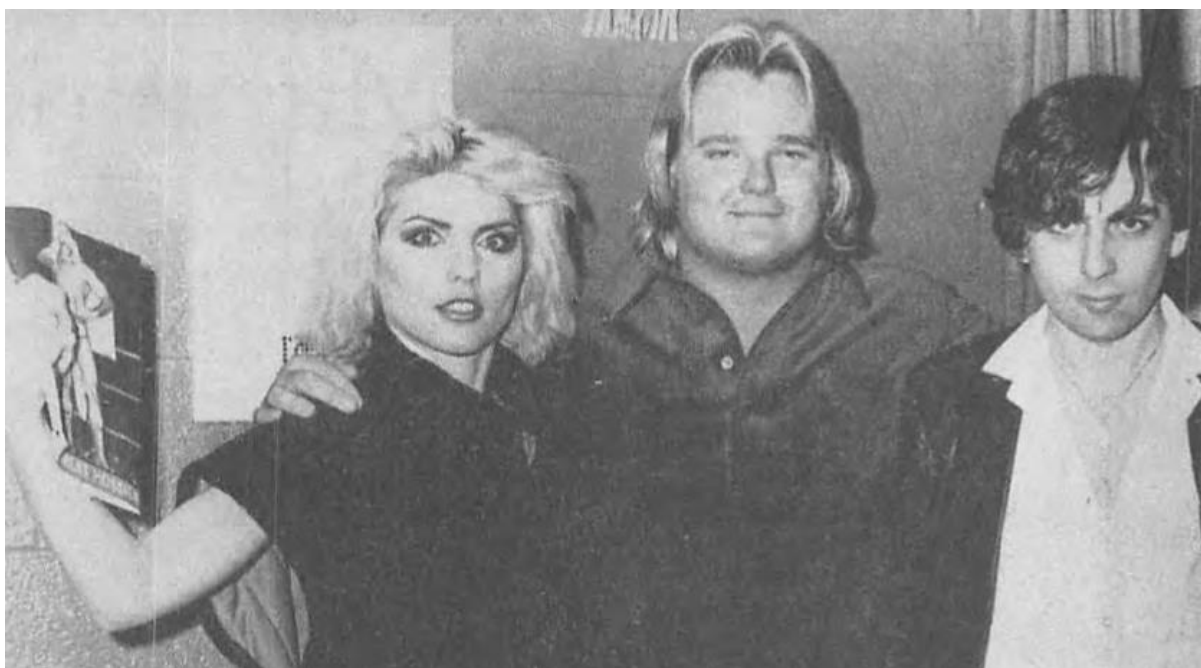


WRESTLE ME!

THE PAT PATREONSON'S MONTHLY FANZINE

Celebrating the Sport of Thieves since 2018

No.49 – May 2024



Greg Valentine joins Debbie Harry and Chris Stein and ruins the band Blondie, New York 1980

Hello and welcome to the *Wrestle Me!* newsletter for May! “Hang on,” you’re saying, “it’s not May, is it?” WELL, SHUT UP! Yes, yes, *it is*.

There is simply nothing I look forward to each year more than our annual pilgrimage to *Wrestlemania*. What about your only child’s birthdI SAID *NOTHING*. First off, I get to spend time with Pete, who is the world’s best travelling companion (has travelled a lot, is insanely generous, up for anything, dresses well) and secondly, I get to see a part of the world I probably wouldn’t bother going to otherwise, and definitely wouldn’t be able to go to without my family in tow, asking me where we’re going to eat and how the televisions in foreign countries work (I don’t know, I’m from the same place they are, for god’s sake, how many times do we have to go through this?)

For reasons that remain unfathomable even months later, Pete decided the best way to get to Philadelphia would be not to use Philadelphia’s airport (which is in Philadelphia), but instead to fly into New York (which isn’t) and then go on a dark, non-stop drive through the night to get to Philly.

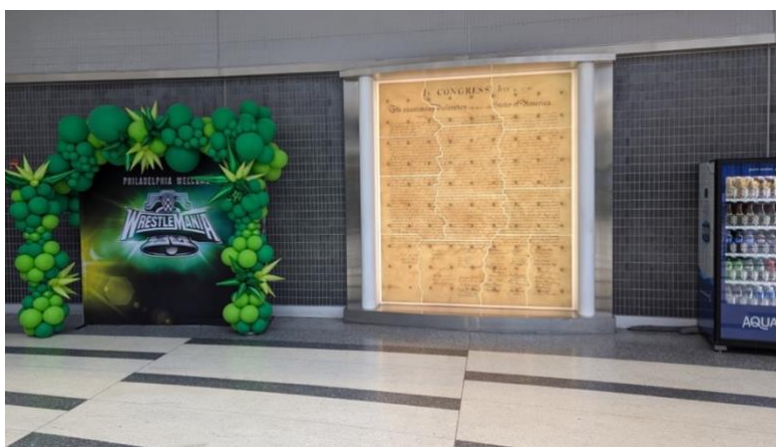
I know you’re thinking “he’s definitely got a scarlet woman in New York” – of course you did, it was my first thought - but the time he’d booked in between arriving in

New York and having to arrive in Philadelphia were not nearly enough for a hook-up with anyone, no matter their level of self-esteem. They'd literally have had to have sex in the public toilets in the airport (and not even the secure ones in departures, you're really taking your chances in the ones open to non-flyers) before Pete got dressed and immediately began his night drive, stay over in a motel, and then make it down to Philly the next day. I brought it up with him again and again on the trip – “Why did you fly into New York, you complete madman!” I'd chuckle, light-heartedly, as I stared intently into his face to see if I could note any visual clues – but he's been unable/unwilling to explain it. It *must* be a woman. It *has* to be.¹

Being on my own meant that I was able to pretend I was a successful international businessman rather than a wrestling fan, of which there were many on the flight. There were easy to spot - not because wrestling fans are a homogenous lump, but because the ones that weren't talking much too loudly about wrestling at the gate were wearing replica WWE titles on their shoulders.

Queuing to have our tickets checked, I was behind a couple of belt-boys, one of whom asked the man next to him, “Are you going over for *Wrestlemania*?” with all the excitement of one of the Golden Ticket winners waiting outside Wonka's chocolate factory. The normal man, who was in his late 40s/early 50s and from Philadelphia, had never heard of *Wrestlemania* and had to ask him to repeat what he'd said, before asking to explain what this unknown thing was (and he realised that was a huge mistake when the belt-boy began telling him both at length and in such a confused way that, within 40 seconds, he'd somehow ending up having to explain that Dolph Ziggler was now in TNA.) The next time someone tells me wrestling is, in any conceivable way, mainstream, I will remember that regular man's horrified and confused look throughout the one-sided chat.

Plowing in to America on the plane through a genuine hurricane (the pilot came on the tannoy with about an hour of flying to go to tell all the cabin crew to strap themselves in and prepare for “severe turbulence”, which is a fun teaser-trailer for the next hour you're about to endure), we touched down at midday.



Walking out of the airport were two photo-op set-ups – firstly, a big replica of the Declaration of Independence and next to it, a big WWE *Wrestlemania* logo, and next to them, a soft drink vending machine. It represents the three best things America ever came up with.

After an Uber drive over a post-industrial cityscape that felt like the opening credits of *The Sopranos* (which I, at best, half-remember, it's been *years*), I arrived at our

¹ It wasn't. But that still leaves the question: *why*?

Air B&B – an apartment above a fancy-ish Chinese restaurant in the city’s Chinatown. The corridor that led from the street entrance looked like Uday Hussein’s palace – all elaborate, gawdy gold fixtures and marble from floor to ceiling. *Literally* to the floor – when it rained, the marble floor was like an expensive sheet of ice. It was like the corridor had been designed by the bloke from *Saw* to ensure that any visitors would fall and break their hips the moment it rained. And boy oh boy, did it rain. And boy oh boy, did I nearly skid and break my hip a hundred times.

The first thing I found in the apartment was a note from the freeholder to the owner of the flat, saying that he hadn’t paid his rent and that if he didn’t, the flat would be repossessed, which isn’t something that makes you feel right at home. It was also a place where the owner had put as many doors in as possible, for reasons known only to themselves. Even the bathroom connected to my room had three separate doors, one of which went to the bedroom, the other directly into the hallway, and the other a ghost door that opened onto the wall that Pete’s bathroom backed onto. It meant that you could never truly relax when you went to the loo, as there were so many unguarded points of entry.



After a wander round the rainy blocks nearby (I bought what I thought was a delicious Dunkin Donuts vanilla milkshake, only to discover - when I poured it out and it was like custard - that it was coffee creamer, something I’ve heard mentioned but never actually understood), eating a Philly cheesesteak (it’s just mince in a sub roll, don’t build an entire city’s pride around it) and forcing myself to watch TV to try and align my puny British inner-clock with the

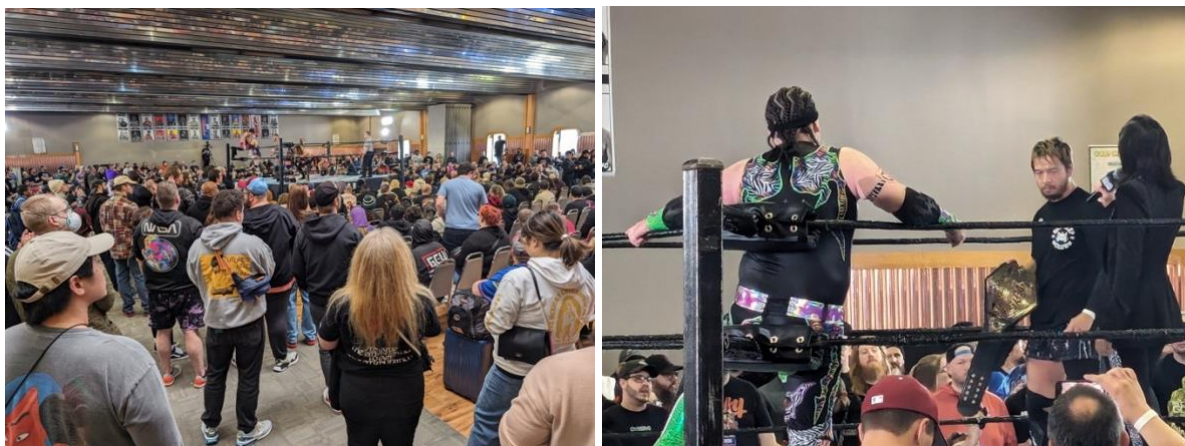
formidable US one (I really lucked out, the flat had Vice TV and they had an eight-hour block of their wrestling documentaries, including a tremendous couple on STARDOM and Mexico’s aging exotics)², I went to sleep.

I was suddenly woken up at 3am by the noise of someone entering the flat and walking about. Like in a horror movie, my eyes opened wide like saucers as I tried to work out what my next move should be, my ears out on stalks preparing for the stranger to try my door handle. I had no idea what I was going to do, but it would invariably have to be violent, largely because I was nude and I didn’t feel that gave me an advantage (the nudity would give me the element of surprise and horror however, so I fully intended to use it). Instead, I nervously checked my phone and thank fuck, there was a new message from Pete saying he was going to arrive very late that night after all, so, nerves jangling marginally less than they had been six seconds before, I got up and opened the door. It *was* Pete, and I’ve never been more relieved to see him. I’d also put some shorts on, so it wasn’t horrific.

Waking up all rested in the morning, I’d fucking *done it*. I’d taken on jet-lag and won. And, while Pete hadn’t and was having an absolute mare, I dragged him straight out to the first show of the weekend: DEFY at Penn’s Landing Caterers, a big old unit stuck on Philly’s largely-abandoned eastern docks. Philly’s a great-looking place –

² You can see the whole series here, if you can work out how to game the Vice TV system (I can’t). https://www.vicetv.com/en_us/video/japans-finest-wrestlers/5cdc5e5bbe407741132f8f61

both post-industrial and historic, and I think the people are as nice (as a generalisation) as anywhere I've been in America.



Pete drove us there in his hired electric car, which I think we only got into three times, and one of those times was to find somewhere to plug it in as the battery began to get dangerously low (Pete ended up in the dark underground car-park of a health food shop, which suggests America's not yet nailed the whole electric car deal yet).

Unlike our previous trips to Dallas or LA, Philadelphia is a far more compact city, much better laid out for a *Wrestlemania* weekend. We were about 10 minutes' drive from every venue and it meant that we barely missed the opening matches of any shows, something we did 75% of the time in Dallas and 95% of the time in LA. But we weren't going without a fight, as we did manage to come in well after the first match had started, so don't think we let ourselves down.



Penn's Landing Caterers is the sort of building we don't have in Britain – while it was a caterer with integral banqueting suite/arena, it looked like a massive 1990s British university building or upmarket leisure centre. With a huge car park out back, a wall of vast glass windows on one side, a gold-metal ceiling and a raised bank of seating, it looked exactly like a swimming pool complex - but instead of there being a swimming pool in the middle, it was just a huge room. Americans must come to Britain and wonder why we only have tiny-sized rooms and no parking anywhere.

Thrillingly, the backstage area was tented off, and you had to stroll past it to get inside from the car park, meaning we were treated (for free!) to a maskless Shun Skywalker having a cigarette before the show began. Kayfabe is dead with this generation of masked men, I'll tell you that.



The first show we saw, DEFY, was one of the eleven shows that GCW staged as part of the Collective – it started as a collective (hence name) of indie promotions, but GCW shows has come to dominate the line-up over the years, primarily because they attract a bigger fanbase than any other outfit.

I'd bought us a pass to see every show, largely because a couple of the events tend to sell out in the months and weeks before, and you never quite know which of the shows will suddenly become can't-miss prospects.³ This happened last year

with *Bloodsport* when Kota Ibushi was added to the card (we didn't go because I didn't book them in advance), and again this year when Shayna Baszler was announced, in an exciting 'WWE are letting WWE talent do a non-WWE show' moment.



DEFY are a Seattle promotion founded in 2017, who it turned out had just been bought by the owners of PROGRESS – I don't quite know why, but I can only assume they wanted some sort of US presence (earlier in the year, they'd announced a 'merger', but no-one was able to work out that meant, but PROGRESS later confirmed they'd purchased DEFY, which was also something that no-one was able to work out what that meant). DEFY as a promotion isn't much more than a local outfit, which doesn't seem to have a specific identity or noticeable following, but it's not my money, so knock yourself out.

What was noticeable was that a number of the UK wrestlers that were going to be performing at the PROGRESS show the next day were put on this card too – and almost none of them did any other shows over the weekend. Having paid for all of their visas, at least the owners of PROGRESS got them to work more than just once, even if it was just for their other company. None of this makes any sense to me.

DEFY - Can't Deny It (4th April)

1. DEFY tag team champions the Bollywood Boyz (Gurv Sihra & Harv Sihra) defeat Man Like DeReiss & Michael Oku (with Amira) (16:37)
2. CCK (Chris Brookes & Kid Lykos) (with Kid Lykos II) defeat Moonlight Express (MAO & Mike Bailey) (16:12)
3. DEFY women's champion Vert Vixen defeats Jazmin Allure and Trish Adora (12:51)

³ Out of the 11 shows we could have waltzed into, we ended up seeing just four. There were some clashes, and a lot of them started at midnight, and to be honest, that was too late. I don't want to be standing in a caterer's at 2am. No one does.

4. DEFY Pacific Northwest champion Schaff defeats Charles Crowley, Galeno Del Mal, Gene Munny, LJ Cleary, Luke Jacobs, Ricky Knight Jr. and Shota Umino (14:57) in a Battle Royal
5. C4XKC (Cody Chhun, Guillermo Rosas & KC Navarro) defeat Sovereign (Evan Rivers, Judas Icarus & Travis Williams) and Team Dragon Gate (KZY, Ho Ho Lun & Shun Skywalker) (13:40)
6. KENTA (c) defeats Gringo Loco (23:06) to retain the DEFY World Championship

Was it a great show? No, but it was *alright*. It was probably hurt a bit by the fact there were a lot of British talents in the show that the crowd - even though they're into wrestling - clearly didn't know (to be honest, a lot of wrestling-loving British crowds wouldn't have recognised all of them), but it was also the first Collective show, so the crowd were buoyed up for that.

Michael Oku, fresh off one of the matches of the year against Will Ospreay, was in the opener in a throwaway, dull bout (he replaced fellow Brit Leon Slater, who had issues with travel). It also slightly wasted Man Like DeReiss, who was enjoying his first *Wrestlemania* weekend, popped up on a few shows, and who seemed to spend all of his down time standing in the crowd with his top off. He was the first person I'd see every time we turned up for a show, chatting away with his Birmingham-bred nips out.



For my money, the CCK-Moonlight Express match was the best on the card (although I think Shun Skywalker was the stand-out performer.) I have a real soft spot for the original CCK, having seen them a lot during the period from 2015 to 2018, when I started going to see live wrestling again and they were the leading tag team on the BritWres scene (I'd also spotted Kid Lykos at the baggage claim on the way over, and noted his battered bag was covered in his own stickers, the age of which suggested he was guilty of a serious violation of kayfabe during the years he was supposed to be masked.)

After his tremendous showing at last year's *Mark Hitchcock Supershow*, I was delighted to see the big Mexican Galeno del Mal in the battle royal, although it was a surprise that he barely wrestled on any other shows over the weekend. This was not a good battle royal. I don't think anyone would dispute that. Most of the entrants were the regulars you see on most British shows, so I was less excited to see Charles Crowley and LJ Cleary than most, considering I'd just spent £700 on a plane ticket

and was literally on the other side of the earth and could easily see them in Clapham every month for about twenty quid if I want. But that's specific to me, and I'm not blaming the wrestlers for working in America and doing their best. I'm the problem here, not them.



The main event was fine, but I'd really built it up in my head as being a possible banger and had forgotten that KENTA has proved really happy to phone in his performances over recent years. He worked at a fine level, but it's still disappointing to see that the old KENTA doesn't really appear anymore, and he's, at best, decent, which is always an anti-climax. At one point, the wrestlers brawled through the crowd, coming close to a delighted Pete, who turned out to be taller than KENTA, which is something wrestling doesn't want you to know – all wrestlers are much smaller than you think they are. Based on what we saw, I have a feeling Andre the Giant was a maximum 6' 1" in real life. Every

time I've seen Jordynne Grace, she's looked to be the height of a free-standing air-conditioning unit.

What it did was set a slight precedent for how the rest of the Collective shows would turn out – they'd all be *fine*, but there'd be no matches that stood out as instant classics. Normally, any list of the best *Wrestlemania* weekend matches would have five or six from the indie shows – this year, I think you'd be hard pressed to make a case for more than one or two. It meant we didn't leave any indie shows this year feeling absolutely and entirely blown away, which was a change from both Dallas and LA. Maybe we're in an odd time period where the more established indie stars know that WWE and AEW aren't going to call so aren't busting their arses, while the younger ones aren't quite well-known enough to get the sort of match-ups that they can shine in.



During the show, Pete and I were also introduced to a young, very large wrestler from NOAH who'd come for his first US trip, and he was incredibly polite and sweet, but neither of us remember his name. Sorry, big nice NOAH lad.⁴ After a trip to Walmart (or did we go for lunch somewhere? I can't remember), it was time for Josh Barnett's *Bloodsport*, a show presenting a card of worked, hybrid MMA/Japanese UWF style shoot

fighting mash-ups.

Having watched a lot of these shows over the years, they can be really engrossing, but I've sometimes wondered why you want to take the pro-wrestling out of pro-wrestling, considering that's the best bit. But, perhaps due to the slightly soft nature

⁴ Just had a look around and turns out it was YOICHI. He did the PROGRESS show the day after, which might seem like a long way to travel to do a singles match, although he won their ATLAS title from Ricky Knight Jr.

of the previous show, this was thrilling to watch live and Pete was bowled over by the explosive brevity of the matches, which were a lot more fun than sitting through 13 minutes of crowd-work and armbars.

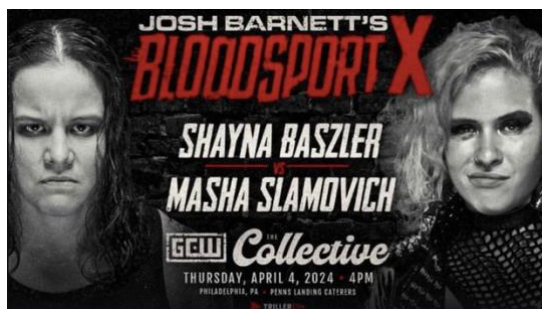
GCW JOSH BARNETT'S BLOODSPORT (4th April)

1. Victor Benjamin defeats AKIRA Way by KO (5:06)
2. Nic Nemeth defeats Speedball Mike Bailey (5:23)
3. Bloodsport Women's Tournament 2024 semi-final: Lindsay Snow defeats Lady Frost (2:16)
4. Bloodsport Women's Tournament 2024 semi-final: Marina Shafir defeats Janai Kai (3:56) in a Bloodsport Women's Tournament 2024 Semi Final Match
5. Charlie Dempsey defeats Matt Makowski (with 'Hot Sauce' Tracy Williams) (6:23)
6. Takuya Nomura defeats Fuminori Abe by Referee's Decision (7:38)
7. Erik Hammer defeats Lou Nixon by referee's decision (3:47)
8. Minoru Suzuki defeats Royce Isaacs by KO (8:37)
9. Timothy Thatcher defeats Axel Tischer (7:52)
10. Shayna Baszler (with Zoey Stark) defeats Masha Slamovich (with Jordynne Grace) by referee's decision (7:14)
11. Bloodsport Women's Tournament 2024 Final Match: Marina Shafir defeats Lindsay Snow by KO (7:44)
12. Josh Barnett defeats Johnny Bloodsport (aka John Morrison) by Referee's Decision (7:57)



What was really noticeable about this show was just how different the superstars of wrestling looked compared to the fun indie guys we see all the time. Nic Nemeth looked like a Greek god; Germany's Axel Tischer was absolutely hulking; and Josh Barnett was massive. If he came into a busy pub you were in, he'd be the biggest person in the pub by at least 50%. Just huge, like he's been wrongly scaled and it's been very advantageous to him.

The biggest focus on the show was that the WWE had loaned Shayna Baszler out for the night – both a favour to Josh Barnett, who has been Baszler's wrestling trainer for years, and also to Baszler herself, giving her a chance to do something high-profile over a *Wrestlemania* weekend she wasn't otherwise involved in.



Barnett has been running *Bloodsport* for GCW since 2019, and it's been something that WWE has clearly had some interest in over the years – William Regal turned up with Jon Moxley (then working as Dean Ambrose) to watch it in the first year (although they didn't pick up any of the talent on the card). He later said that he was able to book Baszler through his

relationships with people in WWE, noting he had “a certain level of trust and consideration...it’s hard to lend your toys out when there’s so much money put into them and the product itself.”

That connection turned out to be Regal, as Baszler told the *RRBG* podcast.

If I’m being honest, I thought that by the time I had the availability to do this that there would be too many miles on my body and I would be done doing this. It’s pretty cool that it worked out this way.

I got pulled into the office at work, it was William Regal and he was like, ‘Hey, what do you think about working *Bloodsport*?’ ‘Is everything...am I cool? What are you trying to say to me?’ ‘Yeah, we’ve been talking to Josh. There are only so many athletes we have that we feel confident can wrestle that style, and you’re one of them. Are you interested?’ ‘Absolutely, yes, 100%.’



Notably, Regal’s son and NXT star Charlie Dempsey was also on the card (having previously worked an All Japan main event in January.) He’s the only nepo-baby I like, as he’s also good at what he’s supposed to be doing, which most nepo-babies forget. He’s no Brooklyn Beckham (who I would like to see taking on Timothy Thatcher at next year’s *Bloodsport*.)



While the stand-out bout was a thrilling stiff bout between Fuminori Abe and Takuya Nomura,⁵ Baszler’s match with Masha Slamovich was the most loudly received, with Baszler receiving the traditional heel reaction for anyone daring to come from WWE to scrabble around in a dirtbag mudshow promotion. Reportedly, the only person not delighted with the reception was Baszler, who was said to be upset

that people were booing her. No! That’s not what we meant! We booted to show we’re in on the fun! *We were playing along! We were trying to make it better!*

⁵ It was a rematch of sorts between the BJW stars (who also form the Astronauts tag team) following their October 2023 singles bout, an incredible bout that was celebrated as one of the matches of the year.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNMkX4taMZo>

The match was really fun, and it was a powerful reminder of Baszler should be (and hasn't been) presented in WWE – as a fucking killer. It was her best character performance in years. And here it is, thanks to our friends at GCW (they're not my friends, I was just jazzing it up.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1EQKBZoq3A>



There was a man there I spotted who'd turned up wearing a WCW title, which made him stand out in this crowd, who tend to wear Ministry T-shirts and truck company hats (or, in the case of one lady, full clown costume). He was also wearing a Cody Rhodes jacket, a Jerry Lawler T-shirt, carrying a bag of merch hot from WWE World, and even had WWE shoes on, which means it was literally dressed head to toe in new WWE merchandise. He didn't seem to enjoy the show, but I presume booked it as a way of seeing a WWE star in a frightening new setting. The shoes were the thing that stayed with me. Man, you wouldn't need to have many people like this pumping all their wages straight into your company before you become worth a billion dollars, would you? If only he was into *Wrestle Me*.

After heading back to record some exciting content for the Pat Patreons, it was off to the most famous Philadelphian wrestling landmark – the 2300 Arena, formerly the ECW Arena, for the *Mark Hitchcock Supershow*.



Located in a slightly empty part of south Philadelphia (and it must have taken all of 12 minutes to get there in an Uber, this city is brilliantly sized), it was a much bigger place than I'd imagined in all the years I spent watching my Delta VHS tapes of the promotion's classic years.

It was positively airy inside – a big old barn with bars at various ends, which, if it was in Britain, would be one of the best concert venues that this country has. Pete began to scrutinise the floor, horrified at how horribly dirty and scuffed up it was, and thus hopefully the one original relic to remain from ECW's glory days.

In a deeply unfortunate moment, someone came over to say hi and asked if we would mind if they brought their cousin over to say hello. In what now seems like an ambush attempt, that cousin turned out to be Michael Hamflett, who is a known member of a rival gang who call themselves WhatCulture.



With our hands reaching down to the butterfly knives we keep in our cowboy boots, Pete and I discussed whether we should shank him on sight, before we agreed to allow him a brief parley. Hamflett emerged out of the shadows, we exchanged sharp words, but agreed that our ongoing war could not flare up tonight, as innocent members of the public were present and could end up hurt (also we all wanted to see the show we'd paid for). In an attempt to cause him problems with his sickening gang when word got back to them (most of them they weren't here, as there weren't enough former WWE stars on the bill for them to be interested), we bought a round of drinks, and then he came and sat with us, got another round in, and we were able to reach an uneasy truce for the evening. But it was made clear, at the drinks we went out for together at a pub afterwards, that this was just a temporary respite between us and WhatCulture, and that hostilities would continue once the evening was over.

Pete and I just hope this stupid, pointless war will one day finally end. I cannot speak for Hamflett, but I do not think he will be happy until we are dead. A shame, he could have been the bigger man.⁶

MARK HITCHCOCK SUPERSHOW (4th April 2024)

1. Nick Nemeth defeated Joey Janela
2. The FBI (Little Guido & Tommy Rich) & Deonna Purrazzo beat Los Boricuas (Miguel Perez Jr, Savio Vega & Nathalya Perez, with Huracan Castillo Jr & Jose Estrada Jr.)
3. Rob Van Dam (with Bill Alfonso) beat Speedball Mike Bailey
4. RevPro British heavyweight champion Michael Oku (with Amira) pinned Titan
5. Matt Riddle & Mustafa Ali defeated The Rascalz (Trey Miguel & Zachary Wentz)
6. Josh Alexander beat Masato Tanaka
7. Team CMLL (Averno, Barbaro Cavernario, Mistico, Star Jr & Villano III Jr) defeated Team Dragongate (Dragon Kid, Kota Minoura, KZY, Shun Skywalker & Yamato)

⁶ In case you don't have time to read this, we met Michael Hamflett at the show and we all got on like a house on fire, enjoyed the show together and then went to Philadelphia's oldest pub and got pissed. But I will never admit that.

8. Paul Walter Hauser beat Sami Callihan in a Philly Street Fight and the Sandman came out and looked surprisingly well.



I talked about this show on the podcast, but it was a crowd that I didn't respect or like. I know that's an odd claim to make, but they seemed to me to be less a wrestling crowd and more of an older WWE-fan crowd who had booked this show on the basis that it was at the old ECW Arena and had lots of former WWE stars on it. There were a lot of healthy-looking, slightly balding, slightly pudgy men in their 50s in the crowd, many of whom introduced themselves to you if you were

sitting near them. "David! All the way from Florida!" said the man sitting next to me, shaking my hand, and then, after I'd said about three words, said "Australian, right?" Three American men heard my lovely English voice on this trip and all of them immediately guessed that it was Australian. Friendly middle-aged American men all seem to be *obsessed* with Australians, it's *pathetic*.



On the night, it felt like the biggest reactions were for RVD, Nick Nemeth⁷ and ugh Matt Riddle,⁸ and the rest of the card was full of wrestlers who largely (and shamefully) meant little or nothing to most of the people in attendance. The fact that Nick Nemeth's new gimmick (it's barely a gimmick) of calling himself "The Wanted Man" got a nasal chant, and yet people could barely raise their faces from their phones during the CMLL vs Dragongate match told me that a lot of this crowd preferred seeing wrestlers they'd heard of from WWE to actually seeing good wrestling.

⁷ Nemeth later went on Twitter to ask if anyone had any photos of his match from this show. I replied with four nice ones of him. No response. Not even a Like. Want-ed man? Arse-hole man, more like. Ungrateful shit.

⁸ Annoyingly for people who don't like Riddle (i.e. me), the match he was in was very good indeed, thanks largely to the phenomenal Ali and the Rascalz.

They didn't even seem to dimly recognise Masato Tanaka, which, at the very least, suggested many of them weren't even aware of *One Night Stand 2005*. Had these old men only got into wrestling at the same time as Roman Reigns became champion? I think they might have.



By now, a lot of beers in (and having been delighted to see Tommy Rich, Little Guido and Los Boricuas, all of whom felt like people you never imagined seeing perform in 2024), it was making me legitimately angry to feel the sheer apathy in the room – it was like showing a herd of pleasant, gentle cows a masterpiece by Turner, before they all started drifting away to blankly look up another cow's bum instead. If this crowd had gone to any early ECW shows, they'd have been silent during the matches of the people they didn't know from WWF TV, meaning the only star they'd have cheered would have been 'Superfly' Jimmy Snuka, and ECW would have closed down in late-1993.



Below is a still from the streamed show of Pete and I actually watching the CMLL-Drongate match, while all around us bovine men silently puzzle over fuzzy and confused notions of beauty and entertainment, and generally bring the mood in the room down.

At one point in the never-ending silence, I wailed "this is so good!" with a mixture of frustration and hopelessness, and although I've not watched the show back, I sincerely hope you can see Barbaro Cavernario pointing at me and clapping in agreement, as otherwise it meant I was more drunk than I realised and it didn't actually happen (it *did* happen).



As a result of the crowd's apathy to most of the matches, it made for something of a flat show, something we've never had at any of the Hitchcock Supershow before. They did, however, like the main event between Sami Callihan and Michael Paul Hauser (which was not good, and made worse by Hauser wearing a T-shirt for *The Lapsed Fan* podcast, who weren't even there like we were), which was saved for me by an unannounced Sandman doing his classic entrance (the first time Pete had ever heard it as nature intended, which is with Metallica playing over the top.)

He rattled his way through the audience, pouring a beer down the throat of Michael Hamflett's cousin, then standing on my chair, asking if I wanted to drink his beer, me saying 'I'm fine but thank you' (I had a sudden realisation that having a 60-year-old feed you beer isn't a very dignified thing to do, seeing as I'm old too and didn't want beer all over my shirt), and then off he went, feeding the person behind me instead. Sandy was so close to me when I snapped a photo that you're able to see he was wearing an absolute pancaking of foundation. The Sandman uses foundation, who'd have imagined that?



Three shows in and we'd already seen Speedball Mike Bailey wrestle three times.

DAY 1 STATS

Matches seen: 25½

Individual wrestlers seen performing: 82

Number of wrestlers who gave us a thumbs up from the ring: 1

Enemies met and taken to the pub: 1

Japanese Mordecai: NO

Did we see RVD's partner with a little dog in the crowd: YES

Did we eat a load of proper old shit and nothing healthy: YES

Running percentage of shows Speedball Bailey was on: 100%

The next morning, we didn't go to the Tokyo Joshi Pro show. But no regrets as instead, we took a trip to the greatest place on earth – *Wrestlecon*!⁹

Last time round, I'd slightly forgotten to place *Wrestlecon* above everything else, and we ended up not spending most of the day there, which in retrospect was a mistake. It is the best place on earth (for wrestle-nuts – for everyone else, it would be at best puzzling and unappealing, at worst, appalling and tragic).



It was my birthday, and going to *Wrestlecon* was exactly the thing I'd wish I could do on my birthday. It was held in a hotel a 10-minute stroll from our flat in the sort of hotel that's probably a bit too nice to have a load of wrestling fans turn up at. In Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman*, there's a story arc where a load of America's serial killers turn up in a hotel they've booked out for a convention, and that's what this reminds me of. Imagine booking the holiday of a lifetime and you're woken up every morning by a man shouting "woooo!" as he wheels a granny trolley full of Funko Pops past your room.¹⁰

Heading up the escalators (American hotels are very different to British ones), there were so many wrestlers doing signings that some of them didn't even make it into the rooms, but were outside in one of the liminal spaces. There's Los Boricuas, sitting opposite the Sandman, close to Lisa Marie Varon, as Perry Saturn walks past to use the toilet and Bushwhacker Luke stares out blankly, his life in the last decade

⁹ There was one HUGE regret, as Aja Kong wrestled on that card and I've always wanted to see her perform in the flesh. We would also miss her appearance in the *Clusterfuck*. Thank God she's booked for an EVE show in London over *All In* weekend.

¹⁰ This year, I saw a lot of collectors at *Wrestlecon* with little metal pull-along carts which were uniformly absolutely full of Funkos and carded Mattel figures. The little carts – like something you'd see in a *Peanuts* strip being pulled by Linus - stripped these grown men of anything left of their dignity, but I also sort of wished I had one to put all my stuff in, so long as no one saw me with it.

consisting mainly of sitting in carpeted hotel rooms and waiting to lick the head of a sweaty man in their 40s.



In the first room, along with more wrestlers (Jannetty! Gunn! The Rhodes family, but not Cody! Shane Douglas! Honky! Demolition!) were a lot of merch sellers, so I grabbed some old PWG DVDs from the commentator Joe Dombrowski at \$5 a throw (he struggled to use the card-payment app on his phone, which is something he definitely should have investigated before putting a lot of delicious merch up for sale to international men like me), a couple of old WCW bendies (Sting and Arn Anderson) from the early 1990s and a handful of even older AWA Remco figures (Flair! Zbysko! Buddy Rogers! Jimmy Garvin! Baron Von Raschke!)



Pete, wisely, bought a lovely George Steele L.J.N. figure for \$10. I later paid \$25 for a lovely condition L.J.N. Mean Gene Okerlund – of course I already have one in my collection, but it's all battered, and that seemed disrespectful to the late Gene. I was hoping to find a Slick – the only L.J.N. action figure I don't have – but they were all priced at around \$200, and I might be merch-mad, but I'm not merch-mentally ill. I also had a chat with Zombie Sailor (don't think it's his birth name) about his exceptionally lovely Heels and Faces retro figure line – he was so passionate about what he does, that he gave me his Jack Tunney prototype and asked me to pull the jacket up, to reveal the figure had a portly

tummy hidden underneath the clothes, even though you wouldn't know it was there unless you cut the jacket off. That's dedication to your art.

Once again, it's surprising to me that people at *Wrestlecon*, by and large, aren't interested in anything old, or even from the recent past. Most of the stalls (and most of the carts being pulled around by man-children) were full of brand-new Funkos or Mattel Elites which were on sale at every other stall at top-end prices. Even worse, the former shoot-interview DVD company Highspots had a whole room which consisted of nothing but signed turnbuckle pads printed with wrestler's names (they're appalling) and huge and expensive Rob Schamberger print signed by the wrestler they depict. Pete pointed out one of Paul Heyman which might be the single least appealing work of art either of us have ever seen.

Our entire walkabout (and encounter with a wonderful Abdullah the Butcher, who conned us) is on the Patreon in video form, which is better than having to read about it, like you're in school.



By going to *Wrestlecon*, we missed seeing the PROGRESS afternoon show. But so we don't miss out, let *Voices of Wrestling's* review fill us in on the show we missed.

A hateful show, born in the fires of minds who have contempt for professional wrestling. This show was an embarrassment.

The new owners don't seem to like wrestling very much. They have descended into the worst kind of gimmick-laden irony wrestling, desperate to entertain the ever-dwindling weirdos who still watch this promotion. It's anti-wrestling, sucking away everything that we love about it.

I caught my reflection in the patio doors and saw a look on my face I didn't recognise. It was a deep anger, spawned by Session Moth and Allie Katch becoming "best friends" halfway through a wrestling match. It was compounded by the work in this match being sub-trainee standard. My rage was multiplied when Session Moth decided to watch the match from the audience for no reason whatsoever. I reached my fiery peak when this match refused to end, damning us all to a miserable evening of wondering why any of these wrestlers got booked at all.

This was a modern PROGRESS show. It contained a lot of good wrestlers that nobody seemed to have any idea what to do with, and a whole load of comedy that makes you feel like you want to die inside. Don't watch this show.

Oh, now I do *actually* really want to see it.

We were back in time for the biggest non-Wrestlemania show of the weekend – *Joey Janela's Spring Break*, which has become the indie *Wrestlemania* of the proper *Wrestlemania* weekend. Booked by Janela (who often puts himself into the main event in dream matches he's always wanted, which is fair considering he puts the shows together and has made them thrilling), the shows have been running since 2017 (*Wrestlemania 33*) and have seen Janela have unlikely but very fun matches

with the likes of Marty Jannetty, Great Sausuke, Ricky Morton, X-Pac and (last year) Kota Ibushi, in what might have been the last decent singles match of his career.

Quite a lot of those Janela main events are here, put up by the streamer Triller.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vDQoj-mmh7M&list=PL7uR_ifkeyJFFf3pjghVdVx4EWA_yL1Tr



Featuring the biggest independent names, *Spring Break* has a rare ability to give you matches you didn't know you wanted to see until they're announced, at which point it's all you can think of. A great example of this was his booking of Walter vs PCO in 2018 – PCO was best known as one of the Quebecers, while Walter was some

big European with a silly name, but the match put both of them on the map in the US, and look at them now.

There's been some matches that you immediately want to watch when you revisit the cards over the years – Taka Michenoku vs Orange Cassidy! Penta El oM vs Nick Gage for the GCW title! LAX vs the Rock 'n' Roll Express! LA Park vs Masato Tanaka! Minoru Suzuki vs Effy! Vikingo vs Speedball Bailey!¹¹

Spring Break is also where the Invisible Man wrestled Invisible Stan, a tour de force of wrestling as performance art - stretching the boundaries of what's possible when performers and audience play their roles to perfection.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cslu7zFmPjM>

Because it's seen as being the key indie show of the weekend, it's also the show where everyone actually works. Comparing this to, say, *Defy*, is night and day. But it lacked the sort of stunt/surprise booking that *Spring Break* has done so well in the past, and there was a sense this felt a little bit more like a higher standard GCW show than the special celebratory indie supershow it's felt like in the past.

GCW JOEY JANELA'S SPRING BREAK 8

1. Masha Slamovich & Rina Yamashita defeat Masato Tanaka & Minoru Suzuki (13:48)
2. Mike Bailey & The East West Express (Jordan Oliver & Nick Wayne) defeat Kerry Morton & The Rock 'n' Roll Express (Ricky Morton & Robert Gibson) (9:20)
3. Dragon Gate Classic (Dragon Kid, Kzy & YAMATO) defeat Reiwa New Generation (Ben-K, Kota Minoura & Shun Skywalker) (13:53)
4. Cole Radrick defeats Aigle Blanc and Alec Price and Arez and Leon Slater and Marcus Mathers and Microman and Mr. Danger and Myron Reed (17:04) in a Grab The Brass Ring Ladder Match
5. Matt Cardona (with Jimmy Lloyd & Steph De Lander) defeats Blue Pain (9:02)

¹¹ Less keen for 2017's now intensely problematic David Starr vs Mike Quackenbush bout.

6. Amazing Red defeats Gringo Loco (15:58)
7. Mance Warner defeats Effy (21:46 in an I Quit Match)
8. Maki Death Kill (Maki Itoh & Nick Gage) defeat Danhausen & Ram Kaicho (12:56)
9. GCW champion Blake Christian (with Shane Mercer) defeats Joey Janela (with Missy Hyatt) (29:45)

We stood for this show alongside Bryan, a delightful chap who was a YouTube Meniac and, unlike a lot of the YouTube pals, didn't relentlessly criticise us for having not heard of the obscure 1971 film *Billy Jack* when we were discussing Billy Jack Haynes's hat. Less lovely was a middle-aged man on his own called Doug, who was sitting on the end of the row where we were standing. He'd only seemed to have drunk one can of beer but was surprisingly quite intoxicated – he kept introducing himself to us, spent most of the show looking glassy-eyed at his phone, and offering to buy the nervous looking alt-goth girls sitting near him a beer. He didn't seem to be interested in wrestling in the slightest so I have no idea why he decided to bring himself along – it'd be like if I'd accidentally agreed to see some ballet and had then tried to make the best of the awful situation by drinking and trying to start over-friendly conversations with the people sitting near me.



Maybe it was the growing expectation around the annual *Spring Break* shows, but this wasn't up there with the best of the previous outings. The main problem was the main event of Janela taking on Blake Christian for the GCW title – at nearly half an hour, it was just too long a match, and as the show inched towards the four-hour mark, it burnt the crowd out. Pete had never been truly wearied by a single wrestling match before, as we tend to see stuff that's good, but this one did it. I hope everyone's proud about driving Pete away from seeing indie shows that I've been hyping up to him for days.

While the reactions to the performers who'd been on the *Mark Hitchcock Supershow* were far better than they'd been on the previous night (Tanaka and the Dragongate crew, who were greeted with appreciation instead of non-plussed faces because they'd not been in WWE)¹², the show wasn't helped by the fact there wasn't a single incredible moment or classic match – it was all fine, sometimes really fine, but we all

¹² Tanaka was in WWE for the ECW *One Night Stand* PPV, as mentioned before. I will NOT be forced to issue a correction.

seemed to be waiting for something – a moment, a point where the crowd exploded, a pop – that never came.



Matches that you think couldn't miss – Amazing Red (who replaced lucha star Volador Jr, who had visa issues) vs Gringo Loco, Mance Warner vs Effy in an I Quit bout, a ladder match with nine people in it, including beloved Microman – just fell short for reasons it was hard to put your finger on.

Whatever wasn't clicking then translated into a lack of heat from the crowd, and so the deadly cycle continued.

“Consistently average,” noted one person talking about the show on Cagematch, “but average in a good way,” which absolutely nailed how I felt about the show.

The matches Pete and I enjoyed the most live were Nick Gage and Maki Itoh taking on Danhausen and Ram Kaicho (small dead Japanese girl), where both Gage and Danhausen blew me away – they have unique characters in today's wrestling landscape and seeing them live really made me appreciate their uniqueness and total mastery of their gimmicks in a way that TV has never quite conveyed.



The same went for the six-man between Speedball Bailey and the East-West Express of Jordan Oliver and Nick Wayne taking on the Rock 'n' Roll Express and another-good-nepo-baby Kerry Morton. The younger Morton turned in a proper 1980s Southern heel performance, which seemed dated when he started and then timeless by the time the match was over. It was a tremendous bit of old-school heel work, and when I recall this match, the only stuff I can remember was Kerry Morton jawing off constantly. Magic.



It would be remiss of me not to mention the Matt Cardona-Blue Pain match, which was nearly a year in the making and which you'd have to concede Blue Pain really didn't make the best of. Despite Cardona putting a load of purposely overbooked bells and whistles all over the place, it was not good beyond there was a blue Kane in the ring. Having not exactly set the wrestling world on fire with this one (or on snow, I know he's the reverse Kane), Blue Pain unmasked the next month, revealing himself as a

British wrestler who previously performed as Memes, as if realising this bit of fun had run its course.

DAY 2 STATS

Matches seen: 9 (total 34½)

Individual wrestlers seen: All of them. Some 10,000 wrestlers were at *Wrestlecon*, so it's ALL OF THEM.

Number of wrestlers who gave us a thumbs up from the ring: 0

Number of dead Japanese spirit girls we watched have their heads cut open with a pizza cutter: 1

Japanese Mordecai: YES

Ripped off by Abdullah: YES

Did we eat a load of proper old shit and nothing healthy: YES

Running percentage of shows Speedball Bailey was on: 100%

The next morning it was time for *Effy's Big Gay Brunch*, a show we always support, but which has slightly become less magically special in the years it's been going as a result of there being loads of them throughout the year, and the wrestling being a little bit hit-or-miss, seeing as Allie Kat and Dark Sheik form a key part of the main event booking and they are, at best, alright wrestlers.



Yes, we should entirely normalise shows featuring LGBTQ+ performers, but I really miss the booking of legendary queer/non-binary performers to be brought out and celebrated in the ring ("give it up for Susan 'Tex' Watson!"), sometimes for the first time in their pioneering careers. Even if it had been an ironic celebration of Rico or Chuck Palumbo for their hideous work in the WWE tag team that was so offensive, I'd have been happy. I miss the historical tribute to pioneering gay elderly wrestlers which was always guaranteed to make me well up.

We missed the first two matches, but were there bang on time for the middle of the third.

GCW EFFY'S BIG GAY BRUNCH 9

1. Monomoth defeats Aaron Rourke and Devon Monroe and Rico Gonzalez (10:42)
2. Edith Surreal & Jamie Lynn Senegal defeat The Runway (Calvin Couture & Tyler Klein) (8:45)
3. Trish Adora defeats Karam (with Pollo Del Mar) (8:13)
4. BUSSY (Allie Katch & Effy) defeat Dirty Breeze (Breeze & Dirty Dango) (15:02)
5. Team Parrow (Adriel Noctis, Angelo Carter, Juni Underwood, Keita & Parrow) defeat Team Pollo (Alex Maze, Dillon McQueen, Don't Die Miles, Ron Bass Jr. & Vert Vixen) (w/ Pollo Del Mar) (16:38)
6. GCW Ultraviolet Championship Rina Yamashita defeats Billy Dixon (9:17)
7. Dark Sheik defeats Sonny Kiss (12:32)

In retrospect, we were fools to miss seeing Edith Surreal, a non-binary performer who formerly worked as the spectacularly-named art project/professional wrestler Still Life With Pears, as they announced their retirement a couple of months later. I've long admired their Leigh Bowery-esque performance-art approach to wrestling, but I think we were running late because we had to queue for an elaborate breakfast in a nearby food market, which was excellent (all breakfasts in America are wonderful, because they've really nailed it by including traditionally non-breakfast foods in it, including the traditionally non-breakfast foods of beef ribs, roast turkey, lobster thermidor, etc).

The BUSSY match sticks out most clearly in my mind as they took on the former WWE Fashion Police team of Dirty Dango (aka Fandango) and Tyler Breeze. Part of the reason that it remains in my memory is because the main section of it – where Dango plonks Allie Kat down on a chair, gives her a dirty dance and then clotheslines her – was exactly the same bit they did as the main section of their singles match at the *Big Gay Brunch* two years ago in Dallas. What a lazy pair, but it was still good, so no, not a lazy pair – a pair of contentious recyclers.

You might notice that one of the competitors in the multi-man match was Ron Bass Jr, who is indeed the son of the 1980s competitor 'Cowboy' Ron Bass. I did look at him, but that's as much as I can tell you. I'm sorry not to have a story out of the back of this. I've let you all down.



Having eaten appallingly since the moment he got on the plane at Heathrow, Pete excused himself to go back home for a lie-down. While Pete slept and grabbed wildly at his stomach as it pitched and tossed, I noted that Speedball Bailey was standing in front of me. Over the course of the week, Pete had become angry about Speedball wrestling in bare feet like a monkey, and then coming out afterwards in floppy sandals, like he was the enemy of shoes. Well, Speedball finally had a pair of actual shoes on – but as if he needs to always subvert the very notion of them, he was wearing trainers that were at least three sizes too big for him. I have no idea what Bailey's issue with shoes is, but it's clear there is one, and it's deeply irritating.

After the show, I headed off to the Suplex Store, a shop dedicated solely to wrestling and therefore a dream come true (a recommendation from beloved Patreonsen Fran Coleman – thanks Fran!). As my Uber crawled up to the hipster-paradise of South Street, the driver noticed the road was closed off, so I got out to find the whole of the neighbourhood had been roped off for a massive wrestling-themed street party, complete with a full-sized ring wedged into the middle of the street.



The sun was out, people were selling lovely-looking *Wrestlemania X* reprinted shirts out of the back of a glittering low-rider, there were tacos, another bloke selling autographed 8x10s (including Bruno Sammartino for \$100, *very tempting*), everyone had colourful wrestling shirts on (who knew, they come in other colours than black!), there was breezy hip-hop playing, and it was a glorious vision of how the world could be if only we'd shut off streets and force people to enjoy wrestling.



The road was so busy I couldn't even reach the front of the Suplex Store, let alone go inside, so I enjoyed peering at the al fresco wrestlefun and then hit some thrift stores, which Pete was genuinely sad to have missed. Because I am such a good friend, I made sure I checked for ironic T-shirts featuring adverts for garages or prescription medicines in Size Medium for Pete, but, alas, came up empty-handed. For a couple of bucks, I bought an

original copy of Aretha Franklin's *Young Gifted and Black* LP, but they didn't give me a bag, and I had to carry it around with me. I made me look like I was advertising the fact I believed I was *personally* young, gifted and black, and it also appeared that I was walking around with a record that I consciously wanted passers-by to see and then think I was cool. That wasn't my plan. *But they did and I was.*

And then it was off to the subway station for the first *Wrestlemania* that's served by a working public transport system! Walking into a tunnel that looked like the set of *The Warriors*, we were shunted along to Lincoln Financial Field in fifteen minutes and for a couple of dollars. Everything was going so smoothly! As we approached the stadium (having passed a car park which used to be the site of the legendary wrestling venue the Philadelphia Spectrum), the first lick of cold blustery wind hit us. But no worries! Once you're in a stadium with all those people, it warms right up, doesn't it? Sure it does!



It turned out that the Lincoln Financial Field has been specifically designed to funnel icy winds into every single nook and cranny of the stadium, which has cleverly been built with big holes in every side to ensure no heat can settle inside. It resembled a car-park, in that there were more cut-out sections in the building's walls than there were walls. This might be fine when it's the early evening in summer, but when the clouds begin to gather, the wind begins to whip up and the dark of

the April evening falls, it turns out to be a whole different kettle of fish. We've been spoiled by the state-of-the-art super-stadiums that we've previously watched *Wrestlemania* in, and this was so dated in comparison, it felt like we could have been in the best stadium in the UK. It was that bad.

Within an hour or so, there wasn't a single beanie hat or thick sweater available on any of the merch stands. This was both because people go mad for merch, but were also very keen not to die of exposure. And it's not like Pete and I had massively underdressed – we both had jackets! Pete had a turtleneck! I was in a fleece! We're from Britain so we know what it's like to sit outside in the glom!¹³

We took our seats just along from the press box (which, wisely, had glass windows to keep everyone inside warm) and settled down amongst the 72,543 fans. Not sure what happened to move all the tickets, as when I was on StubHub earlier in the day, there were definitely over 16,500 *Wrestlemania* tickets still for sale. Even weirder, Lincoln Field has an official seating capacity of 67,594 (although they could feasibly have added some seats on the pitch, so we'll never know for sure just how bullshit these figures are.) It's notable that, even though the WWE is in a blindly hot period, that would be a 12 or 13th attendance ranking for a *Wrestlemania*.

WWE WRESTLEMANIA XL Night 1

1. WWE Women's champion Rhea Ripley def. Becky Lynch
2. WWE tag team title ladder match: Awesome Truth wins Raw tag belts, A-Town Down Under wins Smackdown belts
3. Rey Mysterio & Andrade def. Santos Escobar & Dominik Mysterio
4. Jey Uso def. Jimmy Uso
5. Jade Cargill, Bianca Belair and Naomi def. Damage CTRL
6. Sami Zayn def. WWE Intercontinental champion GUNTHER
7. The Rock and Roman Reigns def. Cody Rhodes and Seth Rollins

As the show continued (which was clearly excellent until the Usos match didn't click, but then it was all back on track and building up and up and up), it became apparent to us in our uncovered seats that we were going to have to move somewhere less freezing.

It quickly fell to 10 degrees, but the wind chill on top (and the wind was absolutely non-stop) was astonishing. Having literally run around in circles to keep warm, we

¹³ In the days after, there were reports that WWE decided they'd never be holding another *Wrestlemania* in an open-air venue on the East Coast ever again. *Good*.

moved down a couple of levels as the Rey Mysterio match began, stood under a concrete roof and, while still bitterly cold, at least we could jump up and down, and move about before the ice worked its way into our knee and elbow joints. The stadium staff seemed to have largely declared an amnesty on people who weren't in their seats but were racing around, undoubtedly aware they didn't want to end up lumped in a class-action for manslaughter if they died in the bitter cold. It was cold, you get me?



We stood next to a rowdy bunch of lads who had noticed two fans dressed as Ric Flair and Randy Savage (in very thin novelty costumes, so god knows how they didn't get hypothermia.) To keep their spirits up, the boisterous boys began calling out to these two – “Hey! Hey, Raaaaa-aaandy! Macho Man! Yo! Randy! Stand up, Macho Man! Oooh yeah. Maaaaaacho. Maaaaaacho.” When the Randy eventually did stand up and point at them, they all began shouting angrily, yelling abuse and

giving him the finger. The Macho Man sat back down, dejected. There was a pause. And then, a lone voice began again – “Oh, Raaaaaaandy.” It repeated time and time again, with the costumed boys eventually, angrily giving in, acknowledging the boys' catcalls to derision, before there was a beat, and the low, keening calls began again. “Hey, Nature Boy. Oh Riiiiiiic. Staaaand up, Ric. Hey, Naitch! Spaaaaace mountain...come on, Ric, spaaaaace mountain.” It was such witless perfection.

Night 1 was clearly a good show, but it was also a very hard show to watch in person, as art took second place to survival. By the time the Rock came out, it was hard not to be muttering darkly “come on, come on, hurry the fuck up” and imagining what it must be like to be standing next to the flaming Brahma Bull logo, and the precious warmth that would provide. We had intended to head to GCW's Clusterfuck show, but honestly, by the time it was over, we just wanted to eat something hot and then lie down in a warm bed. So that's what we did. I went to sleep, both bitterly cold and sobbing bitter tears that I wouldn't see Dink in the Clusterfuck (although it turned out he had to pull out due to illness. Maybe he'd gone to see *Wrestlemania* Night 1 and had got frostbite.)

DAY 3 STATS

Matches seen: 12^{1/2} (I'm counting the one I saw in the street festival as a 1/2) (total 47)

Individual wrestlers seen: Another 50 or so PLUS a Triple H, who's retired (and I'm not counting the street festival ones, as I don't know who they were).

Number of wrestlers who gave us a thumbs up from the ring: 0

Number of *Wrestlemania* performers I've spoken to on a Zoom with: 1

Japanese Mordecai: NO

Body More Cold or Body More Hot: Body More Cold

Did we eat a load of proper old shit and nothing healthy: YES

(although I had a Columbian taco at the street festival which had some green sauce in it)

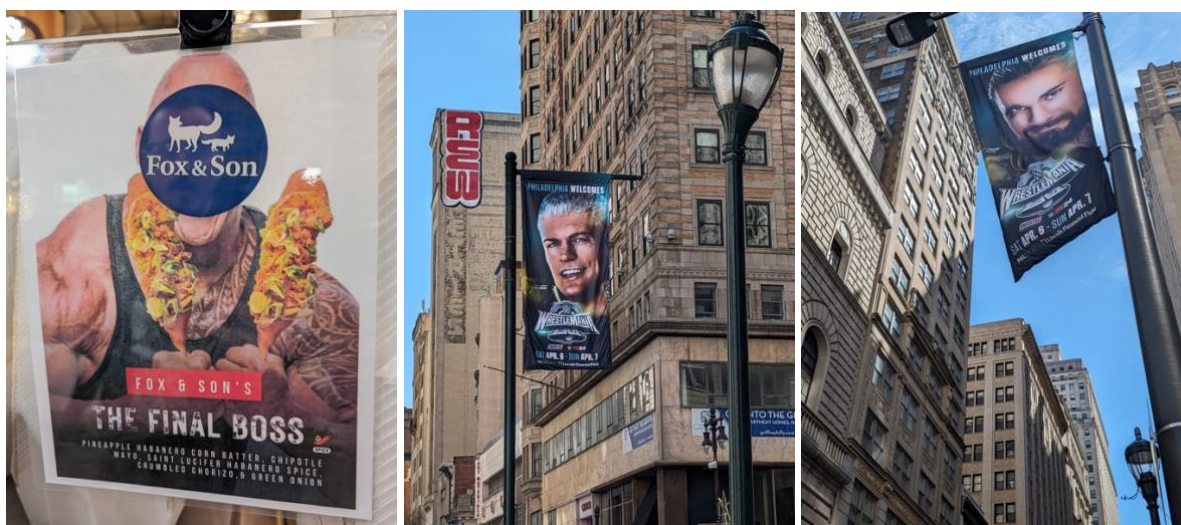
Running percentage of shows Speedball Bailey was on: 80% (he was wandering around the crowd at Big Gay Brunch, so I'm giving him that one too)



Our last day of wrestling started in a bright and sunny Philadelphia, and the first thing we did was head to the big Primark at the end of our block and buy as many clothes as we fucking could. While Pete bought a hat, a jumper and some leggings, I bought two hats, in case I lost one, a pair of gloves, three tops – a pink sweatshirt, a hooded top and a padded bodywarmer. If they'd sold sleeping bags, I'd have bought two of those as well, one for each leg. Instead, I wore two pairs of

trousers. It was we were off to rescue Captain Oates, not about to see the Street Profits.

After that, we had a wrestling-themed breakfast - a Rock-related corndog with a lot of hot sauce on it at an otherwise fancy little place in the city's most celebrated food market. They advertised it with a photo of the Rock lurching towards you while wielding in one hand what looks very much like a diseased animal penis. Yum. It's amazing Pete's stomach hasn't basically come out by now.



We then popped over to WWE World, basically a WWE merchandise warehouse that's was bigger than St Peter's Basilica in Rome. I wanted a simple event poster for my collection, but they'd all gone, as they seemed to priced much too cheaply. Instead, I got a couple of large WWE poster prints advertising the two nights but which don't have the venue or date on like a proper poster should. I can't tell if I like them, or trust them. Still, too late to take them back now.

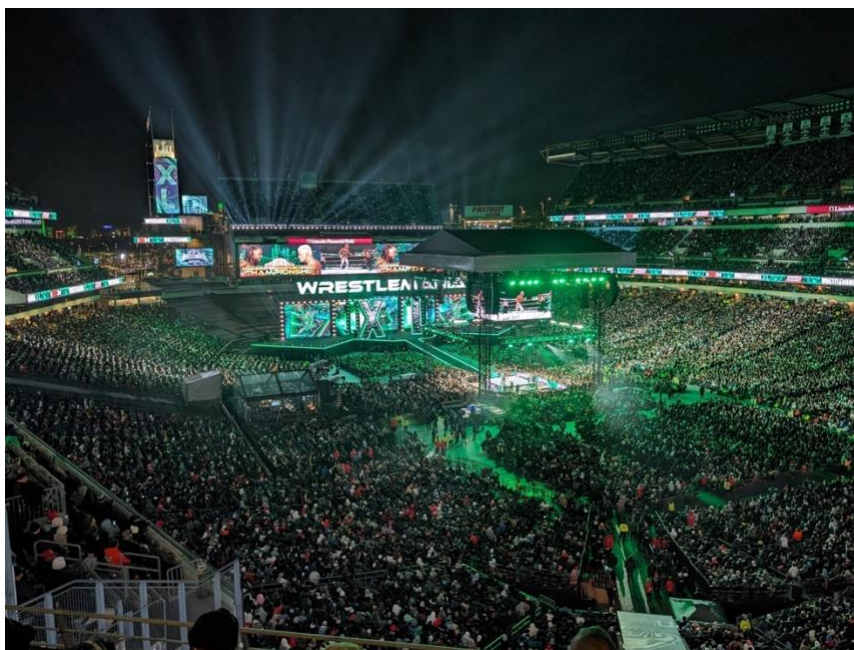
We returned to Lincoln Financial Field with a better attitude, happier vibes and literally \$125 of new clothes each. Even then, it was *still cold*, which is genuinely insane.

WRESTLEMANIA XL Night 2

1. Drew McIntyre def. World champion Seth Rollins
2. Damian Priest def. World champion Drew McIntyre by cashing in the *Money in the Bank* briefcase after CM Punk had hit McIntyre with his armcast
3. The Pride def. The Final Testament in a Philadelphia Street Fight (refereed by Bubba Ray Dudley, but no D-Von, which was weird)
4. LA Knight def. AJ Styles
5. US champion Logan Paul def. Kevin Owens and Randy Orton
6. Bayley def. WWE women's champion Iyo Sky
7. Cody Rhodes def. Universal champion Roman Reigns in a Bloodline Rules match

I couldn't help but feel it would have been hilarious if they'd decided to carry on the story and had Reigns pin Cody again here in under 10 minutes, and then have Triple H explain it was the end of another chapter, and not the story, and then build him up again, and then the same thing had happened for the next four *Wrestlemanias*, with Cody always getting pinned and the cycle starting again the next night. I would respect that storyline so hard.

Stephanie McMahon made her first appearance since stepping down in the whole "my-father's-a-problem" period, and came out to say this was now the "Paul Levesque Era." Why not make it even clearer McMahon is persona non-grata by calling it "The Non-Sex-Offender Era"?



But it felt like a much stronger show – like the WWE had been rattled by the reception to the previous night, the result of a subdued crowd shivering in their seats. This seemed to go off with a lot more pace and surprises and it felt a lot more fun. That rose to a beautiful fever pitch in the main event as the run-ins got more and more surprising, and

honestly, you never think you'll pop for the Undertaker in 2024, but goodness me, we both did. That's the magic of wrestling – it takes a man you don't like, have watched spoil his legacy and become a rival podcaster, and somehow you still cheer when he appears in a ring a mile beneath you. Ace.

Deep underneath the many layers of clothing keeping me from death's icy hand, I was wearing the Dusty Rhodes T-shirt I'd bought at the *Wrestlemania* where Cody debuted in a surprise, and then wore it for last year's main event. So, it's been to all

the key moments of Codylore and is thus the world's most valuable wrestling T-shirt. I'll never sell it (it's comfy).

Ironically, Night 2 was so much fun and we left on such a bigger high that we would have happily bounced onto the *Clusterfuck* until 3am. But it wasn't on, so we didn't.

DAY 3 STATS

Matches seen: 6½ (I'm counting the MITB cash-in as a half match) (total 53 ½)

Individual wrestlers seen: I was gutted they didn't bring out the Hall of Famers so I could see Bull Nakano, but you can't have it all. 18 new ones PLUS a Stephanie McMahon for 19, and two repeats in Cody and Roman, but then we got an Undertaker for 20. I reckon that's a combined total of somewhere around 150 in-ring.

Number of wrestlers who gave us a thumbs up from the ring: 0
Number of *Wrestlemania* performers I've spoken to on a Zoom with: 0

Japanese Mordecai: NO

Did we eat a load of proper old shit and nothing healthy: YES

Running percentage of shows Speedball Bailey was on: 71.4%



On Monday, with a flight leaving in the early evening to get me back to the UK early the next morning which I believed would help me cannily avoid jetlag¹⁴ and Pete driving off to whatever confusing arrangement he'd made with his plane/American tart (you'll have to ask him), I stashed my bags and wandered off for some culture.

But instead of seeing the Rocky steps, or visiting where Betsy Ross sewed the first American flag, I went to a branch of Barnes and Noble and bought a signed copy of Becky Lynch's autobiography (they were piled up by the door in the mistaken belief that anyone who's come from *Wrestlemania* might enter a bookstore), and then bought some wrestle-rubbish from the 7-11: a C4 energy drink with the WWE logo on it and a 'Macho Man' Randy Savage endorsed Slim Jim (which is genuinely like cat food for people.)

So that's it for another year. What a wonderful thing *Wrestlemania* weekend is. Next year is in Vegas. At least we won't have to buy any more sweatshirts.

WRESTLE ME, THE MONTH OF APRIL!

1 APRIL – COERTION AND POWER (NOT A 1980s TAG TEAM)

¹⁴ This wily plan, which was based on an unfounded hunch, didn't work at all and I had a subsequent week of worse jet lag than I've ever had before.

Say what you like about Vince McMahon – I mean, I don't think much of it would be wrong – but even aged 107, he's not going down without a fight. Although (a) he's already gone down and (b) this is what rich people do when this sort of thing happens and, thankfully, it often fails to prevent them from ultimately taking a kicking for their actions.

Released by someone presumably being paid a lot of money to work for McMahon as he faces a civil action for (and I'm paraphrasing) being a cunt, a "gushing love letter" from Janelle Grant – who has launched the suit claiming she was the victim of McMahon's sexual abuse – was released, as reported by the *New York Post*, "in which she called him "my best friend, my love and my everything."

"After almost 3 years together, it's like my life isn't even real to me unless you're there and in it and I'm sharing it all with you," Grant, 43, wrote in the Christmas Eve letter to 78-year-old McMahon obtained by *The Post*.

The lovestruck letter stands in contrast to the allegations in her explosive lawsuit filed in Connecticut federal court in January, which claimed that McMahon allegedly defecated on Grant's head during a threesome in May 2020 – some 18 months before she wrote the alleged love letter.

"You, Vince McMahon, are THE ONE. For the yesterdays and today's and the tomorrows I can hardly wait for, thank you my sweet beast. My heart is yours – always and forever," Grant wrote to conclude her lengthy love note.



It seemed like an attempt by McMahon's team to present the idea that Grant was in love with the pensioner, with the air "well, why would she have written this if he was such an awful groomer?" The answer was simple, according to Grant's attorney, Ann Callis – it was another part of what she claimed was a pattern of coercion and power, and she believed McMahon had demanded Grant write it.

"Frankly it's pretty disgusting that Vince's weeks-late attempt to defend his horrendous behaviour – behaviour he claims to this day never happened – is to try to showcase letters that Vince himself coerced her to write," Callis told the *Post*. "His psychological torture of her continues – as is typical of abusive predators who respond to women speaking out with increased threats. While Janel isn't a stranger to his intimidation tactics, this is a new low even for him."

Grant's spokespeople then produced a text exchange between Grant and McMahon from three days before the email was sent, where she had some sort of surgical procedure on her finger. "How will I write your letter?" she added. "I can type & read it. Or try to write in a couple of days. I'm so sorry if I mess this, I want u to have a nice letter." This suggested that the writing of the letter wasn't a spur of the moment decision on Grant's part, but something which had been discussed between the two,

and which she was anxious about not being able to produce for McMahon in a set time-frame.

It was an *insanely* long email, which a representative for Grant pointed out was padded “with existing material from pop culture,” including a “sugary-sweet” section that was a verbatim reproduction of some lines from the 1947 film *The Bishop’s Wife*. She “She declared that she was “in love with a capital L,”” reported the *Post*, noting that line was lifted in full from a *GQ* profile of Machine Gun Kelly and Megan Fox. It could certainly suggest that someone was struggling to find the words to put into their supposedly spontaneous love letter.

There were parts that McMahon’s lawyers didn’t flag up, ones which struck odd notes that seemed somewhat odds with the infatuated letter she’d penned – she mentioned the “secret bubble” that their relationship was in; her note that her relationship with McMahon had begun when she was “lost so long ago from trauma, sadness, abuse and overall life kicking me in the ass”; noting their love story was “crazy”; and an entire paragraph where she wrote that she recognised that “occasionally, admittedly...I’m a bit of a pain in the ass...I’ll annoy you occasionally, say stupid things, then take it back and go through struggles that confuse you.”

But you handle it in stride. Thank you for putting up with me and seeing all the good despite it. When I’ve been at my most lonely, unhappy, frustrating, confused or dark depressed places, you’ve not only put up with me but you loved me despite it.

And that’s proof Vince that you make the world a better place because you see the good in it.

“Ms. Grant’s claims are false, defamatory and entirely without merit,” McMahon’s attorney, Taub, also told *The Post* on Thursday. “We intend to vigorously defend Mr. McMahon and are confident that he will be vindicated.” Now there’s a bet I’d like to take.

1st April – NO KHAN DO

For the first time in its five-year history, AEW announced a lot of releases on the same day, akin to the annual bloodbaths that WWE performs to such disdain.

They included people who you’d be genuinely hard-pressed to recall signing AEW contracts in the first place, such as The Boys (who came to the ring with Dalton Castle), Dasha¹⁵, Jose The Assistant¹⁶, Jora Johl¹⁷, Anthony Henry¹⁸, Parker

¹⁵ I had to Wikipedia her, but Dasha Gonzalez was formerly in NXT as Dasha Fuentes, where she was a backstage interviewer. She’s now been in wrestling for a decade, barely wrestling but occasionally doing commentary.

¹⁶ He managed Andrade El Idolo and Rush’s Faccion Ingovernable, presumably because he could speak Spanish to them and then English to the AEW TV audience.

¹⁷ An Indian bodybuilder, Johl wrestled solely on AEW Dark, where he was little more than enhancement talent. He was briefly in the forgotten and not-beloved Hardy Family Office faction, which was really the point where it became clear it was time to move Matt Hardy out of TV angles.

¹⁸ Part of the Workhorsesmen tag team, Henry was the most controversial firing, as he’d been out with an injury which he’d suffered working an indie date. “I don’t know if wrestling is something I still want to pursue,” he tweeted when the news came out. “I am devastated.” After an online outcry, Khan rehired him, but noted that the fact he’d been injured on an independent booking meant he didn’t feel he owed him the same consideration as if

Boudreaux (who was formerly signed to WWE, and had a general buzz about him that he was the next Brock Lesnar, which has turned out to be wishful thinking/lucky) and Slim J¹⁹.

The only more recognisable name was 'Gravity' Stu Grayson, who had been a member of the Dark Order and long-time tag partner of Evil Uno, a good performer but not one you'd be bereft if you went to see AEW and he wasn't on the card.

Predictably, Tony Khan came in for some personal criticism, although this time it was more warranted than normal. Khan had made a big deal of saying that AEW was different to WWE as if you were on a contract, you'd never be cut midway through. I think the issue he's run up against is that he keeps on signing people, and now there's something like 2400 wrestlers in AEW, which should be Khan's problem and not Slim J's, but that's the way businesses operate.

In one of not-CEO things that he does a bit too often, Khan went on a media call, noted the firings were for a variety of different reasons, and then claimed the Boys (who are called Brandon and Brent Tate) had been cut as they hadn't turned up for work on more than one occasion.



Brandon went on Twitter to say that this no-show in March was because AEW had messed up the transportation. They posted screenshots showing that they'd reached out, "wondering if we were booked on *Collision*/ROH this weekend, because we haven't got our flight info yet," and were then booked to fly from a distant airport they'd never used before. Getting back in contact with AEW's travel team, were told the issue would be resolved, but never received any tickets or communication, despite their repeated texts. Having asked if they were even booked on those shows, no one got back to them. It was only when the show was starting that AEW starting contacting them to ask where they were.

"I disagree with the point on travel," Khan responded, "and that in the history of ROH and working with us that there hadn't been a couple times where they didn't make it and made me change stuff, but on the other hand I really like both of them. And whether we agree or not about that point of contention, I think it's regardless, I think they were great. They were a great part of Dalton's act. I like both the Tates. I like everybody we released in this last batch recently and I'm wishing nothing but the best for any of them."

he'd been hurt working for AEW. Khan called it "a challenging grey area," and noted it messed up any plans he might have had for Henry in AEW or ROH. "I've had a little bit of time to reflect and think about it," Khan noted days later, "and I've thought about it, and Anthony's gonna come back to AEW and ROH when he's cleared." And now Anthony knows that any contract he signs doesn't really ensure he'll have a job for its duration. Nice one!

¹⁹ Slim J is a 39-year-old best known for his mad, flippy high-flying in CZW and ROH in the early 2000s, when he was little more than a teenager. Incredibly, considering he's been going that long and has been celebrated as a pioneer of that style which you can trace a line from to the work of Ricochet and Will Ospreay, no one's ever done a Wikipedia page for him and his rating on Cagematch is 5.31, which seems cruelly low. Poor Slim J, nothing's gone right for him.

I mean, this could all have been avoided if Khan had just stuck to the line about budget cuts, but instead he ended up looking like you're grasping for excuses in a weird attempt not to show that your company is a bit shonkily run, or end up looking like a bad guy. Mate, you're a billionaire's son. Embrace being horrible. It's your destiny.

2nd April – PIPE BOMB GOES OFF AGAIN, THIS TIME INJURES AEW



In something that nearly everyone in wrestling must have awaited with a mix of fear and sick enjoyment, CM Punk gave a long interview to Ariel Helwani's *MMA Hour*. It lasted nearly two hours (which means Helwani's format has to concede that it's failed the time limit it sets up in the title) and naturally, much of it was about his time in AEW (he's been in WWE for just six months, and for four of those,

he's been out with an "agonising" triceps injury he suffered in the *Royal Rumble*.) You can listen to the whole thing here, and he's a really compelling interviewee.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6xQo-bk000&embeds_referring_euri=https%3A%2F%2Fflastwordonsports.com%2F&source=ve_path=MjM4NTE&feature=emb_title

He suffered another triceps injury while in AEW, shortly before the infamous backstage fight with the Young Bucks, and noted that he had no communication from AEW for six months after that (partly because lawyers had got involved in the aftermath). Punk claimed that he had to pay for that surgery, find a rehabilitation centre and do everything for himself, whereas WWE have covered everything this time.

The differences that Punk noted between the two companies were their structure, protocols, and professionalism. He claimed that AEW are set in an indy-mindset, of match quality over money. "If you're some goof saying you had a five-star match and the building is a quarter full, we're not in the same business," he noted.

Most interestingly, Punk explained his side of the scuffle he had backstage with Jack Perry at *All In* (it's worth remembering that at the time he did this interview, the footage hadn't been released, and we didn't realise how overblown the whole thing was.)

Jack came back from his match. I was the next match. I'm sitting there. I got people with me. I'm not going to say who they are because I got a lot of friends who work there. I wish them all well, and I don't want them to be punished because they're friends with me. I walk up to him and I'm just like, 'Jack, why do you insist on doing this dumb internet shit on TV', you know? He's just like, 'If you got a problem about it, do something about it.' I was just like, 'Come on, man. I could fucking kill you. What are we doing?'

I thought I was doing the responsible thing - I didn't punch anybody, I just choked somebody a little bit. Samoa Joe was there, told me to stop, and then I quit. I turned to Tony, and I said, 'This place is a fucking joke, man. You're a clown, I quit.' I went to my room, and then Joe and Jerry Lynn came and got me, and they're like, 'Let's just go out there and kill it.' I was just too fired up, and I'm fired up now, and I'm probably gonna regret talking about all this shit, but that's what happened.

This was the last time he said he ever spoke to Tony Khan, who he said was "not a boss, but a nice guy."



Punk mentioned that when he left Wembley Stadium, he walked back to his hotel (which was in central London, which seems like a long way if you're walking, although an earlier story where he had to get the tube when a car didn't turn up for him at Heathrow makes me think he genuinely might never have heard of taxis or Uber) and then ordered some Nando's. "Nando's is great," he added. This gives me the perfect opportunity to post MJF on the same night, snapped in a McDonalds at 2am. "Ironic MJF's hairline matches the maccies logo" noted someone cruel on Reddit.

Moving onto WWE, Punk spoke of a friendlier, more laid-back locker room in 2023 WWE than the "brutal" one he'd faced when he first debuted with them. He mentioned he'd run into Vince McMahon once since his return – he was on his phone in the WWE gym at their corporate HQ when someone came over to tell him not to, as Vince didn't like people making phone calls in the gym. McMahon came over, and they hugged. With the subsequent firestorm, Punk noted that wrestling was better off without McMahon.

I mean, there's no positivity there. There's very much a...I didn't read all of the allegations. I read text messages and I went, 'Oh, fuck this. It's indefensible.' You know? And I think doing this, I'd imagined I was going to be asked about it. I think the easiest thing for people to do is to ignore it or avoid it, but man, it's there.

And my initial, first thing out of my mouth was, 'I'm kinda shocked at how dumb he was,' like writing stuff down and leaving that paper trail, and it's horrific. And I'm not - I think at this point, all of the energy should be used to somehow...I don't even know if you can make reparations or amends - but there are victims here.

So, like, what CM Punk thinks about Vince, and the CM Punk / Vince relationship doesn't fucking mean anything. All of that stuff takes a backseat. I'm more concerned with going forward, like how do those people survive after suffering all of that trauma? [That's] my biggest concern.

It's very, very hard to reconcile. I heard what Becky [Lynch] said.²⁰ Because Vince is a father figure to a lot of people. Vince, I think, liked to foster that father figure relationship, and that's why I think he was always fascinated with me, because I was always like, 'Fuck you, I've got a dad. You're my boss. Let's just keep it that way.'

But it's been wild, all that shit. It's sad. He ruined his life. And he ruined his life, [by] ruining other people's lives, so there's very much a part of me that's like, 'We got him. Good.' Shuffle him into the basement.

3rd April – SCOT BOTTOM

The next *Clash at the Castle* PLE was announced, to take place in Glasgow. But three Scottish wrestlers were key to an even bigger event, as the stable Gallus were chosen to get Rock ring-ready for *Wrestlemania* (which is a useful statement you can use to determine whether you have a speech impediment.)



The last time Rock performed a match at *Wrestlemania* (against John Cena at WM 29) saw him damage himself pretty comprehensively, and he had to have emergency hernia surgery straight after. This time, with another decade having passed, Rock did a long training camp to get in shape. WWE sent two rings to his home, and provided him with NXT performers Wolfgang, Joe Coffey and Joe's brother Mark Coffey. Say what you like, but I bet they were absolutely fucking thrilled to get to work with the Rock. I bet they were all hoping they'd be the one he practised the Rock Bottom on, the big marks.²¹

NXT boss Shawn Michaels explained that Rock "needed some folks to train with, and obviously we're talking about three guys who know what they're doing, been around the block, understand every aspect of the business."

You can have somebody out there younger to just fly around but you need guys that are mature, professional, who can adjust in everything to what Rock wants. Obviously I'm partial with those guys - they're fantastic guys but they're so professional, they're very dependable.

Additionally, no one's in WWE's going to be upset if any of them got injured, and it's not as if you have to rewrite TV while they go off to help Rock, as they're barely used on TV. That said, Joe Coffey got a small push afterwards, becoming No.1 contender to the NXT North American title, which he failed to win, and Gallus had an unexpected four-star match on NXT against Tyler Bate, Pete Dunne and Wes Lee in June, even if they only gave them six minutes to do it.

²⁰ And where did this whole 'Becky Lynch finds it hard to reconcile the two sides of Vince McMahon' line come from? It's from the interview I did with her for the *Irish Independent*, where I asked her whether it was hard to – and I quote – reconcile the two sides of Vince McMahon.

²¹ I would have felt exactly the same way and am deeply jealous.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4rjLjnMegII>

The Rock seemed pleased with how it had all gone with Gallus, tweeting “Appreciate all the effort, ideas and hard work boys. Til next time. Keep kicking ass and see ya down the road.” Hmmm, that doesn’t sound like Rock intends to keep in touch. Oh well. They’ll always have the memories.

4th April – THE NEED FOR SPEED?



With *Speed*, WWE launched a new show for the first time in years – and, as if to ensure it wouldn’t work, they made it exclusive to Twitter/X. It seems like a doomed attempt to try and appeal to people who don’t watch TV (i.e. everyone aged 40 and below) by giving them TV, but making that TV incredibly short, as if the bad thing about TV is that you can spend time on

things. If this short-format content on Twitter worked, we’d all be watching *The New Norm*.²² But WWE have a new concept to get The Kids to stop huffing robot glue for one goshdarn-tooting moment and pay attention – because each episode is one match with a three-minute time limit. Surely The Kids in 2024 can pay attention for 180 seconds, can’t they? *Can’t they?*

But there are already some serious issues with *Speed*’s format. Clearly, you’re not going to ask Randy Orton to take part in some dumb three-minute match that doesn’t go out on TV. So, what you end up doing is using people that you don’t need on your proper TV: your Ricochets, your Johnny Garganos, your Tyler Bates, the very use of whom on *Speed* pigeonholes them as “not stars.”

And here’s the worst thing – the matches are all three minutes, but they *never* have draws. Someone *always* wins. I know we all know wrestling isn’t real, but it’s too obvious a fix if you have three-minute matches and there’s *always* a clean-cut victory. And why didn’t these wrestlers wrestle like this and win all their normal length matches quickly, if they can suddenly do it when the time limit comes down? After all, if they *had* wrestled like this before, maybe they wouldn’t have ended up stuck on WWE *Speed*.

The only matches that aren’t three minutes are matches for the WWE Speed title, which are five minutes long. That’s fucking annoying – every match is three minutes,

²² Which, ohmigod you should - it’s a comedy animation on X written by right-wingers that is so supernaturally bad and leaden, it tips over into being genuinely hilarious, but for none of the reasons the creators could have conceived. Every third line is some character saying something along the lines of “you can’t misgender the cat!” and it just hammers along the same lines throughout each episode, like a robot that’s banged into a wall and keeps trying to go forward. It’s like the output of two Tim and Eric characters who have set out to make a right-leaning viral cartoon for boomers and succeeded, but in the process are dimly aware that they’ve made themselves look like the world’s biggest arseholes. *Is it a parody? Or is it just really shit?* I don’t know, but it’s so spectacularly cringe-inducing to almost be a work of art.

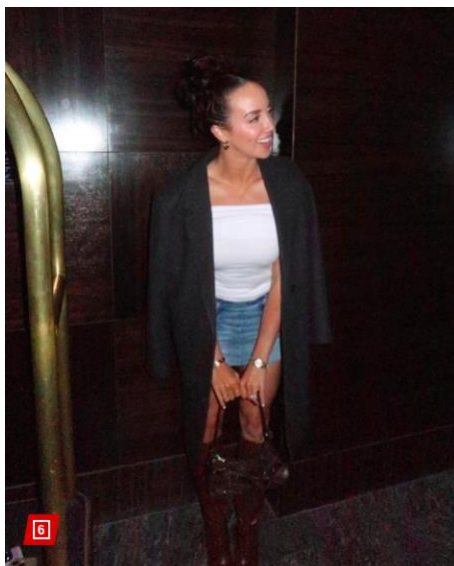
except when you're going for the belt to prove you're the king of speed, where you get 66% longer. If you really want to push that you're the best on Speed, the title matches should be a maximum of 90 seconds. Or make it really exciting, just 5 seconds. Or just don't have them at all.

Anyway, after 3 months, the debut *Speed* episode of Ricochet vs Dragon Lee had clocked up just 3.3million views, which seems pretty fucking dismal considering it's on the WWE's Twitter feed, which has 14.1 million people following it.

<https://x.com/WWE/status/1775550563603619911?lang=en>

Still, at least it's nice to see Ricochet get some spotlight! I bet he's absolutely delighted about this! And I'm sure it won't end up with him asking for his release just weeks later!

5th April – CHELSEX GREEN



With *Wrestlemania* taking over the Eastern seaboard, one group of people who weren't aware it was happening were the staff of the Fairmont Plaza Hotel in New York, where WWE superstar Chelsea Green was about to enjoy a quiet drink before heading to the theatre. The staff took one look at her (in the outfit you can see here), immediately presumed she was an escort, and refused to let her into their public bar.

“Get back here,” a staff member snapped at her when she tried to enter a second time. “We aren't playing your games. We know what you're doing here.” When Green attempted to talk to the manager at the desk (which, thrillingly, is her actual gimmick come to life), she was stopped by three security guards, who told her to get out. “Life is funny!” Green tweeted, which is a much better response to wrongly being accused of being a prostitute than getting angry about it. “She kinda looks like an escort there,” noted her husband Matt Cardona. I do like both of them a lot.

The next night was her birthday and she went out to a Philadelphia restaurant with husband Matt Cardona, dressed – bizarrely – in a vintage Manchester United top, (made even odder by the fact you could understand it if she wore a Chelsea shirt, due to their names being the same). Imagine going out in this country for a birthday meal in a football kit and not being 10, or very fat and middle-aged. I can't tell whether she's great at fashion or incredibly bad at it, but either way, well done her.



6th April – GIULIA STANDS, YET TO DELIVER



There was a surprise appearance at *NXT Stand and Deliver*, which looked to be as much a surprise to the person who was being surprised announced as it did the crowd. Japanese wrestler Giulia (it's basically pronounced 'Julia', but it's spelled as a nod to her half-Italian heritage) appeared sitting at ringside with William Regal and the former STARDOM owner Rossy Ogawa, and looked genuinely taken aback when her name appeared on the screen and the crowd roared for her.

As Regal stood up (presumably as a cue for her to get up too, because I don't think Regal speaks Japanese), Giulia looked around, unsure, said "woah" quietly, and couldn't quite work out what face to pull, moving through a loop of scared / touched / uncertain / fearful of being attacked / awed.



Nothing was said in so far as her signing with WWE, but WWE doesn't stick people on TV and give Rossy Ogawa a plane seat all the way to America if that wasn't the plan, and it was widely believed her debut would be in July, taking on Roxanne Perez for the NXT Women's title at *Heatwave*. But while wrestling in the opening Marigold shows in Japan (where she had agreed to "a handful of matches" to help Ogawa get the new promotion up and running before making the eventual transition to Florida), Giulia injured her wrist and all the projected plans were put on hold. Let's hope the injury doesn't cost her the job.

7th April – SABU SABU BOO, WHERE ARE YOU?

If I was John Cena, I'd say "sometimes the hardest battles are fought before the match" and then I'd check to see if anyone from China was still going on about when

I caused the nation such pain for calling Taiwan a country.²³ But in this case, Fictional-Me-John-Cena wasn't just spouting new age bollocks – he was right.

Rhea Ripley revealed at the post-*Wrestlemania* XL Night 1 press conference that she'd had a full-blown panic attack two hours before her match with Becky Lynch.

It's quite funny how this whole thing works in this crazy world. I legit was having a straight-up panic attack two hours before I walked through the curtain, and I was violently shaking, just nervous.

If you don't get nervous before you go out, especially at *Wrestlemania*, you obviously don't love it enough,' Ripley added. 'That's the way I think about it. So I'm glad the nerves were there. But at the same time, that was sort of taking over my body.

So when I got to step through into the stage with the band Motionless in White, all those nerves that I had just sort of flew away. I was in the zone, I was moshing out like it was a little mosh pit. I was living in the moment, and that's what I love about this business. We get to live in the moment a lot of the time. I just snap into Rhea Ripley, and I'm instantly comfortable, instantly ready to go and ready to fight.



In a hotel room at the Sheraton (where *Wrestlecon* was taking place), someone else was having a panic attack – the owner of GCW, Brett Lauderdale. He was trying to get Sabu to attend the Indie Wrestling Hall of Fame ceremony that he'd put on, where the Briscoe Brothers, 'Hot Stuff' Eddie Gilbert, Trent Acid and Mercedes Martinez were also being inducted. But Sabu couldn't make it on the night, as, er, he was downstairs in the hotel but couldn't be bothered to go upstairs.

"In the true spirit of independent wrestling," Lauderdale tweeted, "Sabu has decided to keep his deposit and no show the Indie Hall of Fame ceremony today. He accepted the booking and took the money, but doesn't wanna get in the elevator and come upstairs. What a legend."

Never a man of many words, Sabu later tweeted "I changed my mind." Lauderdale took it well, later saying "just for the record, I have no hard feelings towards Sabu and still have nothing but respect for him as a person and especially as a performer. The sacrifices he made changed the game (pardon the pun) and many of my favourite memories as a fan are centred around his work."

Sabu later paid back his \$300 deposit, which Lauderdale donated to William Way LGBT Community Centre in Philadelphia. So, in a roundabout way, it all worked out better than if it had gone into Sabu's pocket. I hope he does the same thing next year,

²³ You know if you end up having your grovelling apology pulled apart by Stephen Colbert, you've had a nightmare. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XI2IkPNteO4>

and the year after, in a clever way of getting Lauderdale to fund LGBT Community Centres across America.

And let's not forget someone else who would be feeling terrible this evening: Vince McMahon, for whom it was the first *Wrestlemania* he wasn't in attendance at. While you and I couldn't have cared less about a man whose pigeons had come to roost (the pigeons are horrible sexual abuse allegations, and their roost is the building that the US government build criminal cases in), McMahon's personal trainer Michael Monteforte went onto Instagram, where he began playing the world's smallest violin.

Vince McMahon was unable to attend his first *Wrestlemania*. How quickly people forget, that without his vision, there would be no wrestling or *Wrestlemania*. Sadly, when a person is down, the people who say they love you, turn their backs on you.

Michael, is this one of those "tell me you don't have access to the internet without telling me you don't have access to the internet" things? It's like if every time you put a *Reservoir Dogs* DVD on, Harvey Weinstein got all prickly and asked where his invite was.

8th April – CODY FINISHES STORY, NO NOTES



With all his family in attendance – his mum, his dog, his wife Brandi Rhodes, his brother Dustin (why didn't he come out during the end section dressed as Goldust? That would have been *incredible*), best friend Ricky Starks (which suggested that Starks might not be long for AEW, considering his best mate is now one of the most powerful wrestlers in the business) and assorted cousins and aunts – Cody Rhodes finished his story and won the WWE title from

Roman Reigns, culminating what might be the longest single booked-angle in WWE history.

It was a huge creative, financial and popular success from start to finish and wasn't just the start of a new era²⁴ – it marked the end of a previous one.

Roman Reigns had dominated in his role as the unbeatable, sullen champion in the past five years, holding the WWE title for an unbroken 1,316 days - and the way the angle built to him finally losing was every bit as important and captivating as Rhodes winning. It's one of those moments where, in losing, you suddenly realised just how great Reigns had been, and the only way that his reign could end satisfyingly would be to lose to the industry's next bona fide superstar – and Rhodes' popularity, which has seemed to increase with every passing week since his debut at *Wrestlemania* 38, came to a head at the perfect time.

²⁴ It was later reported that Rhodes had trademarked the term 'The Renaissance Era' but god knows what that's about. Stephanie McMahon tried to call this "the Paul Levesque Era," but that seemed more like an attempt to distance everything from her father now he's effectively human-shaped cyanide.



Oddly, it could *only* have been Rhodes. He went into this angle with so much unique baggage – he was the son of the beloved legend that never won the WWE title, Dusty Rhodes (who was in turn adored by a large part of the WWE roster, who he'd trained in NXT)²⁵. He'd endured a painful first run in WWE – his gimmicks didn't work, he was stuck in the mid-card, he had a terrible run as Stardust – and he left because he knew he could do better. He was a key part of setting up AEW, the only rival to

WWE, had become one of their figureheads (remember when he smashed up that throne with a sledgehammer? That seems like a lifetime ago) and became the first big AEW star to jump ship. He was the returning prodigal son, a man who'd made himself into a bigger star in his time in the wilderness, coming to claim the prize that no one but he ever believed he was worthy of. And he had to do it all against Reigns, the single most dominant main event star of the last decade, who had already proved he could defeat Rhodes in the main event of a *Wrestlemania*.

Angles where everything works as well as this happen so rarely. Every single step made Rhodes, Reigns and the angle bigger. I have a feeling we won't ever see its like again.

The end stretch of the match was just pure magic, the best sort of silly wrestling bollocks. The surprise entrances, each one topping the next, was the WWE at its absolute best – leaning into the past it shares with the fans, and them on the biggest show of the year in a soaraway celebration of the sport of kings. *Wrestlemania* is like wrestling's birthday, and we got presents we didn't think our parents could afford.

Being there live, when the Shield's music hit, there was a collective gasp as to what it meant – there was a palpable air that we were about to see a surprise run in from Reign's old teammate (and AEW star) Jon Moxley (people around us were barking "oh my fucking god, Mox!") When it turned out to just be Seth Rollins, you could almost hear the crowd deflate: "Oh. Oh, right. OK. No, we just thought it was going to be...never mind, it's fine. Right. OK."

Asked about whether WWE had reached out with an eye to bringing Mox in, Tony Khan said no, they'd not. "I was asleep in Japan when that was going on," Mox told *Sports Illustrated* a week later.

When I woke up, I had these messages saying, 'I thought you were coming out!' And I was like, 'Coming out where?' It's cool that people thought it was me. But I was asleep.

²⁵ Dusty *loved* Seth Rollins. I always felt I would have really got on with Dusty, who was my favourite wrestler from 1989 on, but this does make me wonder.



But by the time we'd had Cena, Rock and then Undertaker, it was hard to remember there was a brief, fleeting moment of disappointment when it turned out to be Undertaker and not Stone Cold Steve Austin. And *yes*, it would have been better if it had been Stone Cold facing off against the Rock, but you know what? That was only what you thought afterwards, and it's hard to say that in the moment they didn't give you something that you were delighted to get.

"I would totally understand if no one would believe this," Cody told *Today* the day after the match, talking about the superstar cameos, "but there were certain elements of the match that I asked to not know."

The reason being it's so real at this point that I don't want it to be performative at all. So if there are performative pieces I'll see them as they happen. Just like the end, there's no coordination of that. It just happened, it was all real. Hopefully it came across in that way because it was.²⁶

On the *Pat McAfee Show*, Cena shared the advice he gave Cody as they celebrated in the ring:

When I got to embrace him, he had the championship in his right hand. I said: 'Do you feel that?' He said, 'Yes.' 'Do you feel how heavy it is?' 'Yes.' I said: 'It will get heavier every day.' That is the burden you bear trying to craft the path to being the greatest of all time.

Thanks John! Literally my first minute in the job, and here you are to tell me that it's really hard. Where's your upbeat motivational bullshit when I need it, mate?

Today asked Cody whether he'd had a catch-up with Rock or Roman after the match, and the answer revealed the strange melancholy of being the huge star who's passing the torch.

Neither. I didn't talk to either. And I think they probably appreciate it because sometimes your opponent's there in Gorilla waiting on you...I think [Reigns] was happy to pass through and just, head high, go to his bus and relax, because as much as he had a part-time schedule, he was never not the champion. He always carried himself as the champion. Always, every time he was there, the aura they talk about with Roman, the presence he developed. And I think...he wasn't tired, he was far from it. He was in the best shape I've ever seen him. But I think he...kind of swan song for now. And that's why I haven't [spoken with him]. I'm sure we will.

After the match, Triple H then presented Cody with a gold Rolex, which had previously belonged to Dusty, and which he had pawned to pay for Cody to go to acting school, prior to him getting into wrestling. No idea how they found it, but the

²⁶ Worth noting that Cody has often done a bit of kayfabling in his interviews. He's said before that he didn't know he was losing to Reigns at *Wrestlemania 39* until he was pinned in the ring after being speared, which isn't true. It's not how wrestling works, dummy.



WWE is a huge terrifying wealthy corporation, so I imagine whoever had it was tracked down and made to hand it over for free, just like they do to the nervous people who have good merch on WWE's *Most Wanted Treasures*.²⁷

Cody then went out and got shitfaced, as the Undertaker revealed on his podcast. "He sent me a voicemail that night, the night he won the title. It was 3:49 AM, I think, and I made out about half of it! I believe he was having a good time that night. Well deserved."



Markus Grone @MarkusGron · 26m ...

Nice pic, but unless young Cody was watching a tape here, Dusty had zero matches in 1993. Maybe change it to 1994, he had a few tags with Dustin then and it would also make it an even 30 years.

9th April - CCMTV

In a decision that seemed like it was an attempt to regain the moral high ground over CM Punk after his interview with Ariel Helwani - while also stealing a huge rating for *Dynamite*, hopefully stealing some of the lingering, feel-good spotlight that *Wrestlemania* had placed on WWE, and presaging the return of Jack Perry in his

²⁷ Talking of which, here's Cody hunting down Dusty's polka dot outfit on that show. Cody mentions that it's weird seeing something that used to be in his basement in someone else's house, but it's clear that Dusty just flogged all this to a collector, and now, for some reason, the WWE think they're entitled to take it all back. The poor guy really doesn't want to sell the costume, which he paid something in the region of \$10,000 for, and threw in a load of other merch (like Hulk Hogan's ring-worn trunks) to get it. Where do these people get such good jobs that they not only buy all this stuff, but all have huge empty rooms to store it properly in? This guy does end up telling them to get lost, which I admire. I can tell you this, they'll *never* get my Dusty signed 8x10, which he sold via a website in the early 2000s to try and prop up his failing independent promotion. By the way, you will watch all of these videos once you start - they're so awkward, moreish and the merch is genuinely sensational. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6jaLdWABevo&list=PLcviVtB85dLzs5PECUlaCE6Bvo8GmQjEt&index=4>

‘scapegoat’ gimmick - AEW decided to release the backstage footage of CM Punk’s fracas with Perry at *All In*, which led to Punk’s departure from the company.

When the history of AEW comes to be written, this might be the exact moment that kick-started the second phase of its existence - a misstep that (coincidentally or not) seemed to kickstart a series of small events that chipped some of the gloss off a company that formerly felt like it could do no wrong.



In an incident that Tony Khan said left him fearing for his life and needing to sack Punk to protect the safety of everyone who worked in AEW, the CCTV gave the impression the fracas was a massive damp anti-climax. It was genuinely puzzling in terms of what Tony Khan thought airing it would achieve – even if it was just to get a big one-off rating for *Dynamite*, *surely* he must have known that the footage itself was a puzzling mess, which, at best, showed Punk had lied about not starting the brief

and unimpressive brawl, and, at worst, contradicted the line AEW put out claiming that everyone was in fear for their lives.

Introduced by the Bucks (who were trying to shoehorn it into their feud with FTR, although it seemed more of a hook to hang the screening of the footage on, rather than a well-thought-out angle), the silent film showed Punk facing off with Perry, shoving him while Perry’s arms were clearly still down by his sides, grabbing him in a choke, and then being pulled apart after about two seconds. A startled Chris Hero (who’s now a producer in AEW) then walked off, covering his mouth with his hands like he was in a cartoon.



Here’s *Inside The Ropes* breaking it down (it’s worth saying the third sentence is missing some words, there’s no one called ‘Hook Perry’ and “individuals...is believed to be Tony Khan” mixes the plural with the singular, but apart from that, it’s acceptable wrestling reportage).

With no audio playing, Perry is seen backstage before Punk walks into view. The two exchange words before Punk shoves Perry and places him in a chokehold. Monitors are knocked before both men are separated with Samoa Joe and Hook Perry to one side while Chris Hero and Jerry Lynn. Punk is also seen pointing and shouting to individuals behind the monitors, who is

believed to be Tony Khan, but can't be seen. Punk then walks out of the shot as the footage cuts off.



After it was shown, *Dynamite* cut back to an embarrassed-looking Tony Schiavone, who looked like he'd argued not to show this, had lost the argument, and was now the first person you saw once it had been on (all of which had happened). "He's in the unique position to know first-hand how one bad line or decision can kill a promotion's momentum forever," noted Redditor Alchemist92. "I think he's flashing back."²⁸

What it made me think was (a) yes, Punk's a twat and assaulted a colleague, which is utterly unacceptable and unprofessional whichever way you look at it, (b) Punk's unacceptable actions were massively overblown by Tony Khan in subsequent statements and interviews, and (c) going back to the event made AEW look like they couldn't move on from Punk, who had become the key part of their show even though he'd been in another company for the last six months.

It was like Punk was a boyfriend who'd done them dirty, they'd broken up, he started going out with a much richer girl, happened to mention to a mutual friend that he was much happier, and they absolutely flipped out when they heard. Effectively, AEW are Alanis Morissette singing *You Oughta Know* at their ex.

"I wasn't crazy about the footage and how they utilized it," noted AEW employee Matt Hardy on his podcast *The Extreme Life of Matt Hardy*.

I mean, I get the intent, but I would have stayed away from it. If I was in charge of AEW and making decisions, I would leave CM Punk in the past where he was, and I wouldn't reference him at all going forward. CM Punk is not at AEW, he's somewhere else. I would not reference him at all going forward and I would focus on AEW and who is currently at AEW.

Dave Meltzer of the *Wrestling Observer* agreed: "I did not think it was a good idea."

I never did think it was a good idea, but I thought you've gotta give them the benefit of the doubt and see what happens. Here's the thing: later in the show when the fans were chanting CM Punk, it was like well this one sure backfired. You don't want people chanting the name of someone from another promotion during your show.

Sometimes it's gonna happen and you just can't avoid it, but this one was one that you brought on yourself. It just reminded me of when fans did the 'We Want Flair' stuff in 1991 and that was not a good thing. I didn't see how it helped at all. I mean, whether the rating is good or bad, it just didn't come across well.

²⁸ Schiavone later stated that "my facial reaction to what happened was my facial reaction trying to put more heat on the Bucks for being assholes, within the storyline itself. I did not have any reaction to the footage we saw because I don't give a damn. I didn't give a shit about the footage, and still don't. I'm sincere when I say that I don't care. I don't care. It has no impact on my life." Alright, Tony, settle down. No need to get so upset.

In retrospect, the real problem was no-one came out well from showing the footage. Punk was a bully. Jack Perry got shoved. Tony Khan's decision to broadcast it seemed a bit petty. A backstage event that fans were mythologising for six months turned out to be the sort of witless scuffle you see when Wetherspoon's is kicking out.

Can we just get back to having actual thought-out wrestling on wrestling TV, please? It's much more enjoyable than whatever this was.

10th April – GULAK OF RESPECT

Promoting her autobiography and making it crystal clear she has absolutely no intention of ever returning to WWE again, Ronda Rousey went onto NewsNation's *Banfield* (no, none of us have ever heard of it) and detailed an incident of sexual harassment while she was in WWE.

One time, I was waiting to go talk to Triple H in the writers' room or something. I was standing there with Bruce Prichard and another one of the writers and...God, I forgot his name. This guy that I was barely an acquaintance with grabs the string of my sweatpants as I'm walking by.

I'm just like, 'What the fuck was that? Why are you grabbing the string of my sweatpants? If my husband was standing here next to me, would you feel comfortable walking up to me and grabbing the string of my sweatpants?' And nobody around me acted like...it was abnormal.

I went and confronted him later and I was like, 'If I ever hear about you putting your hands on any other woman like this or doing anything like this to me ever again, ... we're gonna have a problem.' He was like, 'No, no, no. I'm glad you said something.' He really back-pedalled...but it just put a really sour taste in my mouth about the culture there and what's considered acceptable.



Both incredibly serious (in that she's absolutely right to call that behaviour out) and incredibly humiliating for the perp (in that she couldn't even remember this twat's name), Rousey later recalled the individual was Drew Gulak, then a member of the No Quarter Catch Crew on NXT²⁹ (yes, I had to Google what he was doing, as I genuinely couldn't have told you if he was still with WWE, although he's been there since 2016, which is surprising considering how often you've seen him doing anything in all that time. The main note about his recent years is that he was involved in training Bad Bunny.)

²⁹ The other stable members include Charlie Dempsey (Regal's son), Damon Kemp, Myles Borne and Tavion Heights. I have definitely heard of one of them, and spent most of the shows we did in January calling him 'Charlie Sterling' by mistake. Tavion Heights sounds like an American city suburb, Damon Kemp sounds like a modern actor who turns out to be really posh, and Myles Borne sounds like a modern indie musician who turns out to be really posh too.

Following Rousey's claim, Gulak quickly tweeted an apology/explanation. Hmm, that's not usually the best combination.

Backstage at a WWE event in 2022, I saw Ronda talking with a group in the hallway. I stopped to say hi and shake all their hands, and in an attempt to shake her hand, I accidentally touched her drawstring. Complete accident, and one that I had apologized to her for the mishap.

Hmm. The WWE didn't fire Gulak (although it was reported they investigated but were unable to come to a definitive conclusion), but he was removed from NXT and his contract wasn't renewed when it expired in May. Have you learned a lesson you shouldn't have had to learn at this stage in your life? I hope you have.

11th April – OH NO AKEBONO



In what was wonderful news for any coffin-makers who charge by the inch, the Hawaiian-born sumo wrestler Taro Akebono (born Chad Rowan) passed away at the age of 54.

At 6'8" and some 462lbs, Akebono was the first foreign-born sumo grand champion, having moved to Tokyo in 1988 to pursue the sport when he was 19.

Six years after debuting, he became Japan's 64th Yokozuna (or grand champion), a position which had previously been off-limits to non-Japanese athletes. By the time he retired in 2001 due to repeated knee injuries, he was a beloved honorary Japanese, having changed his name and become a naturalised Japanese citizen.

That's where most of his obituaries ended, but to some of us, Akebono is best known for his MMA and pro-wrestling run between 2004 and 2017. A huge monster with a legit background and a big celebrity profile, he was a (literally) huge main eventer in Japan for the first few years, before his lack of mobility, limited skills and repetitive big-man routine quickly made him feel plodding and stale.



Following his sumo retirement and trading on his huge name value, Akebono started off doing shoot matches in a peaking-but-still-incredibly-popular K1, but did terribly, racking up an eventual career record of 1 win and 14 losses (although as he was such a big name, his opponents included the era's biggest stars like Bob Sapp, Don Fry and Royce Gracie). Here's the end of his MMA debut against Sapp in 2004, which drew 45,000 fans to the Nagoya Dome (the match didn't last that much longer than this clip).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjY8eAviUp8>

And here's Akebono's trilogy with Hong Man Choi, a 7'2" South Korean fighter. None of this "let's match-up freakishly sized people to fight!" fever seems particularly edifying with the passage of time.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BvAcXpW2gVk>

After a lot of defeats, Akebono made his professional wrestling debut – and surprisingly, it was in WWE. He squashed prelim talent Eddie Vegas³⁰ on a March 2005 edition of *Smackdown* (and that makes it sound like it was more fun than it was, he barely touched the bloke), ahead of what was his biggest US match: a sumo match against the Big Show at *Wrestlemania 21*.

The match was preceded with a weigh-in, where Michael Cole really pushed the fact that these men were obscenely heavy, as if that makes you want to see them then compete in sports. Akebono was 503lbs, which might have been gimmicked, and then he spoke on the mic, which no one ever let him do ever again. They had a bit of argy-bargy, but I don't think this bout sold many tickets. I'm joking! (I don't think it sold any.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i44vEAGTggU>



Faced with a big fat Show wearing an absurd and much too revealing nappy (or whatever the proper name for it is in sumo circles), Akebono beat the WWE star, but it was a weird match – it was sumo, which isn't as good as pro wrestling because it's just pushing, Big Show was made to look small (which was mad considering his gimmick was that he was the biggest show) and as soon as it was over, Akebono was barely ever mentioned again.

He came back for one WWE match in Japan, where he remained a big deal, teaming with Show to beat Carlito and Matt Morgan, and then made his debut in *Wrestle-1*, where he lost an opening match in the Grand Prix 2005 to Keiji Muto.

Following dipping his massive gouty toe into wrestling's water, he signed with All Japan where he remained a big star, albeit one who was in the high-midcard and who never turned in matches you wanted to go out of your way to watch. With Muto training him, Akebono won 2005's Tokyo Sports awards for both Rookie of the Year, and, for his work tagging with Muta, Team Of The Year, which slightly speaks of both Akebono's celebrity power and of just how deep in the doldrums New Japan was at this time.

³⁰ Better known as early-2000s US indie talent Fast Eddie, he was partly trained by Shawn Michaels and made appearances in NWA Wildside (where AJ Styles was wrestling at the same time), TNA and Ring of Honor between 2002 and 2005. It was all the more impressive he was an indie star as he was legally blind, although this never formed any part of his gimmick. He stopped wrestling in 2009, but why he retired and what happened to him afterwards, I can't find out.



Jumping to New Japan in February 2006, he had an IWGP championship match in March against Brock Lesnar, whose title run in New Japan is not remembered fondly by either the fans, the wrestlers who had to work with him and especially the promoters who had to try and get him to turn up to work for a reasonable amount of money.

<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/xkdhm>

With his limitations meaning he was never going to trouble the main event, Akebono began leaning more into comedy, which brightened up a career that had quickly started treading water. Wearing a mask, he began teaming with Tiger Mask IV as Bono Tiger, and popped up in Michenoku Pro, teaming with Great Sasuke (and wearing the same outfit, although several sizes larger) as the Great Bonosuke.

In 2007, Akebono debuted in HUSTLE, a promotion set up by the legendary UWF shoot specialist Nobuhiko Takada. But the fearsome Takada wanted to do something different, and while the rest of the big Japanese promotions were deeply in thrall to MMA and shoot style, HUSTLE was set up to see if a more American sports-entertainment style could get over in Japan. The formerly gimmickless and dour Takada reinvented himself as the scene-chewing Generalissimo Takada, the leader of the Takada Monster Army, a heel stable whose mission was to destroy the sport.³¹

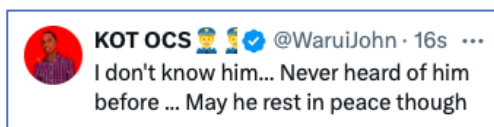


For his introduction, Akebono was introduced as Monster Bono, who was the result of a pregnancy caused when Muta blew green mist into the groin of female heel performer Yinling. The mist caused her to lay a massive egg, which Bono came out of and, as he'd just hatched, he pretended to be a baby, prone to tantrums and sobbing. He would later turn against his mother (who constantly berated him), but ended up tragically squashing her to death. It might feel like a long way from his time as a sumo Yokozuna, but it was one of the more joyful moments in his career.

From there, it was diminishing returns, and after a long and un-notable stint in All Japan from 2008 until 2015 (which surprisingly saw him with the Triple Crown championship, which he had to later give up due to injury), followed by two-years with his own independent promotion (which was called Odo and no one remembers), Akebono retired after being diagnosed with a heart issue. From that point on, he struggled with his health, being wheelchair-bound by 2019 and reportedly suffering from such memory issues that he was unable to recall anything about his years in pro-wrestling.

³¹ Generalissimo Takada would tragically be killed during a 2009 show, when one of his lasers was repelled back into him by the actor/singer Riki Takeuchi.

Akebono dies as one of the few wrestlers to have a perfect *Wrestlemania* win-loss record, one of only two people I can think of who were billed as Great Muta's child, and the subject of the single best use of a giant egg popping open in wrestling history.³²



12th April – THE INTERNATONAL LANGUAGE OF BLOOD



Grizzled brawl-man Jon Moxley managed a unique feat by becoming the first man to hold the WWE, AEW and IWGP title today, pinning Tetsuya Naito at NJPW Strong's *Windy City Riot* in Chicago (NJPW Strong being the US arm of NJPW's Japanese head.) It also marks the first time the IWGP belt has ever changed hands outside of Japan, a lineage that dates back to 1987. The match also took place in the same arena where Mox won the AEW belt.

It's been a slightly rough time for New Japan, reeling from the departure of their number one star Kazuchika Okada and with no younger stars feeling quite ready to step up to the plate. Experiments in recent years in crowning Evil and SANADA weren't successful, and they'd gone back to Naito, who's one of the only stars who doesn't seem either stale (I'm reluctantly looking at Hiroshi Tanahashi here) or utterly unripe (and I'm less reluctantly looking at everyone else).

"I signed a contract with New Japan before I signed one with AEW," Jon Moxley told *Sports Illustrated* (his first match after he left WWE back in 2019 was a victory over Juice Robinson for the IWGP US title, three weeks before he entered AEW).

Japan is the first direction my compass was pointed. New Japan is all about the action in the ring. There's pageantry and big characters, but it's all about the action in the ring, which is so high level. It always spoke to me.

There was an icy relationship back then between AEW and New Japan. I was completely neutral. For a moment, it seemed like I was going to have to pick one or the other, but I said, fuck that, I'm going to do both. And now the two sides have this wonderful working relationship. I hope I helped play a role in facilitating that.

When I first came to Japan, I wanted to understand it and participate in it. That allowed me to learn and grow. I didn't come in and say, 'This is what I do and this is what we're doing.' Everyone I wrestled, I learned from. I've really been able to grow a lot working with New Japan. It's been a mutually beneficial relationship. They get me, and I get them.

³² The Gooker must be spitting feathers, a ha ha ha. Because it's a bird thing, isn't it? Birds have feathers.

The first deal I signed with them was for six months. The shoe fit, so we kept going. We're still on a handshake deal.



There's something so noble about Moxley, in the tradition of Bruiser Brody or Cactus Jack – he seems like a bloodthirsty brawl-monster, but he's also incredibly trustworthy and principled, and if he says he's going to do something, you don't have to worry that he won't.

“To be in this position,” he continued, probably as he was spitting blood out of his mouth and picking at scabs on his head, “it means as much to me as anything I've ever had in wrestling. This relationship with New Japan is very important to me. I take it very, very seriously. I wouldn't have it any other way. I'm right where I want to be.”

Moxley would later defend the IWGP title on *Dynamite* against Powerhouse Hobbs. Sounds fun, right? Well, not if you're NJPW star Yota Tsuji. In an interview with *Tokyo Sports*, he wasn't happy about the choice of challenger, who has no profile in Japan, and not a massive one in America either.

Where was the value of the IWGP? If Moxley has agreed to be the champion, then he certainly has the right to fight for the title. The problem is that New Japan Pro Wrestling didn't say anything about it. What is that feeling? I wonder if they don't feel any discomfort with that. I feel nothing but disgust and displeasure.

It was hard to tell if it was kayfabe or genuine annoyance, but with Tsuji seeming like one of the younger talents who seems to have a chance of breaking out in the upcoming months, it looks like it was just an excellent work. Unless it wasn't, in which case I sort of like it more.

13th April – THE E IS FOR EMPATHY

Two years after his neck was broken during a March 2022 match on *Smackdown*, the beloved Big E announced his latest results were in – and the results weren't good.



I love Big E, I want to see Big E happy and healthy, and, as much as it pains me, I hope we never see Big E in the ring ever again.

14th April – TONY JONES NOW A LONG WAY BEYOND THE MAT



The epitome of a journeyman wrestler, ‘Shooter’ Tony Jones died at the age of 53. After a promising amateur career, his pro career was unspectacular, spent working for tiny promotions in the California indies for twenty years between 1997 and 2017. Perhaps the most notable thing about it was that Jones occasionally faced a rookie wrestler who would go onto better things – a Samoa Joe, a Crash Holly or a Frankie Kazarian. In UPW, he even worked John Cena’s second-ever match.

But Jones had one match that makes him more than an obscure footnote. In September 1998, he took on his fellow APW roster member Michael Modest in a dark match on *WWF Heat* – with the build-up to the match between these two hopefuls being followed by the camera crew making *Beyond The Mat*. In the documentary, it seemed like this could be Jones’ big break - Jim Ross took an interest in him over the more experienced but much shorter Modest, although he did say Jones needed to bulk up.

The irony is that before the try-out you saw in the movie, I was thinking to myself, ‘This is it. This is my shot.’ I wanted to look my best so I went back to my roots of college wrestling and I cut weight and dropped weight. I lost about 35 pounds for the match. I was down to about 220 and looked really good when I went out there. I went out, had a great match, and then I was told I was too small.

As the film revealed as the credits rolled, neither man ever heard back from the WWF. But after the film’s release (Jones mentioned he sat next to Jake Roberts’s daughter at the premiere, and later called the movie “the greatest, best thing I’d ever done for free”), Jones had a WCW try-out (which didn’t lead to anything) and the WWF then invited Jones to train at their dojo under Dr Tom Pritchard³³, where he was in a class with Batista (which also didn’t lead to anything.)

Jones slipped back into obscurity on the California indies, although he returned for a few WWE bouts on *Jakked* (a loss to Raven in 2001), *Velocity* (where he and an

³³ Long before the Performance Centre, the WWF had no training system. In the late 1990s, they had been sending rookies down to the struggling USWA in Memphis. but when that folded, they set up the Funkin’ Dojo, a series of camps run by Dory Funk Jr and Dr Tom Pritchard, in a warehouse behind the WWF’s corporate HQ in Stamford, Connecticut. Kurt Angle, Edge, Val Venis, the Hardy Boyz and Mark Henry all came through the system. It lasted until early 1999, at which point trainees started to be sent to Kentucky’s Ohio Valley Wrestling (OVW), as Jim Cornette had been appalled at how rough the Dojo set up was, and felt that OVW offered a much better place to learn the craft of wrestling, with the bonus of local television exposure. Vince McMahon agreed with him, and OVW marked the start of WWF’s developmental territory system, which would later transfer to FCW in Florida and then morph into the in-house Performance Centre.

unnamed partner lost to the Basham Brothers in 2004) and *Heat* (losses to Eugene and Snitsky in 2007).

Here's a two-hour interview with Jones from 2021. Even since Jones's death, it's only had 120 views.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cl3b2VScb8c>

In a 2000 interview, Jones spoke about what his hopes were.

My objective as an indy wrestler is to make it. To the WWF, which is where I'd like to be, or to make it to WCW. To be in the spotlight. I'd like that opportunity to go out there, do my best, and shine. To have fun means that I'll look back and have no regrets. If it doesn't work out for me and I turn 55 someday, I can always look back and say I had a good time doing it. I can always show my kids, show my grandkids, and say when they're watching the WWF 35 years from now...I can say I did that.

15th April – MARIGOLD COMES INTO FLOWER

Having been booted out from STARDOM (the company he'd founded in 2011, because he was accused of trying to poach talent to start this new organisation, which he denied, but it now looks like those allegations were bang on), the porkpie-hatted and definitely creepy Rossy Ogawa announced his new promotion – Marigold!

It's a classic Japanese-name-that-sounds-a-bit-odd-in-English, and it immediately reminded me of the eccentric Marigold, a chap who used to stand on busy roads in Norwich for 20 years until the mid-1990s and aimlessly direct traffic.



Looking like a black version of Les from *Vic Reeves' Big Night Out*, he was called Marigold because he often wore a pair of washing-up gloves when he did it.³⁴ Marigold became such a familiar sight in the city that the local paper noted that he'd disappeared in the mid-1990s and there was a campaign to have a statue of him erected at one of the busy road junctions where he used to frantically wave.

It was only stopped when his family came forward and said he was doing much better after he'd started regularly taking his medication, and, while they were pleased that people remembered him fondly, they didn't really want a lasting memorial of their family member commemorating the lowest point of his mental health.

³⁴ Note for everyone who isn't British and in their 40s: Marigold was Britain's most popular brand of rubber washing-up gloves. Whoever gave him that nickname was one of the countless unknown genuinely funny people lost to posterity who come up with a great nickname that not only sticks, but is absolutely inspired.

Many of STARDOM's stars stayed loyal to Ogawa (who doesn't seem to offer much loyalty to the people he's supposed to be working with) and jumped to Dream Star Fighting Marigold (it's full name), including Guilia, Utami Hayashishita and MIRAI.



Perhaps most importantly, Marigold's shows were announced as streaming on Wrestle Universe, DDT's streaming service which also shows Pro Wrestling NOAH and Tokyo Joshi Pro. It meant that Marigold was being viewed as major league from the off, as their shows were immediately watchable worldwide. Their first show was announced for May.

But the founding of the company does suggest that Ogawa was being underhand when he was supposed to be working for STARDOM (which he explicitly denied) and there was further shade thrown his way when Kenny Omega spoke cryptically about Ogawa on a Twitch stream following his sacking. And oh god, it sounds like everything you might worry about when it comes to Rossy Ogawa and the position he held in the insular world of Joshi.

From someone who lived it, breathed it, who has very close friends in the industry - I don't necessarily mean the wrestling industry, I mean the *industry*, the government-issued press, the information they know...I'm just going to leave it at that - I would say 'don't be so quick to listen to praise for that individual' because someday - I'm not sure when it will be, maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but someday - people will know the truth. What they do with that truth, I don't know. Will they share it? Maybe. A lot of the higher ups in Japan, they know exactly what.

Pressed to clarify, Omega said: "There is nothing to say."

I just think, eventually...He's done. That's not even the tip. Just you friggin' wait...when it finally comes out. I will say one thing: there are a lot of people who refuse to work for him for the very same reason. Some of those people are in WWE. Some are in AEW. They have a very good reason. It's not just, 'I decided to wake up and not like this guy.'

If you want to know along what lines they tread amongst, the dude just flat out said, 'We're looking for girls ages 13 to 21 that don't have a boyfriend and

aren't married.' We already know he puts underage girls in very revealing swimsuit calendars and books. I wish that's all he did. Let's put it that way.

I don't know. I don't want to say anything. I'm not going on record to say anything. I don't want lawyers barking at my door. That's why I don't want to say anything. I don't have any sort of video evidence - I just have the good word of people who are very close. I'm outside of it. If those people feel like commenting or saying something, whatever.

For now, I'll say that people going to Marigold, good luck. I hope you have a great time. I hope it works out for you. For me, I would be very hesitant. I would be *very* hesitant. That's all.

Someone find out the Japanese for 'MeToo'. I think we'll be using it in the next couple of years.

16th April – THINGS LOOK VERY BAD, DEPLOY THE KITTENS

If you fancy a grim, tight-lipped laugh, then thanks to NBC News, who published a long article about the current life of wrestling pariah Vince McMahon, which saw some sources come forward with a heart-warming story of a twinkly old man helping stray kittens. Hmm, the last time he took something living that needed help under his wing, it didn't work out well for anyone.

NBC News and CNBC talked to 11 people familiar with McMahon and WWE about how he's been spending his time - and how the global brand he built over more than four decades is moving on without him. These people, including close personal associates and company insiders, declined to be named, citing ongoing legal cases and the confidential nature of internal corporate communications.

Back in March, Mark Shapiro, the operating chief of WWE's parent company TKO, wanted to make it crystal clear that McMahon "doesn't work for the company, doesn't come into the office, and he's not coming back to the company." So what's he been up to, apart from sitting for hours in the fancy offices of white male lawyers?

It's as if he's unfazed by his legal fights, two sources said. For instance, on an afternoon in late March, McMahon returned on a private plane to the United States from the sunny Turks and Caicos Islands - but he wasn't alone, according to a person close to him. He had with him seven kittens and a puppy, all of which he brought back to be adopted by his friends, this person added.³⁵

³⁵ There's no indication here that McMahon is going to adopt any of these himself. He's just going to foist them on people he knows. "Here's a foreign dog, pal! Enjoy the 16-years of dedication and vet's bills!" It's almost like he lacks any concept of the consequences of his actions. But I had a quick look at how easy it would be to bring a dog back to the US from the Turks and Caicos (which is a British Overseas Territory), and it requires reams of paperwork, vaccinations, rabies inoculations done a month in advance and animal health certificates, and this all makes me seriously question whether any of this actually happened. And if it did, I hope the US government investigate McMahon to ensure he didn't break the law on importing animals.

“If anything, he’s enjoying life,” said the person, who added that McMahon had also taken a trip to Italy.



Oh, adopting kittens and la Bella Italia! Someone’s having a nice time in the sun! He’s enjoying life! How lovely to not have a care in the world!

“Vince McMahon raped, trafficked and physically assaulted Janel Grant as part of his decades-long normalization of treating women within the WWE as objects,” added Ann Callis, an attorney for Janel Grant who brought the civil case against McMahon and WWE.

He might have thought that Janel would just walk away, but that wishful thinking couldn’t be further from the case. Every day we are focused on adding to our mountain of evidence, speaking with other victims, hiring renowned experts on sex trafficking/coercive control and preparing to vociferously litigate this case.

Ah, I’ve forgotten about those little kittens now, which is probably the last thing McMahon’s inner circle want me to do. So let’s head back to the more human side of the inhuman monster instead!

While his legal battles persist, McMahon is often ferried by a private driver from his posh Connecticut home to Manhattan, according to one of the sources close to him. There, he eats with friends at restaurants such as the old-school Italian spot Il Tinello East on 46th Street, sees his long-time barber for biweekly haircuts and works with his personal trainer multiple times a week, the source said. Two other sources, however, say McMahon has otherwise been “quite guarded” and often on the phone with his lawyers to map out plans since Grant’s lawsuit was made public.

McMahon has also talked to [Donald] Trump, according to two of the people close to the wrestling impresario. The two billionaires have been in touch regularly, according to a person close to McMahon, although it isn’t clear what they’ve discussed.³⁶

This claim caused some concern from someone close to either McMahon or Trump, who contacted NBC soon after that was printed.

Hours after the publication of this story, a spokesperson for McMahon pushed back.

“Mr. McMahon has not been ‘staying in touch’ or ‘been in touch regularly’ with former President Trump. He has spoken with Mr. Trump once in the past several years and that was for about a minute or so after Mr. McMahon’s back surgery. Other than that, there have been no communications between the two,” the spokesperson said.

³⁶ Shouldn’t think it’s art and literature.

Hmm, not sure who wants to make it so clear they've not been in touch with the other. I mean, neither one's problems are being helped by being publicly linked with the other. But there are other people who were definitely said to still be in touch with McMahon and didn't rush to deny it.

Since he resigned, McMahon has been in touch with Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson and John Cena, sources said. Johnson and Cena, both Hollywood superstars, are two of WWE's biggest success stories.

A spokesperson for Johnson declined to comment. A representative for Cena didn't respond to requests for comment.

17th April – THE OHIO STATE ATHLETIC COMMISSION'S PRONOUNS ARE ARSEHOLE/ARSEHOLES

Back in December 2023, AEW put on a Ring of Honor show in Ohio's Paycom Center. One of the matches that wouldn't have stuck in anyone's mind saw Nyla Rose beat Alejandra Lion in a few minutes. Your basic squash. No big deal.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxjQvX9o4bs>

But someone *did* pay a lot of attention to that match: the big boring crying fat old bald babies of the Oklahoma State Athletic Commission. Johnny Aman of RealRasslin.net had noticed that, in the minutes of their quarterly meeting back in January, the white, ruddy, fuck-faced whale-men of the OSAC had been discussing taking "punitive action" against AEW for allowing "a transgender (born male)" to compete "against a female" (they missed out the word 'to', because they're simple-minded fucking idiots).

legislative session.

F. Discussion into what punitive action to take against AEW for allowing a transgender (born male) compete against a female

As Rose is the company's openly transgender performer, it was clearly related to her December appearance. The Commission noted that they had "no idea" there had been an issue at first, "as the wrestler had filled his wrestling license application out as female."³⁷ They referred to Rose throughout their discussions with male pronouns.

It goes on to add that "a match between a man and woman will not be sanctioned, regardless of whether it's professional boxing, mixed-martial arts or even professional wrestling." This means that in 2024, intergender wrestling cannot take

³⁷ This isn't the thing to get most annoyed about here, but having to get a licence to take part in the pre-determined entertainment of wrestling in 2024 is genuinely bizarre. Oklahoma's costs you \$30 a year and has to be renewed annually with details of your bloodwork, a promise not to use foul language and the demand that you don't take on anyone that doesn't share your gender at birth. And what do the wrestlers get in return? Not much more than a basic set of requirements that the ring they're performing in has to meet.

<https://oklahoma.gov/content/dam/ok/en/health/health2/aem-documents/organization/oklahoma-state-athletic-commission/WrestlersApplication32024.pdf>

place in Oklahoma and if you break that law, wrestlers could find themselves sentenced to 30 days in county jail.

With the state's political leaders waging a campaign to "save women's sports", Rose came into the Commission's interfering and pointless sights. They sent AEW a letter in January, in which OSAC officials claimed that Rose violated the law by marking "female" on her application, and issued a formal warning to AEW with a promise of "punitive action" should the company run more matches between trans and cis wrestlers in Oklahoma going forward.

ITEM F. DISCUSSION INTO WHAT PUNITIVE ACTION TO TAKE AGAINST AEW FOR ALLOWING A TRANSGENDER (BORN MALE) TO COMPETE AGAINST A FEMALE.

The Administrator, Joe Miller, explained that AEW, A professional wrestling organization, had an event at the Paycom Center on December 20, 2023, where a transgender wrestler (born male) had a match with a female wrestler. OSAC had no idea as the wrestler had filled his wrestling license application out as a female. OSAC was alerted by a local wrestling organization that had previously done the same thing. That organization acknowledged they knew that was a violation of the OSAC rules and that they would refrain from doing it again in the future. Joe Miller explained that he called AEW and explained that it was a violation of the OSAC rules. He then asked the Commission if there was any other action, they would like to take against AEW. Mike Bower stated that the OSAC boxing, kickboxing and mma applications all ask if someone has had gender reassignment but the wrestling application does not. He stated that it needs to be updated so this doesn't happen in the future. Commission members asked questions and discussed the issues that come along with male vs female wrestling.

Mike James asked what the Commission wanted to do with AEW. Mike Bower said that in his opinion, OSAC needs to be consistent and do to AEW what they did with the previous organization.

Motion made by Dr. Larry Lovelace to warn AEW not to do this again or there will be punitive action made against them if they do. Second by Terry Smith. was made by Dr. Larry Lovelace. Mike Bower, Aye, Mike James, Aye, Terry Smith, Aye, Dr. Larry Lovelace, Aye, David Barber, Aye, Michael Stopp, Aye, Malcom Atwood, Aye.

On Twitter (where she's routinely one of wrestling's funniest people), Rose said she wouldn't personally rest until she'd found "the dastardly Transgender that *checks notes* entertained fans." There was an outpouring of support for her which she said had left her "probably dehydrated from all the happy crying."

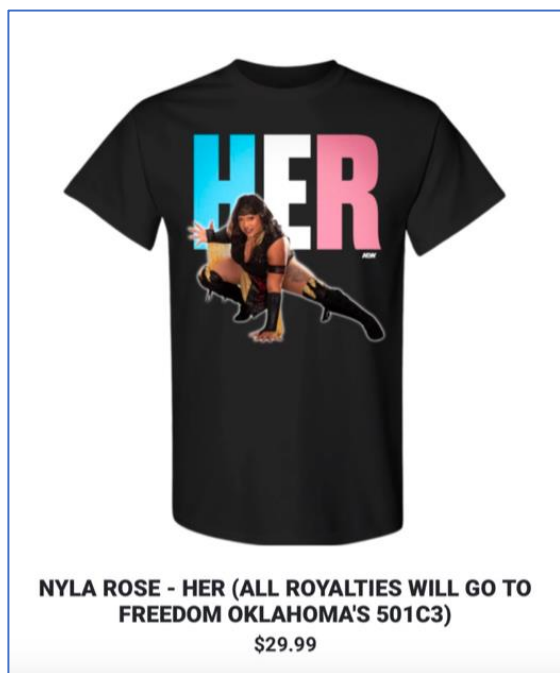
Ahead of the *Dynasty* PPV, Tony Khan made it clear where he stood. "I was really surprised by this [...] and of course I was disappointed by the commission's position and by that warning."

I don't think we did anything wrong. I don't think there should be discrimination against transgender wrestlers or transgender people at all. They have rights, and to that end, I absolutely stand by Nyla Rose. AEW

stands by Nyla Rose and all transgender people who want to play sports. And this is wrestling. There was nothing wrong with it.

If everybody in the locker room can embrace Nyla, I would hope that the Oklahoma Commission could do the same thing

Brandan Bulmer, a wrestler and promoter with the independent wrestling brand Unified Wrestling Oklahoma, told *The Oklahoman* that OSAC's gendered sports crackdown has become "kind of crazy" in the past five years.



The restrictive rules also mean that the state won't allow any mixed matches in any capacity, which Bulmer learned to his cost when he put a female performer in one of his battle royals. "I had the young lady come in the ring and she absolutely destroyed five guys. She beat the snot out them. She threw them all out of the ring and it was down to her and one other guy" before she was eliminated. After the event, the Commission contacted him, gave him a warning, threatened him with a fine, and then suspended every wrestler in the battle royal. What a bunch of stupid old cunts.

Through AEW, Rose released a new T-shirt where all proceeds went towards Oklahoma's only state-wide 2SLGBTQ+ advocacy organization. Glad to see a

horrible decision by a load of old fat twats in an Athletic Commission has ended up helping out an organisation I'm sure they'd love to close down.

"It definitely caught me blindsided," Rose told Renee Paquette's *Up Close* a couple of months after, in June 2024. "I had no idea any of that was going."

Kudos to our company and to our team who was like the ozone layer up there protecting me and us from it, but I had no idea that was even going on. They're like 'Hey, something's coming out. You should be aware of this.' Our team was up there defending and protecting. Then it was like 'Hey, okay listen, we got to rope you in. This is what's been going on. This is what we've been dealing with.'

I was frustrated because it forced me to turn baby[face]. I had some very evil plans on the table. Everybody was so nice and loving and accepting and supportive that I had no choice. I had no choice. The evil cloak has been put away for a while. I owe you guys because you were so good to me.

18th April – ALLIN ABOARD!

Edwardian-boy's-corpse Darby Allin came one step closer to the thing he loves most – being dead – today when he was hit was a bus, as he explained during an appearance on the *Daly Migs Show*. He was hanging out in New York City with the aging California punk rock artist Raymond Pettibon, who's now 67.³⁸

We're in New York hanging out and he's jaywalking. And I see this bus, it's taking a right turn. And I'm like, 'There's no way they're going to see Raymond at night walking. Like, at all.' Because like I said, he can't even really walk that good. So, as I'm like pushing him, 'All right, hurry up. Hurry up. Go, go, there's a bus coming.'

Then as the bus is taking a right, it might have been going like 8-10 miles [per hour], so it wasn't anything like 30 miles an hour. But as I was pushing him out of the way, the side of the bus window - my faced bounced off of it. So, you could say I saved Raymond Pettibon's life.

Already out with a foot injury (which meant he had to cancel the Everest climb he's been chatting about for years), Allin's nose was squashed into his head by the bus. "The only thing that got broke in the accident is my nose and my dignity," he added, before he and Raymond went to a show on Broadway.



I cannot tell you how quickly I would have asked to move seats if I walked in for the performance of *A Chorus Line* and saw these two ghouls there, looking like no-good street punks from *Robocop 2* and presumably absolutely stinking of hospital disinfectant, bus exhaust fumes and clotted blood. The fact that they're also both far more successful than me would also be a part of the decision.

19th April – LET'S GO OVER TO SEAN ROONEY

In America, when a massive sports name turns up at a live WWE show, they announce their name, show them on the big screen and everyone in the arena cheers. Well, they do it a bit differently when they're in Britain.



With Wayne Rooney taking his kids to see the grapple and grunt in the front row at the O2 Arena in London, Drew McIntyre pointed him out in the audience ahead of his match with Jey Uso. McIntyre got on the mic and said "I've got to give this man his props, from one British legend to another, you were the freaking man in your day. But, aren't we the same age? What the hell happened to you?" as the crowd laughed right in Rooney's face.

³⁸ His most famous work is probably the cover of Sonic Youth's *Goo* (the couple in the car which you'll have seen on a million T-shirts, which was based on a 1966 newspaper photo of two key witnesses leaving the Ian Brady-Myra Hindley trial) but he also designed the logo for Black Flag – he's the brother of band founder Greg Ginn, was in an early line-up and later gave the band their name.

Ha ha, that'll teach you for coming out for a nice night with your wife and kids! Absolutely gutted you in front of your family, and you sat there and did nothing! *Nothing!*

<https://x.com/DMcIntyreWWE/status/1781767735040503899>



Rooney's gone to a lot of WWE events over the years, which he does with his kids, but *clearly* he's using the kids as an excuse to go himself, which I respect. Back in 2015, he even made an appearance on RAW in Manchester where he had the piss taken out of him by Wade Barrett, leading to Rooney slapping him across the face. He should have slapped McIntyre. That way his family could have looked him in the face when they driving home, and not just wept and asked "But why didn't you do anything? Why didn't you stand up for yourself?" as Rooney's knuckles whitened as he gripped the wheel in impotent fury.

Oddly, at the same event, there was one sports star that you'd think the WWE would be much keener to mock than a household name former England football player: the spandex-clad Gladiator, Apollo. For what seemed like natural enemies (they're in direct competition in the spandex world of pushing people around and appealing to kids), the WWE chose to make the Gladiator a proper part of the show, having him come out to get into a conflagration with JD McDonagh during his match with Ricochet.



The *Metro* helpfully pointed out that there's been a bit more crossover between wrestling and Gladiators in recent years, noting that "current *Smackdown* General Manager Nick Aldis is actually a former Gladiator, having appeared as Oblivion on

Sky1's reboot in 2008 and 2009, while recent contender Wesley is a professional wrestler on the UK independent scene.”³⁹

But unlike most series of Gladiators since the first one was broadcast back in 1992 (which seemed to come on the back of the explosion of WWF), this year's BBC return has been a huge (and surprising) ratings success.⁴⁰ All the kids at my daughter's school are obsessed with it, while she told me that wrestling is “boring” the other day, which nearly made me burst into tears. And we were watching that *insane* women's ladder match from MITB 2024 *at the time*, for God's sake.

20th April – REBELLION (AGAINST BUYING THIS SHOW)

Having relaunched under their original name and kicked out the old (and popular) booker, TNA must have been delighted when their *Rebellion* show did a whopping, er, no, hang on, just 500 TV PPV buys. It was down 83% from their last show, *Hard to Kill* which did 22,400.

Getting just 500 buys is one of those figures that would make you wonder whether your wrestling promotion is working out, isn't it? And considering it was in a venue that brought it just 1,150 fans, you might begin to tremble.



The event (which you didn't see as only 1,650 people did) saw Matt Hardy debut (having spent the last months grumbling about how they weren't using him enough), Jordynne Grace defending the Knockout title against Steph de Lander, talent like Joe Hendry, Rich Swann and Mustafa Ali and a main event of TNA champion Moose beating 'The Wanted

Man'/'Ungrateful Shit' Nic Nemeth.

I don't know what it says about the promotion, but there's nothing particularly wrong with any of what they'd presented - beyond the fact that almost nobody wanted to pay to see any of it.

21st April – JINDER HINDERED

No matter how many things change in a new regime, some things remain the same. With TKO now overseeing WWE, they announced a day of talent firings, a grim event that rolls around with the same frequency as NXT premium live events.

³⁹ Of the original Gladiators, Shadow was seen as being a potential main-event replacement for the British Bulldog on the dying UK scene in 1995, but unfortunately things didn't go to plan when Shadow became addicted to crack.

⁴⁰ I've met the BBC executive who recommissioned it, and genuinely thought she would lose her job as a result of the decision to bring it back. Shows what I know.

Alongside the lower mid-card talent like Xia Li, Von Wagner (the son of Wayne Bloom one half of the 1990s tag team the Beverley Brothers), Xyon Quinn⁴¹, the Indian tag team of Indus Sher and Scrypts, the biggest name to get his marching orders was the former WWE champion Jinder Mahal.

“We showed them once,” tweeted Drew McIntyre in a photo of them both in their 3 Man Band days, which had ended with them both being fired before each returned and won the WWE title. “Now show them again, brother.”



Mahal is a funny one – he’d got a mild cult status as someone that no one raved about, but everyone kind of liked, and a segment with the Rock earlier this year led to a “Don’t Hinder Jinder” movement to see him pushed after a title shot he was granted was criticised by Tony Khan. Good on the mic, stacked physically and 3/10 in the ring, Jinder wasn’t someone who was ever going to go on a main event run again, but did get a reaction every time he was used, which wasn’t very often.

On social media, Mahal came across like a genuinely nice dude, showing more depth than he had in a decade of being with WWE.

Gratitude for all of life’s experiences, but at the same time positive and optimistic for the future. I’ve learned that good things don’t happen in life with a negative mind frame. So I’m excited for new opportunities, both in and outside of wrestling.

I get a chance to be myself. A chance to show something new. A chance to grow. So overall, this is a positive. For the past two years, I’ve been pretty stagnant and not really growing as a person or performer. So I’m viewing this as a very positive change.



Sports Illustrated claimed the cuts were of talent who weren’t at the level they should have been – a slightly double-think reason, considering wrestling is pre-determined and if they wanted to push Von Wagner, there’s not much stopping them.

The starkest example of this was a couple of days later it came out that Cameron Grimes had also been given the chop. A young indie standout as Trevor Lee, he’d really clicked with a gimmick in 2021 where he’d made a fortune during the GameStop stock price rise and became

⁴¹ A former rugby player under his real name Daniel Vidot, he was given what might be the most NXT name of all time – Xyon Quinn. The more points it’s worth in Scrabble, the more likely they are to give it to someone in NXT. He’d wrestled once this year, a 6-second loss to Bron Breakker on *Smackdown*.

‘the richest man in NXT’⁴², shouting his catchphrase “to the moon!” WWE brought the Million Dollar Man back, Grimes feuded with LA Knight over the reintroduced Million Dollar belt (including a ladder match at *Takeover: In Your House*), lost a stipulation match where he had to become Knight’s butler (in a replay of a classic angle between Kerry Von Erich and Jimmy Garvin) and ultimately won the belt at *Takeover 36*.

In 2022, Grimes won the NXT North American belt in a five-way ladder match at NXT Stand and Deliver, losing it to Carmelo Hayes, and challenged Bron Breakker for the NXT belt at *NXT: The Great American Bash*. Drafted to *Smackdown* in May 2023, he did little of note until he announced he’d been released.

“Over the past few months, I had been going to writers and saying, ‘I just want to work,’” he told *Busted Open Radio*.

I would hear that I would maybe sound bitter. I don’t understand that process or how I came off being bitter. I guess every week, when I ask to work, I guess it starts annoying people. I could see that. it was strange to me.

I was worried. Starting the stock market gimmick made me see business in a different light. Following these companies and playing with stocks, I would see things in a different light. I knew that I hadn’t worked in over a year and I was making a decent salary.

I knew that if someone was to look at the books, I was going to be the first person cut, if you’re looking at it strictly money-wise. If you’re looking at ‘this is a talent that can do something for us,’ they’re going to keep me.

I was told by a high executive on Friday that I would always have a job here. I would never have to worry about losing my job, after expressing my concerns. Five days later, they called and told me I did lose my job.

To prove that sentimentality still had no place in WWE, they also released their longest-tenured employee Sue Aitchison, who had been with WWE for 38 years. A former WWE Hall Of Fame Warrior Award winner for her work as director of Community Relations, involved in WWE’s outreach to Make-A-Wish and a figurehead in the long-running *Wrestlemania* Reading Challenge, her termination was greeted with shock by those around her. I know there’s no such thing as a job for life these days, but I also bet that if you’d deducted her salary from the wages being paid to the suits at the very top, not one of them would even have noticed it go.

For their part, WWE tried to frame this as a new way of doing something unpleasant, claiming that conversations with this group were “far less curt and more apologetic and respectful towards the talents” than they had been in the past. Considering they once sent Mickie James a binbag with her stuff in it, that’s not a massively high bar to clear.

⁴² Something tells me in in real life that title would go to anyone who had around \$8000 in the bank.

22nd April – BRITAIN CLAIMS HALF OF SECOND-BEST AMERICAN MATCH OF ALL TIME

While some of the gloss seems to have come off AEW in recent months – a victim of having been the hot new promotion taking on a slightly stale WWE, and now being the secondary outfit famous for backstage discontent while WWE seems both red-hot and a paradise for wrestlers – one thing they never disappoint in with their marquee matches. Every PPV has one match that’s basically a Match of the Year contender, and *Dynasty* put on one that couldn’t fail: Bryan Danielson vs Will Ospreay.



With Danielson saying he’s in the last year of his active career, it’s hard to argue that he’s not going out as the best professional in-ring performer of the last five years. In front of an absolutely molten crowd, his match with Ospreay built to a crescendo of hard-hitting moves, perfectly timed and placed, over 32 minutes which flew by. Ospreay seems incapable of turning in anything

that isn’t thrilling, and together they made magic in a match that, while breathtaking, didn’t set out to do anything astonishing or shocking: they just did everything sickeningly perfectly, at a sky-high level that very few other performers can and with a level of ferocity that most performers don’t have. Yes, I still think Ospreay mugs a bit too much, but who cares when he brings so much tremendous goodies to the table?

“That match was so good on so many different levels,” said the Wrestling Observer’s Dave Meltzer. “It was one of the best matches I’ve ever seen. Probably the best match ever in the United States.” Normally, I’d not disagree with Dave, but I wouldn’t go this far – clearly, he’s forgotten about the match where Shane McMahon popped both his quads and then Snoop Dogg smacked the Miz in the head.

Meltzer awarded the match a huge 6.5 stars, making it the second highest rated match in *Observer* history. Now the wrestler with the most five star and over matches in history (he’s had 37, with 18 of those rated over 5 stars)⁴³, Ospreay also enjoyed it to the max, as he told the new AEW champion Swerve Strickland on his *Swerve City* podcast afterwards.⁴⁴

I got in there with Bryan and I was so... I kept saying to myself, ‘Don’t be sick. Gotta be in control of all this’... I’m not even joking, the moment the bell rang...I just mouthed to him and went, ‘This is gonna be a pleasure’ and then I

⁴³On *Hey!* (EW), which is a piss-around snarky fun YouTube interview show hosted by RJ City, Ospreay was goaded about Meltzer’s ratings. He responded, “When you talk about guys like Kurt Angle...he hasn’t got one five-star match, and I’m nowhere near the level that Kurt Angle is. I do feel like I have my own unique blend, like stuff that Kurt Angle could never do, I can do, and stuff that I could never do, Kurt Angle can do. I think it’s just his opinion, and opinions are a lot like arseholes, everyone’s got one.” Yes, it is just his opinion. But no one else is doing it, and no one else has done more to both encourage people to watch matches over the last 40 years or record the history of professional wrestling, so thanks Dave and sorry that no one appreciates you like they should.

⁴⁴ Wrestling champions shouldn’t have podcasts. Podcasts are beneath them, as they’re the main home of losers who can’t wrestle – people like me, Pete and Disco Inferno.

stepped back and the moment that bell rang, there was nothing blocking me, there was nothing making me feel like I don't belong here.

Even when I'd done the Kenny [Omega] match and the Jericho match, I still feel like I was punching up. For the first time, I genuinely felt like I was meant to be a part of this. I felt going in there against somebody that I consider the best wrestler in the world, I consider him the greatest to ever do it. At no point did I ever think I was gonna be opposite this man at all, and now here he is standing there, and I just felt like I was on your level. It just felt amazing.

The match was followed by a Young Bucks-FTR ladder match for the AEW tag team titles (the ones that Sting and Darby Allin vacated after Stinger's retirement) and Swerve Strickland winning the AEW belt from Samoa Joe. Gonna say, I admire AEW's dedication to keeping the title match for the end, but having to follow Danielson-Ospreay was always going to be a thankless task. By the time the main event rolled around, the crowd were more subdued than you'd want, or Swerve and Joe deserved.

If this does turn out to be Danielson's final full year, it's hard to imagine how he could go out any better. Oh, hang on, just seen his match coming up at *All In* 2024. He's going out right on top, isn't he?

23rd April – IDEA OF RETIREMENT MATCH RETIRED

Having watched Ric Flair's last match from the front row and entirely missed what everyone else took away from it, the 59-year-old Mick Foley floated the idea of having one last deathmatch, some 25 years after his full-time career ended, and a decade since his last performance in the WWE *Royal Rumble*. It was a fitting choice of final match, in so far that a deathmatch would probably lead to his actual death.



Having spoken at great length over recent years about how physically destroyed he is, both in terms of his skeleton and his memory, Foley had said he'd like to face Jon Moxley or Matt Cardona: "I think Moxley would be the easiest, but Matt has that heat in the death match world that could really make it something cool." Cardona was quick to tweet "hi!" to Foley when he heard.

Foley's reasoning behind the match seemed muddled. He explained that as he's in such terrible shape (he's hinted that he can barely even move around), he felt having to prepare for the match would force him to get more physically fit.

One day, when I was really struggling, I realized that what used to be the best motivation for me was another match. I always got in shape with the goal of having another match, another match, another match.

Fast forward, my wrestling days are over. I've spent, with two small occasions, since 1999, well over 300 pounds. I got down on three different occasions below 300 and then as I saw my weight really get away from me, I thought,

maybe I need that same kind of motivation and along the way I can appreciate the lifestyle changes, eating differences, exercise.

There is no reason for somebody, at my age and weight, to not be exercising for three straight years. It's embarrassing. It's embarrassing when you're asked in the airport if you need a wheelchair. It's embarrassing to be the guy who is bigger than the chair on the airline.

It's something of a paradox that by competing in a death match, I will have a much better life. That day, or night, is going to be tough. It's going to be tough, but the lessons I learn leading up to that match are lessons I intend to carry forward for the rest of my life.

To me, it's the difference between being a grandfather someday, or can crawl on the ground and play with their grandchildren or a grandfather who sits and watches from the sidelines. I don't want to be that guy sitting on the sidelines.

Thankfully (and sadly, considering the state he's in), Foley today announced on his YouTube channel that his terrible idea of having a deathmatch was off.

As some of you know, I had to miss a couple of appearances because of dizziness and light headedness.⁴⁵ After consulting a couple of doctors, and also using my own experience with concussions, the symptoms seem to point to a concussion that I did not even know I received.

I hadn't done too much in the ring, but I had done a little bit. I had noticed that I was lightheaded after one of the workouts but I thought it would go away. So it just seems like the wisest move, and one that's strongly supported by family, is to call off that final match.

If I can get concussed from something I'm not even aware, then some of the things that I was thinking of doing, hoping of doing, in a big match would not be smart.

So, with my family's urging, and after careful thought, I've decided there will be no final match.

A week later, Foley was back on YouTube saying he was feeling a lot better than he had, and confirmed he would no longer "be taking on Father Time and Mother Nature." He also mentioned that he got a concussion six years ago from just being on a rollercoaster. Christ. He must just look like gravel inside.

I really like Foley, and I'm glad he's not going to be risking what remains of his health for this silly business. I hope he's around being all big and hairy for many years to come.

24th April - GOUDABERG

⁴⁵ These appearances were the ones he'd have done at Wrestlecon over *Wrestlemania* weekend, meaning his attempts to have this ill-advised match meant he missed out on one of the most lucrative weekends of his year.

Grumblebaby Bill Goldberg started grumbling like a baby to *93.7 The Ticket* about how he doesn't want to go to AEW, like it's compulsory national service for wrestlers.

I've talked to [Tony Khan] a number of times throughout the past. But this is where you're gonna get the most blunt answer you're gonna get from me. The product's too cheesy. The product is too cheesy. It doesn't deserve to have...I mean, whatever - you're really gonna get me going. But if there was a comparable, viable option as a competitor that would allow me to still look myself in the mirror after I was a member of their roster, yeah, then it would be a consideration. But not a chance.



I genuinely don't understand what's 'cheesy' about AEW. You might not like the high-flying style, you might think it's lost a bit of the wind in its sails, and if you're Goldberg, you might think it looks a bit rinky-dink compared to what you're used to when you go to Saudi Arabia with WWE and nearly get killed by the Undertaker in front of a prince. But *cheesy*? It's not cheesy.⁴⁶

Anyway, with Goldberg making no sense, it was up to Tony Khan to try and explain why Goldberg might be a mood with AEW. The answer – Tony doesn't have any idea.

Bill wanted to work here. I met with Bill several times. Bill was looking to work here. It's funny because I had a bunch of really nice meetings with Bill and would have honestly been interested in doing something. I have a lot of respect for Bill. I was surprised by [what he said about AEW being cheesy] because that certainly wasn't what he said to me when he was talking to me about working here at some point, which I've always been open to and I really like Bill.

Congrats, Goldberg! Looks like you fucked that last payday for absolutely no reason at all! Think of how much expensive cheese you've just cost yourself. Wheels of the stuff.

25th April – ANOTHER KHAN BRINGS WRESTLING TO LONDON

Someone called Khan promising a massive wrestling stadium in London? Yawn, it's so 2023. Only this time it's not Tony – it's Sadiq, and he's promising us *Wrestlemania!*

With the London Mayoral Elections coming up, Sadiq tweeted that "if I'm re-elected next Thursday...we'll look to bring Wrestlemania, Superbowl and the NBA to

⁴⁶ In Saudi Arabia in 2020, Goldberg had a WWE match with the Fiend. If you're talking about cheesy shit, then there's Exhibit 1, surely?

London.” Now these are policies I can get behind (although not bothered about the Superbowl or NBA.)⁴⁷



Triple H was quick to respond, saying “Let’s talk.” I mean, that’s all they’re going to do, unless they want another unpredictably cold *Wrestlemania* that sounds shit on telly. Sadiq was duly reelected, and I will be keeping an eye on whether this pre-election promise will be kept, or whether he’s like all the other politicians who promise the earth and fail to deliver.

At the CAA Congress of Sports (no idea, sounds like a jolly), Triple H addressed the Mayor’s comments.

You saw the Mayor of London put out a statement about *Wrestlemania*. I said, ‘We should talk,’ and we should. As should the Mayor or the leaders of every other place around this globe: if you want WWE, come talk to us. We’re open for business, we’d love to be there. Wherever our fans are going to be the loudest and craziest and the most into what we do. *Raw*, *Smackdown*, a PLE, or *Wrestlemania* itself. Obviously, the big ones are a little more difficult to execute, but let’s talk.

Well, that’s a roundabout way of saying “no, we’re not doing *Wrestlemania* in London.” If we end up getting fobbed off with an *Unforgiven*, I’ll refuse to pay my ULEZ. If Sadiq doesn’t keep to his side of the bargain, I’m not keeping to mine.

26th April – SHADDY DADDY



Continuing this month’s run of stories where the word ‘Khan’ is said over and over again, Tony Khan ran the gamut of positive press to negative press in just a few hours.

On *Dynamite*, Khan was attacked by a returning ‘Scapegoat’ Jack Perry and the Young Bucks and given the Tony Khan Driver (which used to be called the Meltzer Driver), ending with his dad Shad helping his fallen son, in what was the first time a billionaire had been involved in a wrestling angle since Vince McMahon

beat Pat McAfee at *Wrestlemania* 38.

⁴⁷ Sadiq got my vote, although it wasn’t swung by *Wrestlemania*, it was because everyone else standing seemed to be either a fascist or absolutely no-hope batshit mad. I met him once at a pro-EU march and he came over and, with a mischievous look, tapped me on the belly instead of shaking my hand, for reasons I cannot understand. In that short encounter, he came across as much more of a lad than he does on the telly, and I can imagine he was well into WWE as a youngster.

In something you rarely see in modern wrestling, a few days later Tony then turned up to the Jacksonville Jaguars war-room during the NFL Draft (his dad owns the NFL team) wearing a neck brace to sell the beating from his wrestling show. 10/10, excellent kayfabling.

Appearing on the *NFL Network* between Night 1 and Night 2 of the NFL Draft and still wearing his neck brace a day later, he discussed his viral moment from the night before - and went viral again with some ill-advised comparisons between AEW and WWE.

AEW, we've been doing this for five years, we are the most successful sports start-up since the AFL, pre-merger. There has not been a challenger brand that has gained as much market share as AEW in many, many years.

We are like the Pepsi of pro wrestling. We're up against an evil juggernaut. WWE is our competitor, that's who we're facing. AEW, like the Pepsi of pro wrestling. WWE is like the Harvey Weinstein of pro wrestling. I'm really proud of what we do down here.



OK. The problem with this line is *it didn't quite make sense*.⁴⁸ If AEW are Pepsi, then the opposite of Pepsi isn't Harvey Weinstein. It would work if he'd set it up by saying AEW were something that was the opposite of Harvey Weinstein – Alex Scott? Mo'Nawm? Dolly Parton? – but none of those things would make sense to start with. You wouldn't kick off with “AEW

is like the Susan Sarandon of wrestling,” because it just sounds confusing.

It was as if Khan had said to someone “AEW's like the Pepsi to WWE's Coca-Cola” and that person had replied “Coca-Cola? They're not even Coca-Cola, they're more like...er, *Harvey Weinstein*”, and they'd all laughed, but then doing it on TV, Khan had to introduce both and it sounded jarring. The hosts laughed nervously as he delivered the line and moved quickly on.

Khan later auctioned off the neck brace for charity. Jeez, he really pivots between being a good guy and a weird one at breakneck speed, doesn't he? (Just saw the pun there, well done my subconscious.)

27th April – THE HARVEY WEINSTEIN OF WRESTLING IS BACK

⁴⁸ It's not the only problem. It sounded a bit like a crass edgelord punchline that didn't pay any heed to the traumatising cost the events took on the victims, and it doesn't make Khan seem like a proper CEO when he spouts these sorts of 'ho-ho-hee-hee' internet-commenter zingers at his competition. It also paints WWE as somewhere that remains deeply problematic, when the people about whom it concerns - Vince McMahon and some of his associates – have been pushed out by the company. You can debate how they handled it (especially in terms of who knew what when) but to say that the WWE of today is “the Harvey Weinstein of wrestling” is inaccurate, unfair and deeply flippant.

Well, what happened today made Tony Khan's outburst seem far more relevant than it had the day before.

In the first major development since Vince McMahon denied the allegations made against him in a civil lawsuit brought by former WWE employee Janelle Grant, and released what he claimed was a freely-written love letter that he'd received, his legal team began making moves to try and diminish the claims he's facing.

McMahon's legal team argued that Grant had signed an NDA at the end of their (for want of a better word) relationship, and that NDA contained an arbitration clause. As such, they announced they were pushing for private arbitration, which would mean none of the details from this point forward would be made public.

In this filing, McMahon's lawyers also disputed some of the statements in Grant's original case – they said she hadn't been caring for her parents as she stated, nor struggling financially, nor dealing with grief when her parents died, and in fact had a fiancé who she was living with at her apartment four floors below McMahon.

Plaintiff would often visit Defendant at his condominium at all hours, including at 2:30 a.m., to pursue their affair and then return back to her condominium with Goncalves the same night. It is nonsensical that the disturbing alleged acts in the Complaint including violence, coerced sex, and forcing Plaintiff to be defecated on were taking place before Plaintiff returned to her lawyer fiancé four floors below without incident.

Grant's attorney Ann Callis (who said any NDAs signed by Grant should be voided) released a statement in response to the legal filing, saying "Vince McMahon has never known a storyline that he doesn't twist to fit his own shameful narrative."

Her father was in in-home hospice during his final days where Janel continued to care for him around the clock. Prior to his death, she had been caring for her blind, wheelchair-bound mother. Using the grief of someone who lost both of her parents is an all-new level of disgusting.

She was not dating at the time. Her ex-boyfriend allowed her to stay in the apartment as she rebuilt her life and resume post-taking care of her parents. She had no job and no other financial support to lean back on.

Callis then filed a motion to strike McMahon's arbitration request, and also requested that he be admonished "for using the court to mudsling."

Yet even if McMahon's falsities concerning Janel's private life were true (they are not), these statements have no bearing on the merits of Janel's claims, let alone the Motion. McMahon's statements have no place in the Motion, which should be concerned solely with whether this dispute must be submitted to arbitration.

McMahon's attorney, Jessica Rosenburg, sent a comment to *Wrestlenomics*, who are an outfit who accurately report on genuine news stories within wrestling, including attendance numbers: "Plaintiff had no right to bring this case in a public court but

did so anyway. Now that she chose this public forum to falsely accuse Mr. McMahon, she wants to silence his ability to respond. She can't have it both ways."

At the same time, presumably paying out millions for these letters, filings and comments from his lawyers, McMahon put up the last of his TKO shares for sale. At the time, he had just over 8 million shares, worth more than \$776 million. He'd previously sold some 17 million shares, which brought in over some \$1.36 billion. If sold, it would mark the cutting of the final tie between McMahon and WWE. Bring it on (©, The Rock).

28th April – THE JOEY HENDRY EXPERIENCE



In what seemed like something that would go absolutely nowhere, British TNA wrestler Joe Hendry started a social media campaign to get his catchy wrestling theme tune, entitled *I Believe In Joe Hendry*, to Number 1.

With the song having become popular on TikTok thanks to its tongue-in-cheek cheesy video, the scheme all seemed a bit tawdry and unlikely...until it worked almost immediately and far better than anyone could have imagined.

Startling, it had become the most downloaded song in the UK on the iTunes chart within 24 hours, and broke into the Top 20 on the US one. "People had always liked my entrance song," he told BBC Radio Scotland (and if you ever go to their studio in Edinburgh, like Hendry did, it's the smallest radio station premises you'll ever visit in your life. It's like the cupboard Harry Potter's uncle kept him in for being a spud.)

On Tik Tok, people were making videos with it, getting literally millions of hits. I put it up on Spotify one evening, didn't think anything of it and when I woke up it was number 20 in the iTunes charts.

I thought it was funny so I tweeted it out and it just caught fire from there - life's been an absolute rollercoaster since then. The fan base has been unbelievable, the support has been unbelievable and it's so fun and rare in life when something like this happens, when it's so unexpected and it happens it's so cool.

When the final tally was in, Hendry's song achieved a chart position of no.4 on the UK Singles Downloads Chart and no.6 on the UK Singles Sales Charts, having at one point outsold Taylor Swift. I should stress, this is the iTunes chart, and if we're being disappointing but honest, it didn't make the actual official UK chart. But what it did was give a huge boost to Hendry, hugely increasing his profile within wrestling, and he deserves it, as he seems like a really nice bloke (warning: conflicting anecdote coming up in a couple of paragraph's time).

One person who congratulated him was the SNP MP for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey, Drew Hendry, who happens to be his uncle. "It's been cracking to see

the wrestling community and the wider public get behind Joe, he's absolutely deserving of the top spot," he said, while (I imagine) slugging out of a glass Irn Bru bottle. "I've always believed in him."

You can believe in Joe Hendry here. The tiny shrug-wiggle he does after the clap at 0:08 is perfect and might be the best bit about the whole thing.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hb17uaaldwM>

Pete and I have actually met Hendry, when someone introduced us to him outside Wrestlecon back at *Wrestlemania 38* in Dallas. He was very smartly dressed, looked like a star, and charmingly made it clear he had no intention of shaking either of our hands as he was worried about contracting Covid from us. He did his best to explain it warmly, but Pete and I chose to take it as *deeply* rude.

A month after all this, Hendry's viral success would propel him into an NXT appearance, where he was greeted like a major star by the crowd. Well done him. Even though I believe IN JOE HENDRY SHAKING OUR DIRTY COVID HANDS.⁴⁹

29th April – TONE DEF REBEL

Def Rebel might sound like they should be a performer in NXT, but they're a much bigger part of WWE than that – they're a pair of New York-based music producers called Anthony Mirabella III and Ali 'Dee' Theodore who come up WWE's entrance tunes, having overseen WWE's music since 2019.



But in recent months, they've come in for a lot of criticism as we seem to stuck in an era where most of the entrance themes sound like minor variations on a basic generic muddy plod-rock mess. A lot of their work has also been described as "corporate rap," which is the sort of insult that would make me burst into tears if someone said it about music I'd made.⁵⁰

Compare them to the glory years of the 1980s under Jim Johnstone – the man behind the iconic themes for Stone Cold Steve Austin, Bret Hart, The Undertaker, Shawn Michaels, The Ultimate Warrior - and it's noticeable just how unmemorable the modern themes are.⁵¹

While Def Rebel have been involved with a number of decent ones – like Roman Reigns, Sami Zayn and Jey Uso - the problem is for every one that clicks, there's

⁴⁹ Hendry actually followed the rules that were still partly in place at the time and Pete and I both respect him for it. Although we'll never forgive him.

⁵⁰ I do not make music. Last time I did and played my self-written song to an audience, the whole of the Xfm breakfast show were suspended for a week (although Pete was off sick that day so they let him work on the replacement show) and Alex Zane ended up on the front of the *Evening Standard*. None of this is made-up.

⁵¹ After years of peerless work, Johnson was fired by Vince McMahon in 2017. "Vince fired me. He put it in that he wasn't renewing my contract, but that's semantics. Why? I don't know," Johnston said in a 2021 interview. "You'd have to ask him. It was time for me to go for me, so honestly, to some degree, he did me a favour. But still, that doesn't mean it doesn't hurt. It doesn't mean you're not disappointed."

twenty that are so generic they sound like they've been produced by gently tweaking an AI programme, as noted by *ComicBook.com*.

New WWE superstar theme songs tend to begin with the superstar either saying their name or their catchphrase before a generic instrumental follows, evident in the new themes for Tiffany Stratton, New Catch Republic's Pete Dunne and Tyler Bate, AJ Styles, Naomi, and others.

When the *Royal Rumble* used to roll round, you'd know who was entering the moment their theme tune started. Now, it's impossible to work out who's entering when you hear their music (which might be why they slip in names at the start) and there's a total disconnect between the wrestler and their theme, which makes having theme music largely redundant instead of a major part of a wrestler's overall presentation. What's Bron Breakker's music? Can you hum AJ Styles's current tune? What does Grayson Waller come out to?

Here's a video of Def Rebel putting together Shinsuke Nakamura's theme, which was entirely generic until someone turned up with a violin and was allowed to do whatever he wanted. You will not warm to the men behind Def Rebel, especially when one of them unironically barks out "sick bass!"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nV2m5h4I1Pk>

A chap called ImHASKA did a great breakdown on Def Rebel's output "from a musician's perspective." It's long (and I've edited out the list of songs he says are good, of which there's a decent chunk)⁵², but fuck me, does it make the point well.

I'm a musician and come from a family of musicians so I have a pretty good ear for music. It's for this exact reason that Def Rebel's theme songs tend to take me out of whatever's happening on screen, all the time.

Unlike Jim Johnston before them, Def Rebel have SUCH a distinct and recognizable sound that spans across all their theme songs. Whenever they play, I don't think of the star it's attached to, I think of Def Rebel.

I took an unnecessary amount of time out of my day to go through all their songs and put together exactly what I mean.

The biggest thing for me, being a drummer, is their choice of drum sound (or lack thereof). I've noticed a lot of their songs share either the exact same or similar drum sound and this comes through a lot in the form of the snare sound. There's a distinct ringy/bouncy snare drum sound that they use so often it's like they found one preset on an electric kit or they found one sample and refuse to use anything else. I've thrown together a list of the songs I noticed this on:

- Runaway - Von Wagner
- Jacy Jane - One of a Kind

⁵² "Oddly enough, Def Rebel seems to consistently knock it out the park when it comes to heavily cultural or foreign theme songs," to which the poster cites themes for Angel Garza, Carmella, Omos, Gunther, Fallon Henley, Ilja Dragunov and Lola Vice, and notes that "every now and then, they make some really unique stuff. A lot of this is found in NXT, probably [because of] the sheer amount of wacky/cartoonish gimmicks in NXT."

- Gigi Dolin - Watch Me Now (mixed much lower)
- Logan Paul - Take Flight
- Candice LeRae - Wickedder Ways
- Dijak - Driver
- Damian Priest - Punishment
- Cora Jade - Generation of Jade
- Ciampa - Renegade
- Gunther - Prepare To Fight
- Alexa Bliss - Fight Me
- Raquel Rodriguez - Out The Way
- Shayna Baszler - Limb From Limb
- Cora Jade - Twisted Generation
- Xyon Quinn - Run
- Drake Maverick - Flight of the Maverick
- Shorty G - My Way
- Dominik Mysterio - Vengo Por Ti
- Baron Corbin - Burn The Ships
- Tatum Paxley - Eyes of the Reaper

They're all mixed/EQ'd differently of course but it's definitely there and man it drives me NUTS. Generally, whenever they try any form of rock or metal it just sounds kinda awkward, flat, weirdly mixed, etc. Like a non-rock musician's idea of a rock song. They also seem to enjoy using sample/record scratches every now and then which you can hear in Austin Theory, Tony D'Angelo, and DIY's theme songs.

Another big 'Def Rebel-ism' that sticks out to me is heavy use of intro clips spoken by the wrestler (with some of them legit just being the wrestler saying their own name):

- Carlito - Bad Apple
- Lexis King - King
- Jimmy Uso - Born a King
- Nathan Frazer - Never Slow Down
- Luca Crusifino - Verdict
- Alpha Academy - Shooooosh
- Zelina Vega - VEGA
- Jacy Jane - One of a Kind (jacy jaaaanee)
- Chelsea Green - Hot Mess
- Logan Paul - Take Flight
- Tony D'Angelo - All About Family
- Cora Jade - Generation of Jade
- Pat McAfee- The Anomaly
- Xyon Quinn - Run

More recently, I've noticed Def Rebel seemingly reusing some melodies and structure in DIY's theme "It's Our Moment" and Austin Theory's Theme "A-Town Down". Both songs have a nearly identical chorus and go into a short

record scratch bridge thingy before heading into their first verse. Not really a big deal, but hard not to hear for me.

Today, it was reported that Randy Orton had heard Def Rebel's new remix of his theme tune (the iconic version of which was created by Jim Johnson in 2008) and had refused to use it. "Randy was not having that theme," reported *Fightful*.

It was Randy, Triple H and Michael Hayes. They played it through and within about 10 minutes of it being played through in the arena, one of my sources [reported they said], 'yeah, that's not being used.'

"Of all the themes that need to change, they do a remix of one of the few themes that are actually good?" noted one Redditor.

With new management in place who seem to be incredibly sensitive to negative fan input, Def Rebel must have broken into a cold sweat when WWE revealed they were "very aware" of the fan reaction online. Maybe the next music they'll hear will be the closing titles to their story (which will definitely start with a voice saying "Deffff Rebbbbel" before some library-music-level generic rock kicks in).

30th April - EVIL MARIE



Every time I see Eva Marie's name, my blood runs cold with the fear that she might be about to come back to wrestling. Well, rest easy, friends, she's not. But is she still awful? Yes, but today we discovered she's awful in new and previously unknown ways.

In an interview with *Hook & Barrel* magazine (it's about hunting and fishing, not Taz's son posing naked wearing just a barrel, worst luck) and alongside exciting articles like 'Cody Jinks Jams Out' and 'Iceland Fly Fest', Eva Marie explained how PETA's concern for animal life had made her crueller. Having watched a documentary about factory farming they'd put out, Eva Marie decided to zing them for the crime of, er, caring about the welfare of animals.

"Shout out to PETA because you guys made me a hunter," she said, through the limited thoughts her brain is capable of creating "Thank you very much because they did all the hard work by showcasing factory farming ... so now I'm going to go hunt my own meat," adding that she wants to eat food "the way God intended it." Yep, that's solid logic. It's like watching a documentary about the racism that Muslim people in England endure, and the lesson you take from it is that it's unacceptable, so you're now going to racially abuse Greek people instead.

Since leaving wrestling in 2021, when she claimed she had her arm dislocated by Shayna Baszler (shout out to Shayna!), Eva Marie “has since found success as an outdoors influencer and brand ambassador for Christensen Arms, makers of hunting and long-range target rifles.” If she’s as good at handling a rifle as she was at wrestling, I imagine she’s absolutely riddled with accidental bullet wounds.

WHAT HAVE WE BEEN WATCHING THIS MONTH?

Chronologically, we’re still four years out from covering TNA, but by God, it’s going to be fucking wild when we do. Here’s Glenn Gilberti (the former Disco Inferno) and Kid Kash (“two beeyatches!”) taking on the Insane Clown Posse in a Juggalo Street Fight. It couldn’t be more 2004. “Blood! Guts! Fingers and toes!” bellow the ICP over the top. “Who’s going chicken hunt? We’s going chicken hunt!”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAs-8UPwUhs>



You go to a gym hall back in 2001. You watch a triple-threat main event. Every person you see will go onto headline *Wrestlemania*. Oh right, Punk never has, but he might, I suppose. But you get the gist. Look, stop nit-picking, Eddie vs Rey vs Punk was worth every penny of the \$3 entry ticket. Grow up.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLPQkAloD68&feature=youtu.be>

Here’s Booker T in his rookie year, plying his trade in Texas’ GWF against the Super Destroyer, portrayed here by ‘Wild’ Bill Irwin. Even in 1991, we knew this wasn’t very good, even though most indie wrestling at that time was extremely bad. Time decided never to age Booker’s face, which is the kindest thing Time can do.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOlZfj1ilXM>

Ron Killings is one of the greatest wrestlers of his era (which considering his age means wrestlers who were big in the mid-1990s), if only because of stuff like this: his 2023 single *Barnyard Flexin’*. “Big truck, big wheels, from the ground up!” sings Truth, explaining what a tractor looks like. Get yourself a man who can do it all.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3gMWJvVfjQ>

Fresh off his career-rejuvenating run in the NWA from 1989-1990, Terry Funk began his decade-long domination as the main eventer in every small promotion across the world by heading down to Memphis to take on Steve Keirn (who would become the WWF’s Skinner the following year).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMHnwXSpTeg>



Here’s Funk 15 years later, taking on a young up-and-comer by the name of 60-year-old Dusty Rhodes for Southern Championship Wrestling. In a *cage*, you say? And the cage is in a high-school gym? Yes, I *am* interested. *Very* interested. And what a classic Funk promo to kick it all off: “Hulk Hogan might be an obnoxious bald-headed idiot, but I respect him, and he respects me. Ric Flair, he might have a banana nose and

be a goof, but I respect him, and he respects me. But there's one person in this world that I do not respect, and that person is that fat, overbearing, obnoxious, egg-sucking dog!"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ou-aZYAxCfc>

A short clip of Andre the Giant taking on the future 'Rugged' Ronnie Garvin down in Knoxville. You don't see much of Andre's work outside of the WWF in the 1970s, despite his huge star power at the time, and you can see here just how generous he was in letting his opponent look like they might have got the giant beat, getting the audience think they were about to see the impossible, teasing being beaten – and then he'd prove the buggers wrong. Making himself look fallible was such a key part of Andre remaining a top box office draw throughout his main-eventing career.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NSOYoDgxsk4>



We're used to seeing Big Daddy take on Giant Haystacks, but what would a Daddy match be like with someone big who could actually work? The answer: exactly the flipping same as all the other matches he had. Here, the long-time British headline heel act (and hugely underrated) Mighty John Quinn runs into Daddy at a big Wembley show in 1979.

Quinn was a huge star at the time, but he agreed to the quick TV loss as he thought it would be a good payday. Max Crabtree reportedly paid him £30 and he'd been made to look like he was useless (also enjoy the look on Daddy's face as he comes in and a teenage boy kisses him on the cheek.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BYMhEmlFp74>

And here's Quinn showing what he could do when he wasn't being booked into Daddy-shaped oblivion, in a match with Wayne Bridges.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q3TYtFzewlc>

Here's the last public appearance of Giant Haystacks, giving his farewell at a small British show sometime around 1996 after being diagnosed with terminal cancer. It's lovely that for once in his career he got to hear the crowd's applause instead of boos. "Grandparents met him in Wimpy's in Torquay," says one YouTube commenter, "and said he was very chatty and friendly." I can imagine Haystacks only ever truly relaxed when he was surrounded by plates of fried English food.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XAuQbtllF64>

WHAT MERCH HAS MARC BOUGHT THIS MONTH?



Along with all my *Wrestlemania* purchases mentioned above, I bought three different original All Star posters from 2003 (for £8 each), all featuring the masked American Dragon, aka Bryan Danielson in his first UK tour, underneath a Jake Roberts vs Gangrel main event. What a card. Croydon, you don't know how lucky you were. He only does Wembley Stadium these days.



EXCLUSIVE: we talk to the ethical German architects transforming Lincoln Financial Field to meet the complex expectations of Millennial Consumers

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