bring the people up to fever pitch and build them up and down, you're either sending them home either very happy or unhappy - it all depends on how you finish the match.

IN: In your words, how would you define the characteristics of British and European style of wrestling as opposed to other national types, Japanese, Mexican, American and so on?

FC: I'm a huge advocate of British and European wrestling. Any wrestler worth their salt wanted to learn it. For example, myself, Davey Boy, Dynamite and Adrian Street all went to Calgary's Stampede wrestling at the same time. But then if you looked at what happened with Bret Hart, Chris Benoit - they all wrestled European style. It's no surprise that people like Finlay and Regal are out there running the show, Brookside is one of the trainers - because it's the heartbeat, it's the nucleus of pro wrestling is British style wrestling. All the Americans had was punch and kick. That had to change as people had enough of it and wanted to see some wrestling for a change. Dynamite, god bless him, was the guy that changed the landscape if you like of pro wrestling, especially in North America. So they still have their punch and kickers in America, and I say in my seminars they do it because they don't know how to wrestle properly. It's famous everywhere, it's desired and requested everywhere. I've trained everywhere, here, Canada, Dubai - they all want British and European style wrestling.

IN: Would you say that British wrestling essentially covers the fundamentals of wrestling in general? It's the stimulus, where everything else follows?

FC: 100 percent! When I'm teaching Americans, I'll start by saying I'll teach them the bits of pieces of British wrestling. They call it 'chain wrestling', we just call in 'wrestling'. So I describe it as I'm going to teach you all the nuts and bolts of European style wrestling, and it's like giving you Lego bricks, showing you how to build things in different ways. So I give them the nuts and bolts and then I show them how to build something out of them and produce different types of spots but using the stuff I taught them. Essentially that's what British wrestling is - a whole series, a whole manual of moves if you like. Ins and outs, counters and attacks, but they can adapt it any way they want to suit their own style. It's endless the things you can do with the various types of British wrestling skills, holds and moves. They can produce some fantastic and unique moves out of it. One, for example, is a young kid from Merseyside called Dean Allmark. Deano. Deano, still to this day, and still a young guy himself - he takes the basics and conjures up something really new and it's really exciting to see innovation with old British stuff. It's like knocking a house down and using the same bricks to rebuild something different. It's fantastic.

IN: What's your take on the reasons for why ITV stopped broadcasting World of Sport and wrestling entirely from the late 1980s?

FC: I take it as the truth and facts. It was economics. Say for example if there was wrestling in Canterbury tonight, they would send the outside broadcast unit. They would record the show with directors, film crew, engineer, Kent Walton and everybody. I think back in the day it cost 30000 pounds to send the truck out and record the show. In the meantime, they're only getting 2 weeks viewing out of it. In the meantime, WWF are doing okay in the US and starting to branch out with Hulk Hogan as their main man. They come to ITV and say "we can give you 4-hour tapes of our current product for free if you would like to show them on TV". So they thought, Greg Dyke and everyone, do the people want American wrestling yet on TV? "Let's try it!". So if you remember they mixed it, American wrestling one week and British the next week and so on. They then realised people were going mad for this American product and that's where they realised money was king. They didn't have to spend 30000 pounds anymore, and they could get weeks of viewing for free. There were no agendas, that's exactly what it was. Money. They had though UK wrestling had outdrawn its time, and with Big Daddy at the helm I'm sure they were right. But things have changed and people wanted something different. Now it's gone the other way and they want British wrestling back instead of the American stuff!

IN: People say perhaps if they invested more in grassroots, younger talent to create more excitement and get the live gates up, do you think anything could have been done to save things or was it literally hard-line economics?

FC: Here's the thing, it's not like it was the television people's product and they just happened to pick a promoter and say "we'd like to put you on TV, here's the money". It didn't work that way anywhere else either. It was the case you filmed your own product and gave it to TV for free, then you used it as a shop window to travel round all the towns. All your angles were done on TV. That's how Stampede did it. You had to buy the TV time for your product. I think Safeway, the supermarket, paid for the TV at the time at Stampede Wrestling. So it's not rocket science how it went that way. As far as building up new talent, that's where the promoters lacked. Brian Dixon, nice guy, worked for him a long time. He was ok putting shows on but he didn't know how to promote anybody. It was like a soccer club buying in ready-made stars. That's what he'd do, he brought them in. What's happening in WWE now is what happened years ago with All Star and Joint Promotions. People jumped ship from Joint Promotions because All Star were offering more money. It was great for Brian and All Star, but nobody was getting a push. That's where the breakdown was, the promoters weren't capable. Max Crabtree, if anyone, was the best at it in country - pushing and creating new stars, but Brian Dixon didn't really have a clue.

IN: After ITV, wrestling went onto satellite television, didn't it?

FC: That was a different product, Brian Dixon got approached by a company called Screensport. I think we did a couple of years of tapings for them, and it was an exciting product as we pretty much got carte blanche to do what we want, instead of ITV where there were a lot of restrictions. Whereas Screensport we could pretty much do what we want. Rocco was over the moon because he could smash dinner sets over people's heads and beat people up on television and there was good comperes and commentators. Screensport was a lot of fun.

IN: People say wrestling were the 'dark times', whereby things fizzled out a bit. Is it true it was a really sparse time for wrestling in Britain? Conversely, were there any redeeming factors of that period?

FC: It was a good thing in that it allowed promoters to get rid of a lot of dead wood, if you know what I mean. People like myself; I always had a career as a prison corrections officer. I always had a career in the background and a lot of them didn't and just dropped away. But the nucleus of main

guys was still around and shows were very thin on the ground. There wasn't much audience participation or involvement so it was a tough time. Although wrestling promoters are like farmers, they all complain they're broke but you never meet a poor one!

IN: Wrestling schools started appearing around that time. Would you say it was a natural progression or a way to keep the scene alive in Britain?

FC: Around 2000 I opened my first wrestling school in Birkenhead, and there was an interest but not much. I had to be honest with my students, as they'd ask "where am I aiming for?", and I'd say I didn't know as we didn't know the future for the business. But they came wanting to be a wrestler and that's the best I could do is coach them. After that came the tribute shows. To me personally that was a darker time when there was no business, as the halls were FULL of people coming to the tribute shows and you could see the disappointment on their faces when Kane walked out and they're like 'that's not Kane...'. Undertaker walks out and they're like "that's Kane from two matches ago, it's the same guy...". They knew, they weren't stupid. For some strange reason they kept coming and the promoters made a lot of money. It wasn't my favourite time in the business and I was glad I wasn't part of it. If I was on a show, I'd just wrestle as myself.

IN: My first ever show was a tribute show. As a child you're so excited to go, and I think it was an All Star show. They'd use the actual photos of real WWE wrestlers and as a kid you're gullible, expecting them to be there. When the show happened, I was confused, thinking "wait, Undertaker is supposed to be 7ft tall and this guy is about 5ft7."

FC: Yeah, you'd see the disappointment on the parents faces but they didn't dare say anything to the kids. They were selling merchandise like hotcakes and making a fortune! An absolute fortune.

IN: To its credit it was still enjoyable as they laced in some real talent to make the show exciting, but I call it 'hit and run' promoting.

FC: Absolutely. "Start the car, start the car!!!"

IN: Did you witness the attempted ITV restart of World of Sport, and if so, what are your thoughts on it all?

FC: I wasn't involved in it but I saw it. I wish I was involved because the idea was good, the fact it was a studio was not good and there weren't wrestling fans in the audience

- again, not god. They failed miserably there. Great talent they brought in, but whole thing they didn't have a clue. Max Beasley, the backstage managers at the time, he was one of the commentators back in the Screensport days. I said to Max there was something missing, especially with the live crowd. They tried to make it like what AEW and WWE are doing now, using these studios but they just forgot to add all the periphery, and the crowd were told when to boo, cheer, they were sat there like cardboard cut-outs. There was no atmosphere whatsoever, and the wrong people were running it. Non-wrestling people, sadly.

IN: What you say really correlates with many others in that they ignored the whole point of live crowd energy. What would you say is the real importance of having crowd presence at a wrestling show, televised or not?

FC: You can't buy atmosphere or create it. It's like the football clubs struggling now, as they don't have the home advantage of the home crowd where the atmosphere comes from. It's the same in wrestling as if there's no feedback from the crowd it becomes a labour, a really hard job. You could just tell there was no atmosphere, even watching it on TV. Even the post-edited product you could tell they had nothing to work with so they started to pan out and get shots here and there of the crowd and it was average, just a few "ooos" and 'ahs', that's it. I spoke to some of them on the phone, and Harry Smith when he was in the country. He said he couldn't believe what they were doing. None of the wrestlers enjoyed it, I'll tell you that. It's a shame as Harry should have known better.

IN: Some have said the live shows for WOS were much better and it's a shame they didn't just broadcast those.

FC: Yep, that's right. But it would have cost them ten times the money for an outside broadcast than set up in a studio.

IN: NXT UK brought in NXT UK seemingly to go against the WOS brand. Have you witnessed any of the NXT UK product and what are your thoughts on it?

FC: You're exactly right, it was developed to combat the potential threat of it. There came a point where the only place the WWE were actually making money was in the UK, and they didn't want to give up that piece of the pie. So they developed through Regal and [Triple H] the NXT concept. It is Triple H's baby, and the performance centre was born and so on. They knew there was a lot of untapped talent here, and they have a lot of good guys of their own over there already at the performance centre there and the one in London does a great job. But I remember people like Mark Dallas at ICW in

Glasgow saying "I can't believe Triple H came to my show and shook my hand and walked in the ring and waved to my fans!". I said "you should have shot him in the back! He was here to rape and pillage your company". And that's exactly what they did. Cherry picked their talent. Those guys get 13000 a year just to sit on their arse, whether they wrestle or not, and they can't go to wrestle for anyone else. They did it with [Progress], they took their guys and ICW guys mainly and ran with them. Kidnapped them and away they went. They all went "I've been signed!", and I said "signed to what? Be careful". How many haven't even made the roster and even been on TV yet?

IN: Would you say NXT UK's effect on the UK industry is mostly negative then? Or have they brought any positives to the table?

FC: It hasn't done much for the UK industry apart from a hunger from the talent to get noticed and signed. The majority of the talent, and I can tell you this right now, the majority would walk to the WWE for nothing just to put 'WWE superstar' at the side of their handle on Twitter or Facebook. Believe me, they would. So they know that, Regal knows that they will work for next to nothing, right? It's good for their product as when they developed the WWWE network they had a lot of space to fill and needed a lot of content. That filled a lot of it and they've developed a few stars out of it and have made some exchanges with the two main products back and forth. It's like if you own a pub and you're doing ok, if you own 3 pubs - you can make more money with 3 pubs than just one as you can move product and staff around. You order in bulk and separate your product here, there, and everywhere. So it's a good thing as they've made money, and it took a while, but it's helped to develop their product but hasn't done much for British wrestling as a whole. First off, they don't run many shows here, and not every wrestling fan can afford Sky television and internet TV. So good for them, but not good for Britain and certainly not good for promoters here who lost their top talents.

IN: It sounds exactly like IPW here who closed their doors a few years ago. I spoke to the last owner, Billy Wood, who said a lot of their trade was affected due to not being allowed to film any wrestlers that were affiliated with WWE. The majority of his income would come from content, so it affected things quite badly.

FC: *Laughs* Exactly like I just said! A monopoly.

IN: Some say the one good thing is the training they get, like you said with the Performance Centre. Hopefully it will filter down, perhaps?

FC: They've got Jonny Moss and Dave Taylor comes over now and again. Yeah, they're good wrestlers themselves but who's benefitting from that? You can only get in if you're hired by NXT. It's not like you can knock on their door and say you've got your boots and are ready to train. They'd just say "there's the door, see 'ya!".

IN: From your experience and opinion, what do you think has been done well in this modern era of British wrestling over the past decade or so, and on the flip-side, what hasn't been done so well that perhaps was done much better in previous eras?

FC: Well, starting with the positives - people are being trained better. Facilities are better for training. I love the combination of new school and old school. When I worked for Brian Dixon, he was about to throw the towel in and along came the young stars like Robbie Dynamite, Dean Allmark, Mikey Whiplash and Kid Cool. They were a breath of fresh air. Brian wasn't for having this new school thing, but I embraced it. I teach it now to this day; I call it fusion wrestling. Old school new school, a mixture of everything. I think it's great for the business. I think with the days gone by it was hard to change. Change was difficult. They didn't like change, especially the old school guys. Nowadays it's far more acceptable, and long may it continue.

IN: What about the negatives? What are the things that really annoy you?

FC: All these guys that were never able to get hired by a decent wrestling promoter, so they call themselves wrestlers, next thing they call themselves a trainer and open a wrestling school. I tried 2 years ago, and I'm still trying as I've not spent a lot of time in Britain right now but I'm trying to cooperate with local town councils and getting them involved, informing them of wrestling schools opening up where abusers are involved, or where they're un-insured, not paying taxes or not legitimate businesses. All of those components create a bad wrestler at the end of the day. It creates a mentally damaged person who is poorly trained. For all those reasons it's something I hate in the business right now. There's far too many of them, and this country could do with 4 to 6 good wrestling schools and that's it. The rest don't really have a place or earned the rights to call themselves trainers as they don't even know it all themselves. I do a coaching course where I call it "train the trainer". One of the things I explain is that I'm going to teach them everything they know about being trainer, from level 1 to 5. If the guy down the road has only gone to, say, level 2, that's all they'll ever

know to teach their students. There's so much in level 3, 4 or 5 that they never learned so they couldn't ever teach it. Whereas if all the trainers are all taught to level 5, everybody would be a far better performer and it would include safety, looking after each other, doing things right and not the wrong way, the equipment and rings would be spot on - that's my biggest gripe, the wrong people are coaching and there's the front-end of the business where they pretend to promote these guys and run shows. For what? They're not going anywhere. They're just paying this guy money to go round in circles. Quite sad. I've guys who came over from London to Dubai, I had them for 3 months and they said they'd been wrestling for 4 years. I won't say who or where it was, but it was in the southeast of the country and I really thought these guys on the first day were really that bad. They looked like they'd just watched videos and taught themselves. So they'd been paying this guy week in, week out. Sad, really, and dangerous.

IN: Now the industry is opened up now as opposed to back then where it was more protected, do you think something can be learned where perhaps some government intervention is needed or legislation to help the wrestling industry in Britain?

FC: That's kind of what I was getting at when I said about sending letters to local councils. That closed door also needs to come back, there needs to be someone controlling this. "Sorry, you're not fit to be a wrestler. You're not ready to be a wrestler". Not a members only thing, that's silly, but they need to be trained. It needs to be monitored and the whole thing needs to be structured from the front end right to the back, and to where they are actually performing in front of crowds. They need to be monitored in terms of what they've been taught, what they've learned, are they safe, are they mentally right in the head? Are they going to be doing flying headbutts at the top balcony and stuff like that and expect to live after hitting the floor? You've got to be careful when you find all these people, they see things happening but they don't know what goes into creating some of these stunts. It's a whole can of worms on the negative side of things, it's a domino effect and you get guys who don't know what they're doing - and before you know it... How there haven't been all sorts of different lawsuits in this country, I don't know.

IN: Now we're in the age of the internet and social media where everyone has an opinion and can voice it, does it make it hard to put those barriers in place?

FC: Yes, social media has been a positive and negative for the wrestling industry in particular. It used to be that you could wrestle 3 times in the one night. You're on first in, let's say, Norwich then second in Kings Lynn and so on. You can't do

that now as the fans know you're wrestling in 2 towns on the same night. That's killed that. Kayfabe was a good thing back in the day, but it's gone now and doesn't exist. More the pity because it helped regulate the business to a degree. The good thing about social media is you're able to advertise and a lot of people get to know about shows sooner and easier, and it's more cost effective. The days of slapping a poster on anything that didn't move, those days are gone. It's all done electronically and on the internet now. So it's a good thing and a bad thing. They used to be called marks, but now they're called smart marks - happy chappers. You see them chip in and wonder where they got their information from or made them jump to that conclusion. They always think their right. Good and bad, the old social media, right? But it won't go away, we have to learn to deal with it.

IN: Given all the things we've discussed, Covid setbacks, WWE and so on - what do you think the future holds for the British wrestling industry? Is there any hope for it to stand on its own feet again?

FC: There's always hope. The product is always there, they have the structure, the content and the talent. The problem is there's too many wrestling promotions in this country and the best thing to happen is for 90 percent of them to disappear, fade away and get in line like the rest and watch a show. There must be enough wrestlers to fill all these shows, and there are, but 90 percent of them aren't trained or capable and so not ready to be in front of an audience. So I would like it to be reduced to a few main promotions and brought back to TV in the UK. Never say never, it's always possible - but it should be wrestling people behind the scenes. All Star are on the way out. Brian Dixon is sick and not as interested as he was. Deano or Dixon's daughter will keep it going, but it will be reduced. All of the halls used to be exclusive to promoters back in the day, but not anymore. It's a free-for-all. Anyone can book their own local hall and then another promotion could book it another week. There's no structure or continuity left on the shows, no storytelling to come back another time to finish a feud. It's a total free-for-all, and that's what's very wrong with wrestling in Britain right now. It needs to be cut-back and rebooted. But there's always a chance of a comeback.

IN: Would you agree fans have essentially hijacked the industry and perhaps have too much power now?

FC: They have been smartened up to the business and they think it looks easier than it is and go try it, but they just do the bits they can do and think they're in charge because a promoter didn't give them a job and started their own one. I

wouldn't call it power; I wouldn't say they've gained ground in anyway. I'd call it interference, and they're the ones holding the business back.