THE SHOOT: WRESTLING'S REALITY ON THE INDEPENDENT SCENE

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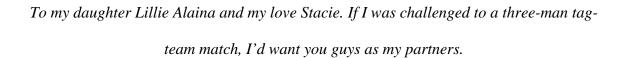
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ABSTRACT

CHRIS SAUNDERS: The Shoot: Wrestling's Reality on the Independent Scene (Under the direction of Jan Yopp, Barbara Friedman, and Elizabeth Hedgpeth)

Over the last ten years, professional wrestling has become more corporate and monopolized. World Wrestling Entertainment is the only major promotion with a few promotions, such as Total Nonstop Action, trying to compete. As a result, those major promotions have changed who they target from traditional wrestling fans to the mainstream population at large. Wrestling purists scoff at the programming they see those promotions produce on television. The alternative for the old-school, dedicated wrestling fan is the independent circuit. The three articles that follow work to illustrate the lives lived, the dreams fulfilled and the hopes broken on wrestling's indy scene. The first article serves as an overview by featuring both wrestlers and fans in a gimmick-based promotion in Raleigh, North Carolina. The second article profiles a wrestling promoter and discusses the financial burdens one undertakes to run a promotion full-time. The final article describes the role wrestling schools play in the independent world and features a former superstar who has turned teacher. These three articles show the cost one encounters when he or she holds steady to a dream.



To all the wrestlers out there who give their bodies for something more. Thanks for showing me how to dream.

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First and foremost, I would like to thank Stacie, my wife, for allowing me to travel on weekends the better part of the past year. While I was watching men grapple, sweat, and inflict pain on each other, she was caring for newborn daughter, Lillie. But she allowed me to dream and to chase the story. I can't thank her enough. I could not have done this project without the cooperation of dozens of wrestlers. They took their masks off and opened their homes and families to me. In a world where many are scared of who they are behind their masks, these men and women were gracious in showing me some of their truths. I owe them the deepest thanks for trusting me. I would especially like to thank Jim Fox, Greg Mosorjak, and Jimmy Valiant for opening their worlds up to me. I would also like to thank William Happer for helping me to navigate through the independent world of wrestling. The background and perspective he provided kept me on course. This project would have been pedestrian at best without the perspective and dedication of Jan Yopp. She was quick to get drafts back to me with thorough edits and feedback. I am greatly indebted to her. I want to also thank my thesis committee members, Barbara Friedman and Elizabeth Hedgpeth. Their guidance and contributions opened up areas of research to me that did not occur to me at first glance. They made my project stronger. A very special thanks to Morgan Ellis who provided an ideal

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In 1999, I wrote a poem about wrestling, read it on a top-40 radio station, and won tickets to World Championship Wrestling's *Thursday Night Thunder*. A couple of days later, the station called back and wanted me to read the poem again, this time offering the reward of front-row seats. I surprised them with a different wrestling poem. I remember I got in a heated confrontation ringside with a wrestler known as Disco Inferno, and I threw a Snickers bar at him. All this to say, I thank the world for the experiences it has to offer.

In the words of Ric Flair, WOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND JUSTIFICATION OF STUDY	1
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	6
Wrestling	6
Wrestling and Its Violence	15
The Effect of Pain	18
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY	24
CHAPTER FOUR: THE INSIDE JOB	30
CHAPTER FIVE: WHAT IF YOUR FATHER CARRIED A BARBED-WIRE BASEBALL BAT	51
CHAPTER SIX: BOOGIELAND	73
CHAPTER SEVEN: THE REAL REAL	85
SOURCES CONSULTED	92
List of Interviews	92
Secondary Sources	93

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND JUSTIFICATION OF STUDY

Abraham Lincoln. Sixteenth President of the United States. The Great Emancipator. Believer in an insoluble Union. And wrestler? In his definitive history of professional wrestling, Beekman (2006) lauds the in-ring prowess of Lincoln, crediting him with more than 300 matches. Beekman states:

Lincoln's most famous match, an 1831 New Salem, Illinois, encounter against local tough Jack Armstrong, established a reputation in Illinois and put him on the road to local leadership and politics. The physical prowess demonstrated by the New Salem match became part of the Lincoln mythology while he was president and certainly helped contribute to the popularity of the sport in the post-Civil War period. (p. 8)

Beekman's research speaks to an important point about professional wrestling, a form of entertainment which for so long has existed on the fringes of culture, in small-town armories and regional territories. This type of wrestling holds only a distant relationship to the sport seen in high school, college, or the Olympics. This kind of wrestling pits men against men and even women against women, and all against a more theatrical backdrop meant to entertain. This kind of wrestling bursts off the television set with raw, almost savage epithets and scenes of both high-flying athleticism and bloody violence. This type of wrestling has found it hard to escape its fringe existence despite some high points in popularity, thanks to television and savvy promoters.

French cultural critic Roland Barthes (2005) traces the origins of our consumption of wrestling to the innate desire to understand that there has to be a winner in the age-old battle between good and evil. For him, wrestling symbolizes the push and pull of those two binary opposites in spectacular fashion. Barthes believes the spectator finds the real in this battle: "What is thus displayed for the public is the great spectacle of Suffering, Defeat, and Justice. Wrestling presents man's suffering with all the amplification of tragic masks" (p. 27). Barthes sees the suffering, the agony, and the triumph as realworld tropes to which the viewer can relate. Though critics accuse wrestling of being "fake," Barthes celebrates the reality fans find in it. Even with its subculture status, wrestling has always existed because it provides this reality, a meaningful escape for fans in which they can see their own values both reflected and confronted. On a Saturday night, they can see the Cowboy defeat the Indian, the American defeat the Islamo-facist, and the rebel defeat the status-quo. We see ourselves in wrestling just as we do in the movies, in our favorite NFL teams, and even in the political candidates to whom we tie ourselves with our votes each November.

While cultural critics pose their theories about the appeal of wrestling, some researchers have a more down-to-earth approach explaining its popularity. Current scholarship suggests that wrestling is a close-knit society, one held together by the dream of success and escapism. Wrestlers also form bonds due to the loneliness of life on the road, a loneliness that leads many wrestlers to adultery, drugs, alcohol, and ultimately failure. Despite the struggles, abundant research exists illustrating that through wrestling, both wrestlers and fans find an identity and a sense of community.

Researchers also consider the violence that has become identified with the sport, whether that violence is real or staged. Current scholarship suggests that wrestling's violence has heightened, pushing the audience to accept a bloodier, hardcore, and verbally aggressive brand. This scholarship maintains that the effects of wrestling's violence, and that of other sports, can negatively impact individuals' attitudes whereby they become more tolerant of violence and aggressiveness in their own lives. Though identifying a cause for violence can spiral into a chicken-or-the-egg argument (did society make entertainment violent, or did entertainment make society violent?), research establishes that there are consequences to the violence that now inundates our cable television 24 hours a day every week.

Any sport predicated on violence also brings with it pain to its participants.

Researchers discuss the role of pain to wrestlers and, more generally, to athletes as a whole. They conclude that the pain works to build a shared experience through which a community is established. As a result, if one cannot find a way to deal with the pain and press on, that person will be judged and ostracized from that community. How participants choose to deal with the pain opens them to a critique by others who have learned to cope. Hence, researchers categorize pain as a badge of honor.

JUSTIFICATION OF STUDY

Until 1999, not much was known about the behind-the-scenes life of a professional wrestler. Few saw them as real people with real lives. However, that year, Mick Foley, a World Wrestling Entertainment superstar, released his autobiography, and a complicated portrait of a professional wrestler emerged. In his autobiography, Foley (1999) contends that he is just a normal guy who had normal dreams of succeeding at something he loved.

He portrays himself as a family man first. His struggles to make it in wrestling and to capture the adoration of women are comparable to the struggles of an everyman. However, he observes that as normal as he'd like to see himself, the wrestling world can obscure reality. He states, "Welcome to my world, the world of professional wrestling, where fact is often stranger than fiction, and the line between the two keeps getting tougher and tougher to distinguish" (p. 9).

Apart from biographies, studies, and media attention, wrestlers' lives in many ways mirror the normal lives of many other people. But that life is often overshadowed or even ignored because of the focus on the persona in the ring. While attending an independent show in Youngsville, North Carolina, I saw Fabulous Frankie Fontaine, a short, pudgy 43-year-old wrestler, dressed in a pink shirt and black spandex shorts. His shirt read, "Touch My Monkey," and below the saying was surely a white monkey one might win at the fair with hands velcroed around Fontaine's waist. Eye shadow circled his eyes, and he clearly emulated a homosexual with his soft, feminine voice. Fontaine is really Rick Garrett, a civilian naval officer who travels three weekends a month to wrestle on North Carolina's independent scene. He appealed to me because he sat at a table trying to sell "Fabulous Frankie Fontaine" shirts in character. Nobody was buying any, and Garrett looked miserable, even though he had dolled himself up for the role. He seemed much more Garrett the man than Fontaine the wrestler. To add to his humanity, he sat beside his wife who was rocking a stroller filled with two of Garrett's foster children. Their suitcase sitting under their merchandise table completed this scene, every bit as valid a representation as any other of the absurd American dream in the 21st century.

Wrestlers all over the independent scene dance in a volleyed existence, bouncing back-and-forth between their real lives and their created lives. When they pack up on a Saturday night, all the wrestlers can talk about is next Saturday night and where they will wrestle. While some observers may think them crazy, I began early in my research and interviewing to see them as admirable men and women who maybe do something we all are, at some point in our lives, too scared to do: chase dreams, be them unprofitable as they are on wrestling's independent scene. I felt a certain sadness at the futility of Garrett's place on a road he will never travel successfully because his height and build are not that of the marketable, chiseled athlete. However, the sadness faded into an admiration and even a certain envy. What I saw Garrett doing was living.

Wrestling's independent scene has a number of Rick Garretts, individuals pursuing something other than a monotonous 40-hour work week. The scene exists as community linked by aspirations and redemption. The proposed thesis, a series of articles, aims to bring to the public a snapshot of these wrestlers, the promoters, the fans, and the families who create the lively community of pro wrestling. The interviews and the articles will explore the motivations and passions to help readers understand the challenges of the ups and downs of this lifestyle.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Wrestling

Scholarship dedicated to professional wrestling varies. Scholarly books, autobiographies, newspaper articles, and journal articles about wrestling focus on the history of professional wrestling, wrestlers' lives, coverage of independent promotions and former wrestlers, ethnographies of wrestlers and the promotions for which they wrestle, analyses of how wrestlers form identities and define communities, descriptions of fan culture, and examinations of masculinity in the sport.

Little research focuses on the history of professional wrestling. Much of the history is anecdotal and exists as rumor or gossip inside the industry. Scholars tend to resist researching professional wrestling since it more aptly belongs to popular culture than any academic discipline. Wrestling communities have worked for many years to protect and preserve the secrecy behind the business. However, Beekman (2006) chronicles a definitive history of wrestling that dates to Egyptian military training. He describes American wrestling as an alternative to the Puritanical stronghold felt in New England in the 1600s-1800s. He also traces wrestling's origins here in the United States to the rise of taverns: "Tavern owners, recognizing the profits to be made off spectators, encouraged sporting endeavors on their property. For example, Benjamin Berry of

modern-day Berrytown, Virginia, retained local strongmen to engage in fistfights and wrestling matches with teamsters who stopped by for refreshments" (p. 6). Even in the colonial United States, a voyeuristic culture developed to judge winners and losers.

Beekman locates professional wrestling's modern turn in the late 19th century. when a new business model emerged. The promoters and wrestlers started performing as parts of traveling shows, and the business turned to more urban settings, replacing the rural localism that had persisted for decades. By the mid-20th century, wrestlers had turned more to gimmicks, using elaborate costumes and character development, and saw wrestling's birth on television. A territory-based system dominated the industry for some 30 years, which saw a return of wrestling to a strong regional hold (in the South, for example), but a reputation weak nationally: "At the dawn of the Reagan Decade, wrestling found itself cut off from significant elements of the American public and struggling to maintain its reduced status. ... The new decade would bring prosperity to wrestling, but at the cost of enormous upheavals" (Beekman, 2006, p. 115). Beekman then explains how Vince McMahon Jr., one of wrestling's premier promoters, used superstars, patriotism, high production values, mass marketing, and merchandising to make wrestling, and more specifically the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), a force on cable television.

While Beekman devotes a large part of his history to the WWE, Oppliger (2004) reflects on the U.S. independent wrestling scene. She classifies independent wrestling as a force of its own: "A search of the Internet found 309 backyard and 195 Indy websites compared to 386 WWF/WWE sites" (p. 25). Oppliger concludes that fans turn to the "indies" to see something different from what the WWE broadcasts. Serving as an

alternative, the indy scene promotions claim to be "extreme" and "ultraviolent" (p. 25). Oppliger argues that, despite low production costs, the independent world displays more passion, higher satisfaction from fans, and a more realistic representation of violence than the televised product, all of which explain the scene's appeal.

Wrestlers' autobiographies have also helped chronicle wrestling's history and reveal the inner workings of the industry. When Mick Foley's autobiography appeared in 1999, it set off an explosion of successful biographies by and about wrestlers, some with ghostwriters, throughout the early 2000s. However, these biographies were published by World Wrestling Entertainment, and they walked a fine line between portraying the wrestling life and celebrating the genius of Vince McMahon, WWE's owner.

One of these books, however, focused on two wrestlers and their rise through the independent ranks in North Carolina. Matt and Jeff Hardy (2003), brothers from Cameron, North Carolina, characterize a tenuous relationship between promoter and wrestler on the independent scene. In their book, Jeff Hardy offers, "Some of the guys who run independent promotions are such assholes. I used to get so sick of hearing how if you don't do what the promoters tell you, they were going to fire you. I'd think, *Shit*, you're barely paying me! How can you fire me?" (p. 69).

Two other former superstars have also published books that chronicle their struggles to make it. However, both of their stories follow an arc of rising fame, the dreaded fall from grace, and redemption through their religious awakening. This journey seems to be a consistent one in many stories of ex-professional wrestlers. Ivan Koloff (2006), who lives in Winterville, North Carolina, explains that wrestling led him to failure as a man: "My life was a wreck. I was a bad husband. I was on drugs, and

because I was on drugs, I disciplined my kids with a weightlifting belt" (p. 156). While Koloff's tale is a cautionary one, he admits that he would live his life all over again as a wrestler because it has become who he is. Like Foley says in his biography, the wrestling reality became Koloff's reality.

Jimmy Valiant (2005), a wrestler who lives in Shawsville, Virginia, claims to have been lost in his wrestling persona, women, drugs, and adultery. However, he too, says that religion saved his life. He offers this description:

I was dying. It was confirmed by more than one doctor that I would not survive the severe Hepatitis that was robbing my body of all its life-giving force. At the time, there were only two types of Hepatitis known to man, A and B, and I had both types at the same time. ... My body was deteriorating quickly, and so was my spirit. Demons from my past haunted me. I was losing it. ... Exhausted and hallucinating, I saw my life passing before me. I was heading towards [sic] a black hole. Then I saw a brilliant white light at the end of a tunnel. (p. vii)

In these popular biographies, faith is a familiar panacea to a wrestling life riddled with failure and sin.

. Bob Calhoun (2008), a wrestler in San Francisco, writes about his time as a performer and describes the struggles he faced in gaining an audience, subsisting on the profession, and receiving a steady paycheck. He concludes that wrestlers do not perform for pay; rather, he maintains, they engage in the profession to escape. He explains:

We all had to be our boring-assed normal selves most of the time. Our livelihoods depended on it. But therein lies the appeal of going utterly bonkers and strutting around Haight Ashbury with your mask on and cursing out street kids like you're a mutant hybrid of Stone Cold Steve Austin and Rey Mysterio Jr. ... The rest of the wrestlers had their day jobs too. The Cruiser was a web designer and animator but he had no problems diving off a twenty-foot ladder into a vat of chocolate pudding when you put him in front of 1,300 paying customers. El Homo Loco worked at a biotech firm. Super Pulga was a schoolteacher and El Pollo Diablo, the eight-foot-tall cock from hell, ran a mailroom at a document delivery company. (pp. 9-10)

Despite Calhoun's conclusion, other media coverage confirms that some wrestlers make performing their dream and even go so far as to make it their primary job. Warhop in *Atlanta* (2006) describes an independent promotion based in McDonough, Georgia, that serves as a direct feeder system for World Wrestling Entertainment. Warhop finds that though it serves as a minor-league system, it is a full-time job to run the promotion and develop the talent for Joe Hamilton, an ex-wrestler who has decided to teach the sport at which he used to excel.

Writers also show that former stars trying to hang on to faded glory also take center stage in these independent promotions. In *The New York Times*, Finley (2009) profiles Jon Rechart, a wrestler who once found success in the WWE, the most prominent promotion in the United States. Rechart currently performs in small venues in small-town America for minimal pay. Finley asserts, "Still, performing at places like V.F.W. halls means squeezing out a living, playing before small crowds, getting changed in storage rooms and having to do so only because the major league groups don't want you" (para. 13). The profile reflects a major drop-off from the major promotions to the minor ones and how some wrestlers have a hard time adjusting. But not all wrestlers do.

Winerip's (2009) *New York Times* piece profiles Tito Santana who still wrestles in Brooklyn, New York, after the prime of his career. Winerip shows how, instead of wasting all of his money on drugs and the road, Santana saved his earnings, remained faithful to his wife, and now teaches high school. Winerip offers Santana as an example of a wrestler who beat the odds by turning out a successful life after wrestling.

While wrestlers' stories appeal to the general public, scholarly research conducted about professional wrestling exists as ethnographies, which serve to explain why one

becomes a wrestler. Mazer (1998) spent time with indy-scene wrestlers in New York, watching them train and wrestle. From her interviews with these wrestlers, she maintains that they dedicate time to their craft through an extensive education that takes place in a gym. She articulates the goal of these men and women is not only to perform as a wrestler, but to become a phenom. She says, "Much like starstruck acting students, what they most desire is to transform themselves from watchers to performers, to become insiders with the same gloss and dash of the superstars. ...[E]ach is convinced that he is special, that he is marked for success, the one who will become a star in his own right" (p. 68).

Hackett (2006) finds a more altruistic reason the wrestlers he interviews participate in the spectacle. Instead of superstardom, Hackett contends men and women wrestle to complete a journey of self-discovery. He concludes the wrestler's story represents a fulfillment of Joseph Campbell's monomyth constructed in *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*. The individual undergoes a crisis and turns to wrestling. He views wrestling as his destiny. He overcomes self-doubt and discovers his true self. De Garis (1999) discusses the futility of ethnographies in studying wrestling, for he underscores that most who study any sport and its culture do not participate in it. He emphasizes, "[S]o few sport ethnographers address questions of what sporting practices feel, smell, sound and taste like. Pro wrestling is largely a nonverbal activity" (p. 71). Therefore, he argues for a participatory or, as he calls it, a "sensuous ethnography," where the researcher is an active participant able to capture data that are not obvious to simple observation (p. 71).

Though ethnographies work to illustrate the wrestlers in their environment, other scholarship analyzes how the sport assigns identity to an individual. Wrestling's independent promotions are spread in venues throughout the United States where wrestlers usually gather on weekends to perform for minimal pay. Research about the indy circuit does not portray life there as an ideal place, but within those walls and the ring, wrestlers and their fans create special bonds. Illustrating how an individual finds a nationalized identity through wrestling, researchers make parallels to the Hispanic culture and its traditional style of masked wrestling known as lucha libre. Levi (2008) traces the political importance of the masked lucha libre, high-flying and fast-paced wrestling, to the Mexican culture. She maintains that Mexican "grassroots activists" chose a luchador as their representative in the 1980s and that Mexican "left-wing opposition...see[s] professional wrestling as a source of symbolic legitimation" (p. xiii). Madigan (2007) offers an in-depth history of Mexican wrestling and notes the mask serves as a means of freedom for the wrestler. Madigan asserts that the mask allows the wrestler to awaken politically or culturally without any constraints. He concludes that the culture of the masked lucha libre has influenced American pop culture through both music and film.

Guillermoprieto (2008) concludes lucha libre wrestling symbolizes South

American identity for women in an impoverished Bolivian mountain town.

Guillermoprieto describes life there: "The poorest altenos employ themselves as beasts of burden. All of them battle hopeless traffic, a constant scarcity of fuel and water, the dull fatigue of numbing labor, the odds that are stacked against them. When they're done working, they need to play" (p. 115). Wrestling allows them this playful escape.

Audiences also identify with the nationalized ideals found in wrestling. For instance, Rahmani finds that a prominent wrestler in the 1980s, the Iron Sheik, gave Americans a common enemy to hate as they "came to grips with a frightening Orient through this character" (p. 94). Rahmani sees wrestling as a microcosm of American political ideology, "suggesting that American political antagonism toward the Middle East is crystallized in the pop-culture icon of the Iron Sheik" (p. 95). Souther (2007) also proposes that negative stereotypes used to get a rise from the crowd can create an usagainst-them identity for the audience, but she does not view this as a positive cultural experience. She states, "This carefree approach actually normalizes latent racist attitudes and presents a very sectarian social stance as neutral or natural. ...[T]his version of identity...is characterized by unquestioning loyalty to group authority and uncritical acceptance of the status quo, a status quo that leaves them underserved" (p. 274).

Identity and community work to create a fan culture that draws people repeatedly to events. The attraction has been specifically examined through research on the demographics of the people who consume wrestling as a product and their motivations for watching the spectacle. Ashley, Dollar, Wigley, Callentine, and Daughtery (2000) offer a study that refutes the commonly perceived notion that the wrestling fan is a "beerguzzling, low-educated, low-income person" (p. 148). Instead, the researchers assert that the average wrestling fan is college-educated, middle-class, "family oriented," gainfully employed, and informed enough to make discerning consumer decisions (p. 148). Rather than focus on defining *who* watches, other studies explain *why* they watch. Atkinson (2002) argues that professional wrestling serves a mimesis of the violence fans see in sports and offers them arousal that mere legitimate sports competition cannot. Wrestling,

he contends, takes the violence from sport, places it under a microscope, and presents it in an in-your-face fashion that excites the audience.

Maguire (2005) offers three sociological reasons apart from a thirst for violence as explanations of why people watch wrestling. First, he explains that wrestling acts as an event like September 11, 2001, or as a device like a soap opera. He suggests such events and cultural capital bring people together to bind a fractured sense of community. Second, Maguire claims that modern life has disenchanted the American public so much that wrestling offers an excitement to infuse a person's life with pulse and vigor. Third, he maintains that professional wrestling "offers an escape from political correctness" (p. 173).

Though the research on identity and community in professional wrestling is invaluable, the majority of research on professional wrestling deals with the portrayals of masculinity in the sport. Oppliger (2003) ties wrestling to a hyper-masculinity, in which violence is linked with problem-solving. She is critical of its aggressive portrayals that she contends lead to violence toward women and homophobia. Soulliere (2006) examines the messages about manhood and masculinity found in the WWE, the most prominent wrestling promotion on television. She concludes that "real men" act aggressively and violently, men tend to settle disputes with physicality, men are confrontational, men take responsibility, men do not whine, and real men consider themselves winners. Soulliere and Blair (2006) suggest that WWE television programming constructs an ideal masculinity and provides the standard for what "a 'real' man should look like and aspire to be" (p. 274). This standard includes "large size, lean muscularity, and strength" (p. 274).

Dell (2006) offers a counterpoint to wrestling existing as a world of hypermasculinity. Instead, he acknowledges that women, too, have contributed heavily to wrestling's success and hold just as strong a significance to the history of the business as muscles and men. Dell argues that women's strongest presence finds itself located in fan culture post-1950 and that wrestling offered women both a voice and an identity. For example, Dell points to fan club bulletins: "This personal aspect of communication...functioned particularly well for fan club bulletins. Women established communal bonds through the familiar forms of speech they used in the pages of bulletins, drawing on and applying women's oral cultural practices to their written work" (p. 83).

Wrestling and Its Violence

Whether men or women are in the ring or the audience, one of the common criticisms of professional wrestling is that too much violence permeates the industry. This criticism echoed loudly in the mid-1990s when an upstart little promotion out of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, known as Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW) attempted to reach national prominence by having matches that were ultra violent. The promotion saw matches with barbed wire, forks, cheese graters, tables, and ladders. Wrestlers freely bled on their way to reach fame. But many critics asked what effect would this type of wrestling have on society. The emerging trends in this field of research falls in one of three trends: causes of and solutions for such violence, violence and professional wrestling, and competition and aggressiveness.

Jamieson and Orr (2009) outline multiple root causes for violence in sports. They suggest that societal factors lead to violence because "sport as a mirror of society, a marker of national achievement, and a way to measure excellence, tradition, and

contribution to global society reflected many social constructions that gave way to national personality" (p. 92). The researchers also maintain that language used by sports journalists and broadcasters helps spectators see the sport as a violent struggle rather than entertaining competition. Also, Jamieson and Orr suggest the media trivialize the violence in sport and minimize its effect. They link violence to how sports leagues market their product—with strong sexuality and violent images on commercials.

While Jamieson and Orr (2009) discuss possible root causes to sports violence, they also examine possible solutions. Two key suggestions they offer are stronger leadership from sport organizations and stronger legislation and intervention from the federal government. Leizman (1999) also argues for Congressional intervention but also suggests more practical solutions that could be employed by sports leagues themselves. For instance, he suggests a limitation or outright elimination of alcohol at events. Leizman also suggests the elimination of mascots, quicker expulsion of rowdy fans, stronger penalties when athletes fight, and stronger regulations on marketing violence.

While researchers look for causes and remedies, they also aim to establish links between professional wrestling and violence and suggest that the violence seen in the squared circle can have damaging, long-lasting effects on spectators. Kaestle, Halpern, and Brown (2007) state, "[F]or the first time in young adolescents, that exposure to commonly viewed television content combining sex and violence may negatively influence the development of sexual norms that reject rape" (p. 187). They identify professional wrestling as a leading predictor in adolescent males of an increased acceptance of date rape. In their analysis of verbal aggression in professional wrestling, Tamborini, Chory, Lachlan, Westerman, and Skalski (2008) claim that in their 36-hour

sample of WWE programming, they found 833 aggressive interactions. They say this number yielded an average of 23 interactions per hour. The researchers then conclude that such inundation of violent aggression can explain problems like spousal abuse and school and youth violence. They suggest that verbal aggression acts as "an antecedent to physical violence, citing being threatened, disrespected, or humiliated by one's peers as powerful stimulators of such violence" (p. 255).

Lachlan et al. (2009) explore the motivations for the acts of violence that take place on WWE programming in an attempt to ascertain if these acts could be justified or not. They emphasize two key findings in their research. The first is that more than 90 percent of the violent acts were disproportionate to the act that instigated it; therefore, in the WWE, violence is "over-retributive" (p. 69). Second, the researchers observe that a high number of wrestlers for whom the audience cheers respond with violence for reasons not considered socially acceptable. As a result, Lachlan et al. (2009) link the actions of these liked characters to a more "disinhibited" and accepting response to violence from society. In other words, people's senses become deadened, and the limit for tolerance is drawn farther away from what it used to be.

Some research moves beyond specifically linking violent tendencies just to wrestling and instead generalizes them to all sports. This research identifies aggressiveness as an intricate component to sports. In fact, Burton (2005) claims, "Without aggression there is no such thing as sport" (p. 845). The researcher locates three factors that explain why heightened levels of aggression arise in sports: biological, psychological, and social. Using these three factors, Burton claims that healthy aggression can reach "extreme and inappropriate versions" in sports, which should be

viewed "as a health-promoting exercise in psychological development and maturation" (p. 851). Kerr (2008) argues for a critique of the Competitive Aggressiveness and Anger Scale (CAAS), which defines aggression in sports as "any [intentional] behavior, not recognized as legal within the official rules of conduct, directed towards an opponent, official, team-mate or spectator who is motivated to avoid such behavior" (p. 722). The author finds other existing motivations for violent acts than just aggressiveness, such as thrill violence and power violence, and as a result, he calls for a deeper understanding of aggression in sports by sports psychologists.

The Effect of Pain

An interesting and related line of research concerns pain and athletic identity. Though limited research on pain and specifically the professional wrestling community exists, a great deal of research focuses on four trends of pain and sports. Researchers identify a sports inventory for pain and have weighed its effectiveness. Research focuses on the ability of athletes to compartmentalize pain and "push through" or play on. A great deal of existing scholarship examines pain in the dance community. Finally, research dealing with pain and sport explains how that pain can both offer and deny an identity and a sense of community to the athlete.

Researchers define the Sports Inventory for Pain (SIP) as "a 25-item sport-specific measure of how different athletes respond psychologically when in pain" (Bourgeois, Meyers, & LeUnes, 2009, p. 20). Bourgeois, Meyers, & LeUnes (2009) validate the SIP and determine that an athlete's capacity to cope with pain can indeed be predicted. The study helps identify those athletes who know how to address pain effectively so that "optimal rehabilitation" can be assigned to those who do not. Griffith,

Hart, Goodling, Kessler, and Whitmire (2006) offer a study of the SIP applied to one of the most dangerous sports: base jumping. They note that experienced jumpers more likely face adverse affects of pain in that they dwell on pain longer, use mental imagery as a coping mechanism, possess a pessimistic attitude prior to jumping, and consider not jumping. As a result, how people cope with the pain, or how they score on the SIP, affects their performance and even participation in their respective sport.

The majority of research dedicated to enduring pain and continuing participation in a sport focuses on the power of the mind. Heil and Fine (1999) explain that, too often, researchers define pain as only physical or mental. However, the authors point out that pain is a product of the two, or what they term "biopsychology" (p. 14). They state, "[P]ain refers to a perception that is an end product of a stimulus that is received and mediated by a complex biological system. The process of perception further elicits attempts to find the meaning of the pain and to guide one's behavior accordingly" (p. 14). Collinson (2005) explains that the attempt to find meaning cognitively can lead an individual to view his/her injury as "a transition from a sacred to a profane state" (p. 235). This view is where the cognitive turns emotional, Collinson offers, and the athlete feels sadness, despair, and mortification.

Researchers who analyze what it means to "play through" pain focus the majority of their studies on endurance sports. Such is the case with a study of pain and self-doubt experienced during a marathon (Hart, 2009). Hart (2009) characterizes pain as a relatively easy obstacle to overcome if a marathon runner mentally prepares for its defeat. She says, "I recommend preparing a mental arsenal full of weapons to be used when needed. This arsenal should include motivational quotes and music, pictures of inspiring

people or places, movie clips from your best performances, and vivid images of a strong, successful finish" (p. 52). Hart's remedy for dealing with pain clearly belongs to a strong mind. Kress and Statler (2007) also concentrate on an endurance sport, cycling, and they also conclude that mental preparedness can aid in overcoming pain with the following strategies: focus, awareness, goals, imagery, and positive self-talk (p. 439). The researchers also state that their subjects, cyclists, view pain as finite, something "that will end in a relatively short amount of time" (p. 445). This view made pain easier to manage for the cyclists in their study.

Malcom (2006) chooses to steer her research away from endurance sports and instead focuses on coping mechanisms used to play through pain in softball. Instead of attributing one's coping with pain to the internal, the mind, she maintains that the external can help a participant push through. She identifies that external factor as socialization. Malcom asserts that other players' rebukes can cause a player to play through pain. If a player was ranked higher on the depth chart, she was more likely to shake off pain and play through. If a player belonged to a higher social class, she more readily accepted pain and adopted the proper sport ethic to play on. Malcom also credits a shift in gender identity as being a cause in equipping players with stronger coping mechanisms. She states, "[T]hey were exposed to a variety of socialization experiences in which coaches, teammates, and others disapproved of their traditionally feminine reactions to minor injuries and introduced them to the way athletes are expected to deal with pain" (p. 520). Hence, external factors can play just as an important role as internal factors in teaching a person how to play through an injury and play on.

When one thinks of activity that can enact long-term, irreparable harm to the body, one usually does not think of dance. However, dancers prove to be some of the most well-equipped in coping with and continuing on through pain. Encarnacion, Meyers, Ryan, and Peace (2000) report that ballet performers' overall pain responses mirror that of the general collegiate population. However, they point out:

When comparing overall pain coping styles of ballet performers to specific sports populations, however, ballet performers exhibited lower coping and cognitive skills and higher catastrophizing responses than recreational runners, high school and intramural athletes, elite equestrians, and high school and collegiate rodeo performers. (p. 28)

Therefore, ballet dancers' responses to pain differ from other sports performers' reactions. Wainwright and Turner (2004) define ballet as an artform that grants a person a certain identity, not a sport or dance. As a result, they show that pain and injury threaten a person's identity and can "spell disaster" for a dancer facing retirement. Paparizos, Tripp, Sullivan, and Rubenstein (2005) contend that ballet dancers who have higher skill levels more readily accept their pain and have a higher tolerance.

Though much of the scholarship mentioned views pain as something to deal with or eliminate, other scholarship frames it positively as a socializing mechanism. Research concerning sports and pain shows that pain provides meaning, identity, and community for an athlete. Though very little research concerns itself with professional wrestling, Smith (2008) observes that pain becomes something wrestlers need and want: "A close look at pro wrestling interactions reveals that pain is experienced as functional and meaningful. In contrast to the popular notion of pain as harmful or adverse, pro wrestlers come to understand pain as, at worst, benign, and at best, desirable" (p. 147).

Available research counters this notion and, in fact, submits that pain in sport can actually hinder the formation of a community. Howe (2004) offers a case study of a Welsh rugby club team to illustrate this notion. He suggests that because an injury or chronic pain can ignite talk of an athlete's retirement, the rugby players in his study chose not to discuss their legitimate pain with their teammates. However, they would describe the pain when they played through it to assert more masculinity or use the pain as an excuse for poor performance. He concludes, "What clouds this logical development of a squad is the talk of pain and injury, which is often used as a barrier to mask the true feelings of players in times of distress" (p.147).

Crockett and Holtan (2007) question how much an athlete actually engages in a community unified by pain or an injury. Although the researchers discuss how pain opens an athlete up to trust, intimacy, and, therefore, a sense of community, they claim the female athletes they studied admitted to denying themselves rehabilitation because they were unable to admit their pain to another person. They suggest that when one is injured, one must admit to injury, visit a trainer, go to a doctor, etc. However, Crockett and Holtan's athletes could not do this and, therefore, denied themselves a sense of community.

Wrestling houses a violent culture, as do a great many sports around the world, but the violence follows as an expected by-product of the heated competitiveness and aggression these sports have both adopted and celebrated. Popular and scholarly research provide a solid basis on which to construct a more in-depth study of professional wrestling. Understanding the trends found in research solely dedicated to professional

wrestling would help to identify the profession and its means of forming identity and community through the shared and socializing experience of pain.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

My series of articles will highlight how meaningful wrestling can be for those involved: the wrestlers, their families, their fans, and the promoters. Specifically I will consider the following questions:

- 1. Who makes up the world of independent wrestling? What is the role of the promoter, the wrestler, and the fans in that world?
- 2. How do the independent wrestling promotions differ from the major, more well-known promotions, like World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE)?
- 3. Who are the wrestlers who create ring identities and then don these costumes on the weekends? How much of a balance exists between their in-ring personas and their out-of-ring, conventional identities?
- 4. What level of professionalism and training exists in professional wrestling?

 What role do pro-wrestling schools play in those facets of the industry?

Interviewing and Observation

I became intrigued with the idea of writing a series on professional wrestling after doing an article for a newswriting class in fall 2008. Starting in April 2009, I contacted two wrestling promotions in North Carolina and inquired about featuring them both in my thesis. The first promotion, named Gimmicks Only Underground Grappling

Entertainment (G.O.U.G.E), bases itself in Raleigh. It holds shows regularly in Stem, North Carolina, and also travels around the Raleigh area to armories. Its promoter, Greg Mosorjak, has been involved in wrestling for more than 20 years, and he has run G.O.U.G.E. since 2006. He formerly ran it as Southern Championship Wrestling (SCW) from 1994 until 2004 in Raleigh. The promotion markets itself with a family-friendly brand of wrestling that is absent a great deal of blood and violence. Instead, it focuses on entertainment with comical characters, like Seymour Snott, a nerd who wears thick glasses, plaid shorts, and a Batman tie. I have attended their shows on a semi-regular basis from April to December 2009, trying to make it to at least one show a month.

The second promotion I contacted houses its operations in Sanford, North Carolina. Jim Fox, its promoter, has owned Power Pro Wrestling for three years. It runs twice a month out of Sanford, and in fall 2009, he has started to take the promotion to surrounding areas (i.e. Dunn, Pittsboro, etc.). Power Pro is a more violent brand than G.O.U.G.E. Fox runs the promotion as his full-time job, and he uses high production values to vault Power Pro to one of the top promotions in the state. I started attending Power Pro's shows in June 2009 to do research and interviews for a possible thesis article on the business-side of wrestling. Because of my interest in wrestling as a possible thesis topic, I continued to attend at least one show a month regularly through September.

When I attend these shows, my method involves two strategies. The first is simple observation. Both Mosorjak and Fox have allowed me access to their locker rooms, so I observe the wrestlers before, during, and after the shows. Watching and observing each wrestler's in-ring performance and style adds another dimension to my

research, so I watch as many matches as possible. Observing the crowd serves as another important facet to my research.

The second strategy is interviewing: the fans who attend the show, the wrestlers, and the referees who put on the shows. I even interviewed the family members and friends of these wrestlers to get an idea of who the wrestlers are outside of the ring. I learned early on that I needed to have an informal approach when I interviewed at a show so that the wrestlers, who are already guarded in an industry they constantly try to protect, could warm up to me. If I found the wrestler interesting, I asked for his or her contact information, and I followed up by meeting them or phoning them for a more indepth interview.

Limitations

In the last 12 months, I have spent time equivalent to more than a month attending shows, interviewing people, and reading about wrestlers. I recognize that so much immersion into the culture can be potentially detrimental to my ability as a journalist to step back from the subject and give an impartial, fair portrayal of the people and their lives. As noted earlier, I learned early in the interviewing process that the wrestlers were somewhat of a closed group but that the promoters were much more willing to share information so they could market the sport, increase audiences, and boost their gate receipts as a result. I have reviewed interviewing techniques and discussed the potential liability with professors to make sure that I can approach the material in an unbiased and factual way. Having spent so much time with these wrestlers, I have gone out of my way to maintain professional relationships and to avoid fraternizing with the wrestlers. I meet them only at the matches and conduct most of my interviews on the phone when I want to

discuss points more in depth. I let quotes in my sources' words tell their stories, not me.

I also consider descriptive words and phrases very carefully to recreate scenes accurately and without bias.

I have already written two articles on the topic. Both of them have been published in North Carolina newspapers. I have used that experience to test my ability to tackle numerous pages of interviews and notes and fashion stories that reveal the people behind wrestling. Some of that material will appear in my thesis but in a much different format and structure.

Also as I began my research, I realized that I needed more than just the stories of the wrestlers. I needed some insight into what makes people wrestle, the pain they endure, and what makes audiences attend. I was able to get much help on the literature review by enlisting a faculty member from UNC's Department of Exercise and Sport Science. Dr. Elizabeth Hedgpeth, a sports psychologist, provided insight into the role pain plays in an athlete's life. She helped compile scholarly articles and books with which she was familiar about pain and sports. Her role has been invaluable in establishing possible explanations for why these men and women compete in a manufactured sport in such a violent way.

The Articles

Professional wrestlers use a term in the industry to describe when one wrestler moves away from the script in the ring. For example, he or she starts throwing real punches in the ring. They call the match a "shoot." Fans also use the term when wrestlers go public, revealing their own stories and sometimes dirt on other wrestlers in articles or interviews. Essentially, the term alludes to the erosion of wrestling's facade

and to a frank look at the realities of the industry. My three articles will attempt to unveil even further those realities.

The first article will provide a general description of the different components of the wrestling life on the independent, small-town scene in North Carolina. It will draw on several events I have attended to paint a slice-of-life view of what happens at a typical show. Included will be a description of who attends wrestling shows and their motivations for doing so. The article will provide an overview of what constitutes the wrestling life for the wrestlers: pay, travel, career goals, etc. To show who these wrestlers are as everyday people, I will include descriptions of their daily jobs and family life.

The second article will feature a wrestling promoter and what it takes to run a promotion full-time: stage a show, advertise it, book wrestlers for the show, and find a venue. This article will provide a thorough explanation of how money works on the independent scene: what the expenses are, what comes in as profit, and where the profit is spent.

The third article will profile a wrestling school in Shawsville, Virginia. Jimmy "Boogie Woogie Man" Valiant and his wife, Angel, run the school. Along with his former students, Jimmy Valiant trains the wrestlers, and Angel makes the costumes for them. Both serve as the wrestlers' surrogate parents. The article will examine what facets Valiant emphasizes to his trainees in becoming wrestlers and will highlight the familial bonds that form among people involved in the world of independent wrestling.

TIMELINE

Dec. 4 – Turn in committee to Cindy Anderson. My committee consists of Jan Yopp (chair), Barbara Friedman (reader from J-School), and Elizabeth Hedgpeth (reader from EXSS).

Dec. 13 – Turn in rough draft of proposal and literature review to Professor Yopp. Also turn in first article for review.

Jan. 15 – Complete path exam discussion with committee members; submit revised proposal to Professor Yopp; submit proposal to Dr. Friedman and Dr. Hedgpeth.

Jan. 22 – Submit signed, approved copy of proposal to Cindy Anderson; complete second article and submit to Professor Yopp.

Feb. 5 – Take path exams.

Feb. 12 – Complete and submit third article to Professor Yopp.

Feb. 26 – Deadline to have all completed revisions and final draft completed and submitted to Professor Yopp.

March 5 – Send thesis out to committee members.

March 19 – Defend thesis.

March 26 – Submit final, formatted copy of thesis to University's Graduate School.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE INSIDE JOB

The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing *about* the absurdity of the human condition; it merely *presents* it in being--that is, in terms of concrete stage images. This is the difference between the approach of the philosopher and that of the poet.

MARTIN ESSLIN, The Theatre of the Absurd

The klowns

Dusk descends on Stem, N.C., a town of just under 400 people in Granville County. The main drag has a Hardee's and an ABC Store. It's a small community, and if they didn't have streetlights there, God might forget it existed.

But there's one place in Stem whose existence is indisputable this Saturday night in late April 2009: the town's fire hall.

Inside about 100 spectators have paid \$10 each to trade in their comfortable couches at home for the hard steel their backsides will ride on for three hours, some electric and some tedious. The fire hall's bay doors are all open to let in some of the warm spring air and to freshen up the staleness that will build from the night's activities. Carefully aligned up chairs extend five rows deep on four sides of a wrestling ring.

Inside the ropes, gimmicked gladiators from both sexes will lay down their dreams, sacrifice their bodies and trade in their 40-hour working worlds for 10 minutes of

acrobatic and sometimes violent waltzes with one another in what promoters bill as this theater of wrestling.

On this particular night, two wrestlers, a masked tag-team known as Krazy Killer Klowns, steal the show with their wicked imaginations. PoPo Da Klown wears a shirt bearing his name, black pants, a yellow tutu, and an orange and yellow top hat. His mask is white with a black and red outlined grin that pops out of the darkness as in a horror movie before someone is stabbed. Green strands hang down from the crown. LoLo wears a similar mask, only his is blue, draped with yellow strands. He sports a limegreen shirt with a fake tuxedo design on the chest. Black and white boots climbing to his knees meet his navy-blue wrestling trunks.

PoPo and LoLo partner with HoHo, a female, taking turns tagging in and wrestling their opponents one-on-one: first, the Momma's Boy, a grown African-American man who comes to the ring wearing yellow pajamas decorated with fire trucks; then the Wrestling Superstar, a short, masked wrestler, who smokes through his black and silver mask at his merchandise table after the night's action; and third, Andrea the Giant, a tall, blond woman whose long face contorts with a fierce grimace.

During the match, PoPo and LoLo, both African-American men, stand on the ring's apron and start a chant. The rhythm builds through the Stem Fire Hall, the audience's voices harmonizing as they clap, sing and praise the Krazy Killer Klowns.

"
$$K - K - K$$
. K — K — K ."

"In a weird and crazy way, I love having white people chant KKK for two black guys in hoods," says LoLo Da Klown in an e-mail interview. He admits he and his

31

partner laugh under their masks when they hear the crowd join in. "Only in pro wrestling will this happen, and the only violence is in the ring."

Though the audience understands the irony and absurdity of the scene, it is clueless to that particular personal pleasure, a way that the wrestlers entertain themselves. The audience sees only the "theater" created by the masks and gimmicks that the Klowns—and other wrestlers—use. On this night after their Gimmicks Only Underground Grappling Entertainment (G.O.U.G.E) match, the Klowns celebrate their victory by inviting kids into the ring with them, continuing to pull the audience into their theatrical world.

Pop culture serves as the basis for a number of the gimmicks in the promotion, says G.O.U.G.E wrestler Robbie Flanagan. And in G.O.U.G.E, the gimmickier the better. Gimmicks like the Klowns and their clapping along with chants of "KKK" challenge the boundaries of social acceptance. Other ideas for gimmicks, like a lacrosse player based on the 2006 scandal at Duke University, never made it inside the ring for fear of potentially crossing that boundary.

LoLo, who does not want his real name used, appreciates that G.O.U.G.E gives him freedom to satirize culture and develop a character. His motives seem to match those of a number of the wrestlers, and even a promoter, on the independent wrestling scene today. These men and women face miniscule odds of making it to a major promotion like World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). They subject their bodies, especially their backs and spines, to cumulative and chronic pain. Some bleed, sometimes profusely, for the spectacle. Much of the industry has been exposed as predetermined and "fake." Yet

the wrestlers still go out and perform to engage audiences that average 200 people—and to entertain themselves.

In G.O.U.G.E, they have one man to thank for letting them wrestle for their own amusement: Count Grog.

The man behind the curtain

Greg Mosorjak understands the freedom of not caring. After one G.O.U.G.E. show, he wears a tie-dyed shirt with yellow-orange shorts and socks pulled up high on his shins. The 48-year-old self-proclaimed Deadhead has a salt-and-pepper beard and a jolly smile on his full face. He looks like a garrulous high-school English teacher, the last guy who would run a wrestling promotion.

But once a month, sometimes in Stem and sometimes in other small towns in North Carolina, that's what Mosorjak does. He dons a cape and a black suit, comes out to eerie Halloween organ music and announces in a thick western Pennsylvania accent the card for every show. He leaves Mosorjak behind and exists to the audience only as Count Grog.

Mosorjak doesn't need the wrestling to survive. He has a good job in educational research. His wife of nine years, who merely tolerates wrestling, is director of a preschool.

"[Running a promotion] can be stressful," he says. "It depends on what you want out of it. I think it's more stressful if you're in it to make money. G.O.U.G.E. is not really a money-making proposition. We break even at best and try not to lose too much."

At one time, though, wrestling was the only meal on Mosorjak's plate. Growing up in Johnstown, Pa., in the 1960s and '70s, he watched wrestling greats like Bruno

Sammartino and Killer Kowalski wrestle out of the Pittsburgh territory. He started to correspond with promoter Ken Jugan, whose name Mosorjak found in a national wrestling magazine. Jugan was a promoter who also sent out industry newsletters that served as regional reports recapping results from matches across the United States. After Jugan started Three Rivers Wrestling in West Virginia and Ohio, Mosorjak attended a Cleveland, Ohio, show. A manager/referee didn't show up for his spot that night, and Jugan asked Mosorjak to fill in. Having not been trained, he didn't know what to do.

"Luis Martinez [a famous wrestler from the Midwest] picked me up and bodyslammed me on the floor in the dressing room," Mosorjak says. "He got me through enough to take a bump that first night."

Mosorjak, then 20, continued to swim deeper in the industry's allure. He managed wrestlers in his role as Greg "Punk Rock" Mason, who wore a pink coat with paisley flowers all over it. He started to put out a fan newsletter and referee more and more, much to the chagrin of his father.

"My dad hated it," Mosorjak says. "I was a skinny kid growing up, and he always thought I was going to get hurt. Every now and then, my picture would appear in the wrestling magazine, and he'd hurry out to buy one. Most of my other family didn't know I was doing it."

After a failed stint as a business major at West Virginia University, where he coincidentally roomed with the nephew of the Original Sheik Ed Farhat, a prominent wrestler from the 1960s, Mosorjak moved to Raleigh in 1985 after hearing about a booming job market in North Carolina. He graduated from North Carolina State University with a political science degree in 1989 and dropped out of wrestling for

awhile. Two years later, he moved to Boone, N.C., to pursue a teaching certificate. When that didn't pan out, he got into booking bands locally and moved back to Raleigh in 1993 to pursue that profession.

After he mastered the promotion gig, Mosorjak saw an opportunity to get back into wrestling. He would promote bands during the day and go to wrestling gigs as Count Grog on weekends. He worked 100 shows a year. Then, in 1994, he started his own promotion in Raleigh called Southern Championship Wrestling, which found success for 10 years.

Capitalizing on the more violent, hardcore direction of wrestling in the mid-to-late 1990s, Mosorjak pushed more physical contact in that promotion. "We were doing 10 matches," he says, "and eight of them were bloody."

The new century came, and with it, change. Wrestling's violent niche eroded somewhat, and Mosorjak took a corporate job in research to pay the bills. He continued to promote wrestling but saw it was time for a change. Now, Mosorjak only worries about putting on a satirical, funny show for both adults and children.

And the wrestlers say they appreciate Grog for what he's doing.

Mike Phillips, a 34-year-old senior claims clerk for Erie Insurance in Raleigh, has wrestled all over the U.S. In indy promotions in North Carolina, he becomes Seymour Snott, a bald nerd who wears a buttoned-up white shirt, blue plaid shorts, a Batman tie and black glasses held together with tape across the bridge of his nose. In the last year, he has settled in Mosorjak's promotion.

"One of the reasons I do like G.O.U.G.E. is that Count Grog has been in the business for 30 years, and he has been there and knows what it is like," Phillips says.

"Some promoters start up and say, 'I'm going to put on a wrestling show.' You show up, and there's three people in the crowd, and you're like, 'Dude, what happened?""

Mosorjak understands those pitfalls because of his 30-plus years on the road.

"I've been in some nasty redneck towns all over South Carolina, North Carolina and Tennessee," Mosorjak says. "I worked in a place in Waynesville at a Flea Market where a guy tried to stab me because I blew my nose on the American flag. In Fall Branch, Tennessee, a guy basically had an old garage and lawn chairs. We changed in his bedroom upstairs."

The addiction

The muscles on Robbie Flanagan look like inverted snowmen, rock hard mounds overlapping each other from his shoulders to his elbows. At 5 feet 10 inches and 310 pounds, the veteran of North Carolina's independent circuit uses these muscles to throw his opponents around the ring like a toddler swings her doll around a nursery. Flanagan, 32, has performed on the circuit for 11 years, wearing a black cut-off shirt and jean shorts when he wrestles as Trailer Park Heat.

Flanagan says he helped Mosorjak conceive G.O.U.G.E. in 2006 along with wrestler Phillips. In fact, Flanagan says, the idea originated when Phillips, with nothing better to do, e-mailed them an idea to start a promotion that would serve as an absurd world that fans and wrestlers could both enjoy by using satire and humor. "Wrestling falls into that circus," Flanagan says. "When G.O.U.G.E. was made, that's exactly what we wanted to do."

Flanagan says he sees G.O.U.G.E. as a way to pay respects to the gimmicks that have been a part of wrestling for decades and to honor wrestling's tradition, something that is rare in today's independent climate.

"Independent wrestling is filled with a bunch of people who don't respect the business, a bunch of marks [fans] who think they can hop in the business and think they can open up their own federation," Flanagan says. "They put people in the ring who aren't properly trained. It gives guys like us a bad name who busted our asses."

When Flanagan was a little boy, he wanted to be three things. "I wanted to be either a wrestler, an airplane pilot or a lawyer," he says, adding that he has almost reached all three goals. "I've been wrestling for 11 years. I've flown in planes. I almost have an associate degree in paralegal studies from Kaplan University."

But even though wrestling has allowed Flanagan to play out his dreams for the last decade, it has come with its costs. The travel wears on him too much, Flanagan says, now that he has a wife and a 4-year-old daughter. And the pain takes its toll a lot more than it did when he was in his 20s.

"We had a show Saturday night," Flanagan says after a January 2010 G.O.U.G.E. show, "and today is Tuesday. My lower back is still hurting."

Though wrestling pits two opponents against each other, wrestler Mike Phillips says that a match functions more like a dance with the participants actually working together, giving their bodies to each other. "A good wrestling match is no different than watching Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers dance. It's about being able to work together. I think what people forget is that there is an art form."

The artistic merit, however, has waned the last decade as more amateurs without any formal training have threatened to break into the industry. Along with sloppier performances, the relative safety within the indy ring is being jeopardized by numerous wannabes and "backyarders," a term assigned to young men who violently wrestle with no formal training in their backyards. Those with little formal training show up at matches and want on the night's card. Promoters can take them only at their word and give them a chance.

A veteran of North Carolina's independent circuit, Rick Garrett, says that a kid can show up and name-drop a famous wrestler as a trainer. Then he gets in the ring, and he doesn't know what he's doing. It can turn out that maybe he trained one or two times with a trainer, but quit.

Today's wrestlers take a chance every time they step into the ring and blindly trust their opponent to protect them. When novices step into the ring with veterans, veterans can get hurt with one wrong move by a wrestler they've never even met before. "I trust a lot of people with my life when I go to wrestle other places, wrestling guys I don't know," Garrett says. "They could drop you on your head, and you could be crippled for the rest of your life."

The pain accumulates over the years on a wrestler's body. Flanagan says a wrestler has to find a way to cope. "I take Tylenol," he says. "Hot baths, heating pads, you know."

But, Flanagan says, he's seen other wrestlers turn to harder remedies.

"[Wrestling] has caused a lot of wrestlers to self-medicate with pain pills," he says. "I'm not going to say everybody does it, but I would be willing to say 30 to 35 percent do it in

some form or fashion. Booze, pain killers, smoking pot, whatever it takes to dull the senses."

Beyond the forms of self-medication, a wrestler cannot do much else for an injury. Flanagan sells life insurance, but he says he can't sell himself a disability policy because of exemption clauses for actors, boxers and performers like wrestlers who put themselves at risk.

"I don't know too many guys who have insurance," Flanagan says. "I can sell myself an accident policy. If I go to the emergency room, I have some coverage. I don't have major medical, so I take a big risk every time I go out there [to wrestle]."

So why does Trailer Park Heat bump around the ring on Saturday nights for G.O.U.G.E.?

"I'm addicted," Flanagan says coldly and bluntly. "You know how people get addicted to drugs? You know, adrenaline is addictive, too. You go out there and you hear all the fans, and you want it."

And because of the addiction, Flanagan can never wholly free himself of Trailer Park Heat. "I've retired before, and some months later, I'm back doing it," he says. "There's no 12-step program to getting over this."

The philosopher

William Happer is a mainstay of G.O.U.G.E.'s gallery of gimmicks. A high-school civics teacher and wrestling coach by day, he wrestles as "The German Beef" Otto Schwanz for Mosorjak's promotion, as well as for other promotions around the state. Happer's 6-foot 4-inch, 240-pound build reinforces the fact that he played offensive line for the Georgetown Hoyas in the early-to-mid 1990s. Happer made it to what the

wrestlers call "The Show," meaning he caught on in the late 1990s with one of the major promotions at the time, Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW).

After a short stint with the organization, Happer found himself back on the indy scene, but it's an environment where he sometimes seems out of place. He would rather talk about authors Mark Twain, Kurt Vonnegut or Sinclair Lewis than wrestling. He doesn't feel the need to fraternize with the fans on a circuit that centers around the intimacy of National Guard armories and high school gymnasiums, where fans can approach the wrestlers at any moment. And he's more interested in entertaining himself with his character, who shouts gibberish and performs like one of the Three Stooges.

Happer's face doesn't match his brawn, and it almost contradicts itself. He has a shaved head. He looks zany on one hand, like Ogre from "Revenge of the Nerds," but his eyes and his guarded grin look like that of a philosopher who is the only one in on an existential joke. He describes his position in life with self-effacement. "There are three types of people in the world," says Happer, 37. "There are those who are going up, those who are going down, and those who are going nowhere. I'm the one going nowhere."

But his view of his own inertia in the world also symbolizes that of the wrestling world. Some aspire to make it to "The Show," wrestling's major leagues, like the WWE. Has-beens emulate Mickey Rourke's Randy "the Ram" Robinson in "The Wrestler." The independent scene around the country sees millions of men and women vying for one or two spots in major promotions every year. But in reality most of these wrestlers are going nowhere, and those in G.O.U.G.E are fine with that.

The gimmick

At a late-November 2009 show at the National Guard Armory in Youngsville, N.C., Rick Garrett, 43, admits he's going nowhere, saying he's too old and too short to ever trade in the small towns of North Carolina for the big cities the WWE visits.

Garrett sits at a merchandise table trying to sell his Fabulous Frankie Fontaine T-shirts before the show. The merchandise table serves as a way for wrestlers to make a little extra money on top of what they take from the door, which usually comes to \$20 per wrestler. "Most guys sell gimmicks because they need the money," Happer says in an e-mail interview. "It covers gas, etc. I used to sell shirts and pictures. But no one likes to try to sell stuff. It's okay when they come to you to buy but even trying to get kids' attention is painful. I would always pick my nose and eat it to get their attention."

Garrett has a compacted 5-foot 6-inch, 235-pound frame. He wears a pink T-shirt with the words "You Want to Touch My Monkey?" printed on it. A pink and white feathered boa, black spandex shorts, and pink and black boots serve as the necessary accessories for his gimmick—Fabulous Frankie Fontaine, a feminized male character who pays homage to past wrestlers like Adrian Adonis and Gorgeous George, who themselves satirized gender. His face droops, looking solemn despite the heavy, blue eyeshadow and pink lipstick that offsets his black goatee. Garrett has already transformed himself into Fabulous Frankie, who will walk to the ring to Justin Timberlake's "Sexy Back." A stuffed monkey puppet hugs Garrett's midsection, its hands velcroed together around his waist.

"We can sell monkeys and fairy wings," Garrett says. "It depends on where we are."

Most of the wrestlers don't stand six feet or taller, a height necessary to sell their bodies to Vince McMahon and the WWE. So they wrestle with gimmicks that can be an inside joke for themselves. "I entertain myself more that I entertain my audience," Garrett says, adding that others have complimented his gimmick. "I've had one person come to me and say they're gay and say what I'm doing is the coolest thing they've seen. They said I play gay better than most gay men."

Garrett doesn't view his makeup, his slow strut, his lisp or his outfit as perpetuating homosexual stereotypes. Wrestling as Fontaine requires Garrett to commit wholly to the gimmick. "When you turn that switch on," Garrett says, "I have to forget about my wife and kids. I have to change completely, or it's not going to be as good as it can be."

And he doesn't worry about his gimmick and the effect it might have on young audience members. Instead he puts the responsibility on parents to teach a child acceptance.

"If their mom or dad is sitting there, and [the kids] are screaming at the top of their lungs, 'F'n faggot this' and 'F'n faggot that,' that's a parenting thing," Garrett says. He says it's not his problem "if you're going to allow your 8-year-old child to be that way."

Garrett loves that he can convince people that Fabulous Frankie Fontaine is a real person, even though it can be somewhat alarming just how much people believe. "Some people believe every breath I say," he says with the pride of an artist looking at his painting hanging in a museum. "They believe that I'm from San Francisco and that I fly

back and forth. Sometimes it can get scary when they make their own Frankie Fontaine T-shirts and paint me pictures."

In wrestling the term "kayfabe" means that a wrestler continues to put on the illusion that nothing in the business is staged, that everything from the matches to the feuds to the characters are real. Indy wrestlers who deceive themselves into thinking they are celebrities may kayfabe even when a fan comes up and asks for an autograph or makes small talk.

But there's a clear cut-off when Fontaine's fabulousness subsides and Garrett returns to his real life. For him, the guys who become their gimmicks outside of the wrestling environment deceive themselves into believing they're something more than they really are. "At the end of the day, there's no sense in lying to yourself," he says.

On this night, Garrett undercuts his Fabulous Frankie flamboyance by staring off into nothing, as if something weighs heavily on his mind. By his feet sits a suitcase, a common accoutrement for an independent wrestler. Based in Havelock, N.C., Garrett, a former U.S. Marine and now civilian Naval officer, travels three weekends a month, reserving one for his family. Behind him, his wife, Christy, rocks a two-seated stroller holding their two foster children. Before this night is over, they will travel 280 miles round trip from Havelock to Youngsville back to Havelock. No distance is too great for Garrett.

"I will go anywhere they want me to be," Garrett says. "The farther away, I'm looking for gas money but not a whole bunch of anything else."

Christy Garrett, 34, sees her support of her husband's wrestling as a natural part of their marriage. She has her Barbie collection, which he supports, and he has his

wrestling. "I knew about it when we got married," she says, adding she met him as a fan attending a wrestling match. "You can't expect someone to stop what he is doing. He'd be miserable."

The giant

Dimmed by a shadow, Andrea the Giant's face could frighten anyone who looks at the cover of a G.O.U.G.E. program for a January 2010 show in Wake Forest, N.C. Her long hair falls down the sides of her face that is contorted like the topography of the Rocky Mountains on a relief map. She looks like Bela Lugosi if he were a rocker. Or Tom Petty if he were in a horror movie. Her stare, her scowl and her raised hand--whose ring, middle and index fingers look large enough to swallow you like some mythological three-headed-serpent beast--serve as warning of the Giant's power.

Andrea the Giant is the gimmick run by Glenna Kamholz, a polite 43-year-old software developer living in Garner, N.C. Kamholz is the opposite of her menacing Giant. Open and confident, she laughs at her self-effacing jokes. She's insightful and thoughtful in describing the wrestling world, not monosyllabic like Andrea.

Kamholz got into wrestling two years ago after spending three years on North Carolina's roller-derby circuit. When her roller-derby team did a cross promotion with Ring Wars Carolina, a wrestling promotion out of Fayetteville, N.C., she got in the ring and beat all of her teammates at Indian leg wrestling. Then she asked if anyone wanted to challenge her in the crowd.

"They did, and I took all the guys out," Kamholz remembers.

That night inspired her to break into wrestling. At 5 foot 11 inches and 220 pounds, a lot of which she says is muscle, she fits as a character in this circus world of

wrestling. But that world seems more important to her than it does for a lot of the weekend warriors. Kamholz still holds out hope that she is going to make it.

"There's only like 300 paying positions in the industry that are good pay,"

Kamholz says of wrestling's major leagues, WWE and Total Nonstop Action (TNA). "I realize that the potential for me to go somewhere at my age is limited. At the same time, I think I stand out compared to most of the girls."

Kamholz thinks she stands out because her Andrea does more than just be a valet, a role reserved for those women whose job entails looking pretty, dressing scantily and only accompanying wrestlers to the ring. That has been the limited role of many famed women in pro wrestling the last 15 years. But Andrea actually wrestles. And her battles to do so have taken place outside of the ring, as well.

Kamholz is going through a separation in large part, she says, because of commitment to roller derby and wrestling. "There was kind of a disconnect," she says of her marriage. "My ex wanted me to spend more time at home. It was kind of to do the domestic thing."

Wrestling gives her the independence and the confidence that maybe domestic life didn't, she admits. It opens her up to experiences and brings her out of her shell. She believes she's capable of anything.

And Andrea has a place in a wrestling family now. That community has accepted her as one of its own. Kamholz says that the men backstage have accepted her because she can be comedic, but she throws bashfulness and modesty right out the door like they do.

Kamholz may never make it to the big-time. But she's proud and steady in her own skin (and pink spandex tank top and gray and black tights), something to admire for holding tight the assuredness in who she is.

But that assuredness sometimes faces challenges. Some around Kamholz hide from Andrea the Giant on Saturday nights. "I have a teenage son and daughter," Kamholz says, with a voice that pauses with regret over what she's about to say. "They haven't actually been to a match yet. They know I like it. They haven't shown up for me, and it's a disappointment. It's nice to share the fun stuff."

The feeling good

Otto Schwanz hangs around after a January 2010 G.O.U.G.E. show. He has already changed out of his black tights and is wearing a casual T-shirt and pants. His suitcase that carries all of his gear is packed, and he's ready to leave the show and head home. He's back to being William Happer.

Happer asks a journalist how his four-man tag-team match went, and Happer brags that he featured himself in 75 percent of the match. Then he explains that he has excelled as an in-ring performer the last decade because of repetition.

"It's like Aristotle," Happer says, making one of his patented intellectual transitions away from wrestling. "He said virtues are formed by repetition."

As he scrolls through his i-Phone to show what philosophy books he's reading, two women who look like they came from a mid-1990s grunge-rock show approach him and ask for a picture. One wears a green skirt with yellow stockings and seems disinterested in meeting Otto Schwanz. The second one has unruly, but styled hair partly dyed punk-rock red. She wants her picture taken with Schwanz.

After a couple of minutes of chit-chat, Happer's acquaintances introduce themselves as women from the Raleigh roller-derby league. They get a kick out of telling him their real names and professions outside of roller derby. Happer takes to the women rather quickly because they perform under a pseudonym. Like him, they have an identity to hide. The three grow amused at sharing what they each do in the real world. It's an understanding and connection few would share with them.

In wrestling, Happer's conversation with the two fans could happen only on the independent scene. An intimacy with fans exists here that doesn't in sold-out 30,000-seat arenas the WWE calls home. Two-hundred fans can come to an independent show, and 20 stay after to catch up with the wrestlers and talk about what's happened since the last time they wrestled in the town.

Also in attendance at G.O.U.G.E. events are "ring rats," female fans of the independent wrestling scene. They chase the wrestlers and ask for phone numbers and maybe something more, like dinner or sex.

Not all the wrestlers flatter themselves by playing a pied piper to the circuit's rats.

Mike Phillips upholds his clean-cut persona of nerdy Seymour Snott and doesn't pursue girls when they find him on Facebook or on the Internet.

An 18-year veteran of the North Carolina, Virginia and Tennessee scene, Frank "the Tank" Parker says rats have been so persistent in their pursuit of him, he's had to take his name off his voicemail and change his e-mail address. "I've got one worrying the shit out of me right now," he says. "Another wrestler gave her my number, and she calls here eight to 10 times a day."

But for the most part, those in attendance come to see the action inside the G.O.U.G.E. ring. An intimacy around the ring not seen on the major-league level also exists during a show on an independent circuit. The fans on the front row, little boys and old ladies alike, jump off the ground and harangue the wrestlers they don't like, yelling loud, rude barks and looking like Yosemite Sam bouncing up and down with animated wrath.

"Most of them are die-hard wrestling fans," says wrestler Robbie Flanagan, who gets a pop from the crowd like no other when he thunders out of the dressing room as Trailer Park Heat and storms around, giving high-fives to the people standing up on the front row. "They love independent shows because you're closer to the action. They can shout something out there and get a reaction."

When Glenna Kamholz comes out as Andrea the Giant, she says nothing. She just gives a scowl. The crowd responds negatively, with either fear or degradation.

Sometimes, they'll say she looks like a man, which she laughs off. "I don't consider myself a gorgeous girl," she says.

But she loves the crowd's reaction. "Certain kids come up to me and turn their heads and run to their moms," she says. "They give me the finger and hide it from their moms. That's great that my character can provoke a response."

The fans who react with so much emotion and passion at these independent shows chant and yell vicariously, taking out the frustrations of their everyday lives, says Allen Littleton, 40, a lifelong fan of wrestling and an always vocal part of any G.O.U.G.E. show. "You're having a bad day," Littleton says, "and you can holler at the bad guy. By the end of the night, you're feeling good."

The mayor

Nancy Alford knows what it's like to feel good.

She's missed only one G.O.U.G.E show at the Stem Fire Hall since it has been coming to the small North Carolina town the last four years, and that was only because she was sick. She sits in the same seat, the end of the front row on the right side of the aisle where all the fans come in. Her hair is black, coal black, black as the tinted sunglasses she wears to protect her eye implants. The wrestlers consistently ridicule her with taunts of a bad dye job when they come out to the ring.

Alford, a 71-year-old mother of two, never takes their insults without a fight. She stands up and gets in the wrestlers' faces, pointing, shouting, putting on a show.

"Half the crowd enjoys her," says Eugene Wheeler, Alford's docile second husband who runs the A & W Grocery and Grill, where a ham-and-cheese sandwich will cost you \$2.65. A & W sits just up the road from the Stem Fire Hall.

"We love Nancy," wrestler Robbie Flanagan says. "We wish we had more Nancys at a show. Nancy is one of those who loves wrestling. She is an old-school wrestling fan, and she gives it just as good as you can give it to her. And she makes the show better just by her being there."

Alford sits restlessly, and she talks with a chip on her shoulder, like she has something to prove. But after 15 minutes with her, she becomes your favorite aunt. She tells stories in her lazy southern drawl. Like the time her train was stopped in Austria on her visit through Europe because there was a fugitive on it. Or when she was named Entertainer of the Year—she's got the certificate to prove it—at Nortel, the

communication technology corporation where she worked as an electronic technician for 27 years until retiring in 2003.

Or when she celebrated being elected mayor of Stem in 2009 by putting on her pajamas, standing on Sunset Street and proudly announcing, "Here's your mayor."

Alford's biggest worry used to be whether customers would pick up their cheeseburger orders from the grill. Now as mayor her worry extends to trying to get a new police station and a new town hall built. She hopes both can do one thing for the town, one thing she thinks wrestling already does for the town on those Saturday nights in the fire hall.

"Build morale," she says. "There's not a lot of activities going on in Stem. We have limited things to do in this town."

And the G.O.U.G.E. fans in Stem give her the camaraderie she says she has never had, complaining, "I ain't had a husband yet who likes wrestling."

CHAPTER FIVE: WHAT IF YOUR FATHER CARRIED A BARBED-WIRE BASEBALL BAT?

The death (?) of Dick Foley

Four Central Carolina EMTs huddle over a dead man in the middle of a ring surrounded by a 10-foot-high chainlink fence. He's a wrestler, defeated and perhaps now eyeing the big ring in the sky. Dick Foley's long black curls are matted with blood. They hide a goatee and the last expression this life saw. His stomach, which accounts for much of his 270-pound frame, spills out from under his T-shirt, which has been pulled up to give the EMTs a clear field. One of the EMTs crouches over Foley's camouflage pants with a defibrillator.

"Clear," says a female EMT as she backs away. Other wrestlers in the ring back up but look on concerned.

Foley's stomach jolts off the mat and, when it splashes back down on the mat, shakes with the motion of addled jello waves. The defibrillator awakens his heart with shock and awe. He leaves the ring alive, but barely. Paramedics carry him out on a stretcher past rows of fans burying their mouths in their prayer-ready hands. Once out the door of the Kendale Entertainment Center, they place him in an ambulance that transports him to Central Carolina Hospital.

The ring bears the remnants of Foley's more-than-40-minute war with Scrapyard Dog, an unfeeling, old-school wrestler whose most mortal weapons are his cold, distant eyes that look through you. Both men drew blood, which has now seeped into the mat forever.

Before the match, a trash can full of weapons sat in the front-left corner of the ring. A toilet bowl, which would later have its brown-liquid contents emptied onto Scrapyard Dog, sat in the back right corner. A trash can lid, a crowbar and even a stuffed pink bunny lay in wait to be used in the annihilation of each man's enemy. Foley brought a stainless steel kitchen sink to the ring. Scrapyard Dog brought a chain with a horseshoe attached on each end. Barbed wire coils around the ropes surround the ring like a string of lights on a Christmas tree.

Once the match starts, it doesn't take long for the trash can to be emptied. Foley pulls out a cane and hits the Dog. In a literal ass-kicking, he pulls out a prosthetic leg, fit with a tennis shoe, and whops the Dog's backside. Foley uses a barbed-wire baseball bat, the trash can, the kitchen sink and even the handle of a malfunctioning chainsaw to wallop Scrapyard Dog's 5-foot-10-inch, 230-pound frame.

The Dog uses his own arsenal. He rings Foley with the horseshoes on his chain. He scatters a bowl of thumbtacks in the middle of the ring, only to find himself thrown into them four times. The final time, Foley tears off Scrapyard Dog's shirt and slams his bare back into the sharp, metal puddle.

On the independent wrestling scene in North Carolina, the more thumbtacks you have lodged in your back, the bigger hero you become. Wrestlers have had to up the ante with graphic violence as the industry's storylines and matches have been exposed as

fabricated and predetermined. The men here range from their early 20s to their late 40s. They drive UPS trucks, serve in the U.S. Army and work in dialysis centers. It's a subculture where men don't bludgeon their bodies and bleed just for the money. In fact, they likely average a \$20 payout for a night's worth of action in a 10- or 15-minute match. These men dream of one day making it to a major national promotion. And as they struggle to make it to that destination, these men escape the constraints of their 9-to-5 worlds.

"One nice thing about the business," says Foley, who merely staged his death in the ring for a special night of wrestling theatrics, "is that it's probably the only job that, when you walk through that curtain, you can be whoever you want to be."

But the wrestlers are just one part of the independent scene's equation. Carolina Independent Wrestling, a Web site that serves as a hub of indy scene activity throughout the Carolinas, lists 74 promotions in North Carolina. Dozens more promotions exist though they are not listed on the site. The people who run these organizations, known as promoters, are the men behind the curtain. They are the wizards to the ring's Oz. They gather the talent. They develop storylines. They book venues to put on their weekend magic shows. They rent the rings that serve as the stage to which the wrestlers escape. For wrestling promoters, escapism hardly offers a profitable business model.

<u>Kendale</u>

Sanford, N.C., used to have two things going for it: the railroad and its downtown. But both reside in the economic past, so Sanford's nearly 30,000 residents now claw for viability. The Western and Chatham Railroads no longer dart through Eastern North Carolina like they did after the Civil War when they carried coal. Like in

numerous, more rural cities across the country, Wal-Marts and malls replaced the department stores that used to thrive in downtown Sanford.

Mark Carley, who moved to Sanford from New Jersey when he was 7 years old, says that Sanford just doesn't see the money it used to. "Sanford's not a very rich city," he says. "People work at whatever factory or the school system, and they don't have a lot of money to throw around."

In cities such as Sanford, escapism can flourish in poor economic times, says

Carley, who is a professional wrestler. Professional wrestling can make people forget.

"In a bad economy, wrestling is one of those things that thrives," Carley says.

"The reason why is that people want to forget the bad times."

That escaping and forgetting takes place in Sanford at the Kendale Entertainment Center, a former movie theater that has taken on a new life in the strip mall where only a flea market has survived. Owners Bill Johnson and Larry Howell opened the theater in May 2008. They hoped it would succeed as what Johnson says was the only Hispanic movie theater between New York and Atlanta. By summer 2008, their hope had vanished, and the theater was dead.

But Kendale now offers Sanford something more than first-run features and popcorn: Power Pro Wrestling (PPW). The wrestling promotion has injected adrenaline into the lifeblood of Kendale. "This has been a boost to our business," says Johnson, who also works as a Nationwide Insurance representative in Sanford while still owning the building with Howell.

Blown-up pictures of wrestlers align the window in the ticket booth to the Kendale Entertainment Center's entrance. Though the center doubles as a concert venue,

it loudly boasts its wrestling identity. Inside the lobby, posters promoting events for the last three years line the green walls. The concessions stand offers candy and pizza-by-the-slice from Pizza Inn, one of the Power Pro's sponsors.

As a theater, Kendale had two auditoriums. Now, a live, manufactured world replaces the celluloid dreams once shown in them. Above the ring in one theater, the screen, called the Power Tron, runs vignettes, explaining the storylines that soon will play out. When the show gets started, the promotion's wrestlers dazzle on the big screen, like the opening credits of a television drama. When their video hits the screen before a match, the wrestlers emerge from one of two entrances below the Power Tron. The crowd erupts when it hears a wrestler's trademark music, usually 1980s heavy-metal hard, like AC/DC, with a singer screaming so loudly it hurts your throat just listening to it. Weapons used in past matches adorn the walls and set the tone for the evening: a baseball bat wrapped in barbed-wire, hubcaps, road signs, and even a toilet seat stained with blood.

Its four walls lined with curtains the color of orange Starburst wrappers, the second theater is where the wrestlers ready themselves for the night's matches. Although they will fight each other in the ring, before the match the wrestlers share a jovial sense of brotherhood. Six oversized golden belts for the promotion's different champions glow on a stage below the screen down front, but it is clear they are just props. No wrestler claims them. Instead, the wrestlers claim each other, running from clique to clique to be included in a picture, like high school graduation. The All-American Ty Tyson flirts with his girlfriend, who doubles as his valet when he wrestles. Wrestler Kenneth Franklin Carter (K.F.C.) theorizes with another grappler about which sexual position would best

enable him to please Chyna, a former wrestling and reality television star. The Little Dragon, a masked wrestler, denies a request by another wrestler who has asked the Dragon to help apply paint on his face.

All the wrestlers take their seats and wait for the address from their leader, Jim Fox.

Jim Fox is a hard man to reach

When he doesn't answer the phone, Jim Fox's voicemail kicks in with a spiel for the upcoming PPW show in mid-October 2009. He sounds like a disc jockey on a country music station reading an ad. He announces a "Wild West Match" where Tito Rain will have to beat an opponent by putting him in a noose and dragging him around the ring to touch all four top corners. The ring's ropes will also be wrapped in barbed wire. Rain's opponent will be Dick Foley.

Dick Foley is Jim Fox. When he wears the promoter hat, he's Jim Fox. But on the mat, he's Dick Foley.

Jim Fox is to wrestling what Tony Stewart is to NASCAR, maligned for becoming an owner while still racing on the circuit. Fox is both owner of and wrestler in the Power Pro Wrestling promotion.

Some wrestlers around the state don't trust a promoter who wrestles. Sixteenyear veteran W.C. Smith Jr., known as the Wrestling Superstar, says guys who both promote and wrestle are problematic for the indy scene.

"They want to put themselves over so bad," Smith says. "They just want to be somebody in their hometown and their little shows so when they run in to Wal-Mart, all

the little teenie-boppers can say, 'There's the champ.' Fifty miles down the road, nobody knows who they are."

Mike Phillips, who wrestles around the North Carolina circuit as a nerdy character known as Seymour Snott, doesn't like how some promoters fire themselves up the ladder to become a star, never training properly and putting in the time to learn the psychology of the business.

"A lot of guys come into wrestling, and they are automatically handed things," he says. "They have the attitude of, 'I'm a superstar everywhere I go.' It's a great attitude to have, but unfortunately, when it comes down to reality, they're not the guys they think they are."

Carley says some wrestlers, mostly the ones who are transient workers and who don't work in PPW regularly, have a problem backstage with Fox putting himself over. They see Fox's motives built on selfishness and ego, but Carley explains that Fox is unique: He's the promoter and wrestler and the owner of the promotion. "He knows [that] out of everybody, he's going to be there," Carley says. "[Fox] being the top guy makes sense. Anytime something happens out there, Foley's name is the first name [the fans] call."

Phillips, who has wrestled in PPW, agrees that the situation is a little different for Fox's Foley. Playing off the popular, former World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) superstar Mick Foley, Fox has grown a goatee and his hair falls past his shoulders. When he puts a flannel shirt and carries a barbed-wire wrapped baseball bat, he holds an uncanny resemblance to Mick Foley. As a result, Phillips explains, Dick Foley is very

popular with the Sanford crowd. Wrestlers describe that popularity as "being over" to fans, who are called "marks" in the business.

Carley, who wrestles for Fox and PPW as Mark James, says a Halloween 2009 PPW show illustrated how "over" the Foley gimmick is. "Five guys and a kid [in the audience] come dressed looking like Dick Foley," he says. "I didn't have one fucking person come looking like me."

Larry Howell, one of the owners of Kendale Entertainment Center and business partner to Fox, says that Fox has success because the fans relate to him. "The people who come here need heroes and villains they can relate to," Howell says. "They can touch them. They can talk to them."

Melanie Bass, Andi Dixon and Tonia Weber loiter after a fall 2009 PPW show, enjoying a smoke and the cool early-November air. It's clear they're not groupies, but they do hang around hoping to share a word with Dick Foley. When asked about Foley the character, not Fox the man, their eyes widen and they laugh nervously, with Beavis-and-Butthead awkwardness. Only one articulates what they all three feel.

"Here's my word for Foley," says Weber, who has come all the way from Maine to watch PPW. "KICK-ASS!"

Nobody better understands the effect his gimmick has on fans than Fox, who grew up loving Greek mythology. He wants you to know that he is the promoter of PPW, the god lording power over this manufactured world.

"On Saturday nights when I get in that ring," he says, marveling at the power he has over his audience, "everybody in that building believes everything I tell them. I can tell them that Jesus is going to be here at 9 o'clock in the morning, and for the most part,

they're going to try to get ready. It's almost scary. It's almost like I could go 'Rise,' and they'd rise."

Kids and old ladies

But Jim Fox has his limits when it comes to which storylines he will use to promote wrestling in Power Pro. He won't run a lesbian angle. It's as simple as that.

Most women in wrestling appear as valets, eye-candy who accompany wrestlers to the ring. In more recent years, some of these valets have started to wrestle and even cross over into mainstream. The wrestlers in the back want Fox to entertain the idea of a storyline involving lesbians. That angle has been played out in WWE when Vince McMahon capitalized on the appearances in Playboy of two of his star valets, Torrie Wilson and Sable. Extreme Championship Wrestling also used the angle when its leading good guy, Tommy Dreamer, found out his valet-girlfriend, Beulah McGillicutty, was having a lesbian affair with Kimona Wanalaya.

Fox has spent years learning what types of entertainment sell. "I think I've always been a ham," he says. "I've played in bands. I've been a front man in a country band. I've opened for Restless Heart. I've played with Hank Williams Jr.'s band. I've always been in some type of entertainment. It always seems that's when I've been my happiest."

Fox says he believes a lesbian angle would hurt a family-friendly atmosphere at Kendale, and his explanation reflects his main goal as a promoter. "People ask me why I do this. And I tell people, and this is in all sincerity: I love to see kids laugh and old ladies smile," he says with the dramatic whisper that indicates he's said this point, in this way, numerous times.

Carley suggests Fox is somewhat hypocritical. "He wants to maintain a family-friendly atmosphere," he says. "But on the other hand, he has no problem going in with barbed wire. Going after a guy with a chainsaw, you think that's fucking family friendly? He wants it to be family friendly, but to what degree, I don't know."

The good, the bad and the audience

Fall 2009 is an important time for Fox because he's mulling over a significant change in storyline. For the first time in the promotion's three-year run, Fox might turn his Foley character from a good guy, known in the business as a "babyface" or "baby," in the promotion to a bad guy, or "heel." The turn might make business sense for the promotion because controversy sells tickets.

Maybe the move is right for Fox, who says he likes to work stiff, which means he likes to hit hard in the ring, the sign of a badass. He loves sexual puns, one of his favorites being that his autobiography will be called "The Ins and Outs of Dick Foley." He has his vices: cussing and smoking. And he even did more than 17 months in jail in the early 1980s for stealing money orders from a department store where he worked.

But it's hard to imagine Fox's bad side on a visit with him in his duplex on the Quail Ridge Golf Course in Sanford. He offers his guest a Coke, water or root beer. He plays with his orange tabby, Simba. He grins ecstatically when Sweetie, his teacup Chihuahua, enters the room. He was an avid churchgoer up until he graduated high school. He cites inspirational lines from "Sister Act 2" as life philosophy. Fox traveled around the U.S. as a musical accompanist with an evangelist for a year when he was 18. He plays 13 musical instruments.

"I think [the turn] would make a good story if there was a good baby," Fox says, admitting there needs to be a "good guy" in the promotion as popular as him. "But if I don't have anybody who is as big a baby as I am, it could go wrong."

Carley, who helps Fox a little in developing storylines for the promotion, admits that some behind the PPW scenes worry that Foley's personality change in the ring could affect business. "The thing we're worried about is that we turn Foley, we could piss off the fans to where they never come back," Carley says. "Because Foley is like their dad, but only if their dad carried a barbed-wire baseball bat."

Fox's avoidance of the lesbian storyline and his struggle with deciding to turn heel reflect the businessman in Fox. He explains that figuring out the audience is like bass-fishing. "You need to know the water temperature," he says. "Is the water muddy? Is it clear? Do you want to use a dark bait or a light bait?"

As a fighter first, he wrestled on the indy scene for more than 10 years before he became a promoter somewhat by accident three years ago. A guy owed him between \$500 and \$1,000 for some filming Fox had done and paid him back with a wrestling promotion, a ring and a sound system. That transaction alone saved \$8,000 to \$10,000, what Fox estimates starting a promotion from the ground up would cost in today's indy climate, although another local promoter, Greg Mosorjak, says nobody still invests that much money in promotions anymore.

Early on, Fox felt the growing pains of a novice promoter. He staged only five shows that first year, all fundraisers for local charities, including one for a local high school football team. He booked too many wrestlers for shows. He paid the wrestlers too much.

Fox says he had a vision when he started but that his instinct and mistakes clouded it in the beginning. "I know how it was *supposed* to work," he says. "But you fall down and have to get back up. Other than one show, I've never lost money on a show."

What distinguishes Fox from other promoters is that they have other sources of income. "[Running a promotion] can be stressful," says Mosorjak, who runs Gimmicks Only Underground Grappling Entertainment (G.O.U.G.E.) out of Raleigh and who has 30 years' experience in the wrestling business. "It depends on what you want out of it. I think it's more stressful if you're in it to make money. G.O.U.G.E. is not really a money-making proposition. We break even at best and try not to lose too much."

Mosorjak doesn't depend on G.O.U.G.E. to earn a living. That comes from his 40-hour-a-week job in educational research. But Fox traded in the N.C. heating and air, electrical and plumbing licenses that hang on his bedroom wall for the wrestling world, whose posters and figures now adorn the bedroom's opposite wall. Excluding a side electrical or plumbing job here and there, Fox and his wife, Jennifer, survive on what they make from PPW.

"I believe in Power Pro," he says. "I'm probably the happiest I've ever been doing this. It eats inside of me so much that there's just something I know that one day this is going to break loose. And when it does, all I can tell you is hang on. Because we are going for a ride. I'm not scared to try anything, and I'm not scared of failure. I'm probably more scared of not trying it and not knowing than I am anything."

Like a one-man band, Fox brings a renaissance-man approach to Power Pro. He is the promotion's biggest babyface. He wrestles as four characters: Dick Foley, Kind

Man, the Love Dude and Jack Cactus. He edits and sells DVDs of PPW shows, like the one featuring the match between him and Scrapyard Dog. Twenty dollars for a two-disc set with a case and art. Five dollars for ones without the decoration. He and Jennifer create and sell merchandise, like glossy photos of their wrestlers (he spends \$200 to \$300 a month just on the ink and paper for those photos). He hosts a PPW-based radio show on Thursday nights on Blog Talk Radio, a Web site that allows anyone to podcast programming about anything. He tries to do it all, maybe even to his detriment.

Fox bases his self-reliance on one simple concept. "I am a perfectionist. I trust me," he snaps, pointing out that the wrestlers do their 10-minute match and go home. "They don't have time to put out posters. They don't have time to go to the paper. When the show is over, they go home. I've got to get ready for the next show."

The dirty business

Maybe Jim Fox's trust in himself comes more from a distrust of others than from self-confidence. Jeb Shook, who wrestles in PPW as "The Ultimate High Roller" Roland Dyce, says that in wrestling, a promoter like Fox only has himself to trust when his dollars are on the line. That's just the nature of the wrestling business, Shook says. "You have a lot of people you know but very few friends," Shook says. "He's going to make sure that nobody is going to screw up what he's doing. It's a dirty business."

But even if Fox and his wife can survive wrestling's backstabbing and duplicity, can they stay afloat in today's economy?

"I'm making enough to pay the bills," he says, "but I'm not making any money."

In fact, Fox says since 2006 he and his wife have had to move four times while running Power Pro, twice because of evictions.

That scraping-by is a far cry from the big business that the WWE does. In February 2010, Vince McMahon's brainchild, which is now a publicly traded company on the New York Stock Exchange, announced its 2009 fourth quarter results, which totaled \$117.3 million in overall income. Eleven million dollars was net income, which resulted in \$0.15 a share for its stockholders. Revenues for 2009 totaled \$475.2 million, with \$50.3 million being net income. That resulted in \$0.68 per share.

In the business world at least, Fox has a stable home, running shows at Kendale twice a month. He does take PPW on the road to neighboring cities and to fairs, where he says he made as much as \$900 in Moore County. Jumping on board with the Kendale Entertainment Center gave him the opportunity to put on shows twice a month. In October 2008, he moved the promotion from Hendersonville, N.C., to Kendale in Sanford.

Fox does not pay rent to the theater's owners, Bill Johnson and Larry Howell. Instead, he splits the take from a show's door 60/40. Johnson and Howell get all the money from the concessions. Jennifer keeps all the money, which averages between \$200 and \$300 a month, from the merchandise booth. And Fox doesn't charge a wrestler any fee for setting up a table with his or her own merchandise. What they sell, they keep. He does, however, charge fees to vendors, like the wrestling-memorabilia and costumedesign company Highspots, if they want to sell products at a show.

Fox saves money on the ring, too. Kendale houses a ring that belongs to two of Fox's friends: Shook and Raymond Frye, whom Fox calls Shack. That saves the partners from having to rent a ring, which can cost \$300 to \$500 per show. Monsters Rings and Cages, an online ring dealer based in Kentucky, sells rings ranging from \$1,900 to

\$5,100. Shook and Frye also help Fox save money by rarely taking any salary for their part in a show, Shook says, adding that if they make enough at the door to get a payout, they put it right back into the promotion to pay wrestlers or help promote.

Kendale holds 294 people. The first show Fox ran there, on Oct. 18, 2008, drew 75. Fox's shows at Kendale came to average 200 by summer 2009. He charges \$12 for VIP seats (the first three center rows of the theater), \$10 general admission and \$6 for children 5 to 12.

Now, Fox's shows draw 125 to 150 fans. He admits that even pro wrestling isn't immune to the effects of the poor economy. But, he says, he has fans who are industrious in finding some disposable income. "I've had a family that would have yard sales to come to my show," he says.

So with an average take of \$1,250 to \$1,500 a show, where does the money go? It goes to the talent. Fox plans for a budget of \$400 to pay his talent. "I've got to put 60 people in there to get my cut of the door to pay talent," he says. "Anything above that is my money."

Fox says he can clear \$200 with 100 people in the audience and \$700 with 200. He runs a big show every four months with something special to entice fans, like a cage match. Those, he says, will consistently average a \$1,500 take from the door before talent is paid.

The wrestlers perform as independent contractors, so they are not beholden to PPW; they can wrestle anywhere. Fox says he gives them an average payout of \$20 per show. All newcomers must wrestle for 90 days before they receive a cent from him.

And he doesn't pay the wrestlers he trains as his students. What one wrestler receives is the same as the next wrestler's pay.

"Here's what I tell the guys," says Fox, who claims to be one of the fairest and most equitable promoters in North Carolina. "If you work for Power Pro, you're equal to the next guy."

Carley, who wrestles for various promotions but calls PPW home, says that Fox is indeed fair. Fox laid it out for him when Carley first joined up with the promotion. He says Fox told Carley what he, as the promoter, would pay and that if Carley didn't like it, he always had the option to go elsewhere. "That's the beauty of the independent scene," Carley says. "You can leave."

The main job of a promoter is to publicize the show. Fox takes his profits and pours them into the media to spread the word about PPW. He puts up posters and does radio spots. He uses Twitter, Facebook and MySpace. He purchases two 30-second spots during WWE Raw for \$140 for the Sanford market. He passes on spots in the Raleigh and Fayetteville market because they cost more than double, coming in at \$160 for one 30-second ad. He shells out \$40 a month to host his interactive show on Blog Talk Radio. He garners sponsorships from Andy's Cheeseburgers Shakes and Fries, Pizza Inn of Sanford, Sanford Rent-All, and Bill Johnson's Insurance Agency.

Maintaining an amicable locker room where there are no egos is a priority for Fox. He says he can't stand wrestlers who are "belt marks," guys who just want a title around their waist to inflate their ego. "A guy that can put himself over and never need a belt is a good worker," he says. Wrestler Jeb Shook says that Fox is a good worker because not only can Fox put over the Foley gimmick, but its popularity can help Fox put

over other wrestlers by losing to them. "Last year," Shook says, "[Fox] lost almost every time putting other people over."

And if he encounters one of these wrestlers who thinks of himself as bigger than PPW, Fox will get rid of him, even if he is a friend. "People know I have a good heart," he says. "But they know they can't mistake that kindness for weakness. They might once, but they won't a second time."

The skulk

Jim and Jennifer Fox do not sleep in the same room. Her snoring keeps him from sleeping. He dreams of wrestling so much that he has woken up to find he has her in a headlock, thinking she was Sgt. Slaughter, a famous wrestler in the 1980s who wore his military fatigues and his patriotism on his sleeves.

"He watches his History Channel. I watch my Nick-at-Nite," Jennifer Fox says of their arrangement.

Their nightly routine is one thing. But when they go to work at Jim Fox's office at Kendale to help PPW grow and prosper, it's together.

"I trust Jennifer 100 percent," he says.

What Jennifer Fox feels for Jim Fox is more than trust. It's admirable love and devotion. "He believes in Power Pro," she says. "I believe in him."

But it's a belief that's hard for outsiders to understand. Her husband, a 50-year-old man, wrestles and promotes full-time. She describes him as still being a "big kid," and he admits that he didn't grow up until he was 33. In 2001, his heating-and-air business struggled, and they had to file bankruptcy. He built it back up, Jennifer Fox says, only to give up a \$100,000-a-year business with seven employees to struggle to

break even on the harsh scene of indy wrestling, which has caused their credit to suffer ruin the last three years

"There's been times we made three dollars," says Jennifer, who maintains an image of success with red, manicured nails. "I mean that was our profit. There are times when I go, 'Really?'"

Wrestler Mark Carley says Jennifer should be commended for her belief in Jim. Shook says that although he admires Jim Fox for his vision, it's Jennifer Fox who is to be admired more. "I'd honestly like to say it's Jim," Shook says, "but I believe most women would have had a hissy-fit by now."

But Jennifer believes nonetheless. It's a belief that started almost 30 years ago in late 1980 when Jennifer was on the boardwalk in San Diego, Calif. A group of men approached her and her girlfriends and invited them to their hotel room. Jennifer, then 17, says she was looking to enjoy a party. But when they got close to the hotel, a man rolled up on skates and asked if he could get her something to eat at the local Burger King. That man was Jim Fox, who was in the Navy at the time and stationed in San Diego.

His gesture of bringing her food that night serves as a symbol of the function Jim Fox played for Jennifer—a provider. Originally from El Cajon, Calif., Jennifer Fox had a history that involved drugs and drinking. But Jim, still holding pure from his early religious influences, kept her on the straight and narrow. He calmed her and provided her with a sense that she was loved, which was hard for the normally reserved and closed-off girl. Then one night it just came out of her mouth, something she had been holding in and not wanting to admit to both herself and Jim Fox.

"We got to wrestling on the floor," Jennifer Fox says. "It popped out, and I tell him I love him."

The two eloped after only knowing each other for three months. They decided to live their lives for seven years with just each other before even entertaining the thought of children. Then, on May 6, 1987, Heather Fox came into the world, and Jim Fox got his daddy's girl.

"There's things you can do with a little girl that you can do with a little boy," says Jim, who admits he and Jennifer Fox wanted to have a little girl. "But there's things that you can't do with a little boy that you can do with a little girl. You can take the little girl fishing and hunting and teach it to play baseball, but don't know if you want your son doing ballerina classes."

Though Jim Fox took Heather Fox on these hunting and fishing trips growing up, the pressures to provide for her and Jennifer Fox with his own business kept Jim Fox away from his family. "She'll tell you she never saw her Daddy," Jennifer Fox says of her daughter. "And I didn't see him that much."

And that is where the Fox family serves as the exception to the rule. Read any wrestling autobiography, and a wrestler probably reveals the industry and the road tore apart his or her family. But the 9-to-5 grind of a regular job is what placed a strain on Jim, Jennifer and Heather Fox. And the wrestling world brought them back together.

"This has brought us together," Jim says, "because we've been able to do it together."

With Jim running the promotion, Jennifer takes care of the merchandise. She also pays out the wrestlers at the end of the night. And she'll even make tough business decisions when Jim's big heart, as she calls it, won't allow him to do so.

"That's where I come in," Jennifer says. "That's how I got my nickname, Mamacat. I fired our champ last year. I made the man cry."

Heather Fox used to follow her father around the indy circuit and film him. Then, Jim Fox involved her in an angle where she was kidnapped from him at a show in Hendersonville, N.C. She became a valet known as Cristal, a high-maintenance, evening-gown-wearing beauty. But she has since traded in the pearls and the dresses of Cristal for a much darker character known as Queen Spades.

"I love [wrestling]," says Heather Fox on a cool night in late November. Her face wears the widest smile calls when a little girl buys a glossy of Cristal for \$5. "I just like to see kids smile."

Wrestling's indy scene is a hard one for the outsider to navigate. One never knows if he's being told the truth or being sold snake oil. But Heather Fox is the easiest one to believe.

Maybe it's because of that smile.

Maybe it's because of the saccharine and innocent chirp in her voice as words slip words out under her slight overbite.

Maybe it's because she loves her mother and father and can't choose a favorite when ask whom she admires more.

Maybe it's the patience she shows to every fan who comes and asks her repetitive questions while she mans the merchandise booth with Jennifer Fox on Saturday nights at

Kendale. She's kind to PPW's fans, not because she sees them as marks or as \$10 bills with legs, but because she just is.

Or maybe, just maybe, it's because she's going to be a mom in three months.

Princess Spades' pedigree

When pushed, Jim Fox can't make a decision on the fate of the Dick Foley character. He doesn't know if he'll stay a babyface or explore the more tenebrous regions of being a heel. The only thing he's sure of is that he's excited to be a grandfather.

Three months have passed, and Heather Fox gave birth to a baby girl, Harmony Raelle Cummings, in February 2010. In September, Heather plans to marry the child's father, a wrestler on North Carolina's indy circuit known as Sean Powers and Solomon Spades. Even though Heather says Harmony won't see the inside of a wrestling ring, Jim Fox is already plotting. He even has put pictures of Harmony on Power Pro's website, calling her "Princess Spades."

Maybe that's the grandfather in him.

"They say it won't happen," Fox says, "but it's going to take an army and a truckload of guys to keep me from taking that baby to that ring. That baby will come in that ring with me if not but at least one time for Grandpa to hold that baby up and then be proud one time.

"And I'm going put a little flannel shirt on them," he says making himself burst with laughter and pride.

Maybe that's the wrestler in him.

"Sean's going, 'Football player,'" Jim Fox says of his future son-in-law's choice for the child's profession. "I'm going, 'Nah, heavyweight champion."

Maybe it's the promoter in him.

"I pick at them," he says. "I say, 'You know, that baby will be in a storyline before it's 30 days old. I'll have it bumping in six months.""

Or maybe, just maybe, it's all three.

CHAPTER SIX: BOOGIELAND

High on a hill

For the past year, Charles Abbott has spent his Sundays driving on Appalachia's green-canopied country roads, past cornfields and across a one-lane bridge.

He passes the Bible Truth Tabernacle and the Sowders Chapel Baptist Church to find a sanctuary of his own in a cinder-block building high on a hill in Shawsville, Va. Once out of his car, the 24-year-old walks up a long driveway past a line of visitors' cars and even a collection of classic vehicles: the Boogie Limo, a 1974 white, six-door stretch Caddy; the Boogie Trike, a 1967 Scoot custom cycle; the Boogie Hog, a 1972 Harley Davidson painted blue and pink; and finally the Boogie Wagon, a black 1979 Ford LTD Brougham with orange and yellow flames on the hood. On the station wagon's windows, bumper stickers, crumpled and peeling from wear, announce this place's mantra: Make Your Dreams Come True.

The vehicles look like they belong more in the Country Music Hall of Fame than in the driveway of a Virginia countryside home. Stairs lead past yard art—garden gnomes and a suit of armor standing guard—farther up the hill to the compound. There a placard announces this place's name: Boogieland.

Boogieland is the creation of Handsome Jimmy "Boogie Woogie Man" Valiant, a professional wrestler for more than 40 years. The compound consists of a gazebo and four cinder-block buildings. Abbott first passes an 8-foot-by-18-foot building that houses a hall of fame, whose walls are plastered with autographed 8-inch-by-10-inch glossy photographs of all the major stars from the last 50 years. He passes the gazebo on his left, then is flanked by 12-by-12-foot buildings housing dressing rooms. Both dressing room doors read "Wrestlers Only," and more pictures of wrestlers line the walls inside.

Not 10 feet beyond the dressing rooms, Abbott finally reaches the compound's sanctuary, a 30-by-30-foot building in which George Thorogood and The Destroyers blast from a stereo rather than the serene hymns heard in those country churches Abbott had passed a few minutes earlier. Instead of angels on stained glass, life-sized cutouts of muscle-bound superstars stare down at the congregation. Thousands of Polaroids and magazine clippings of family, friends and various wrestlers are pinned to the walls. A square mat bound by ropes and turnbuckles—padding where the ropes intersect at corners—serves as the altar where Abbott's dreams are offered up. Like the other students who come to Boogie's Wrestling Camp (BWC), Abbott dreams of being a wrestler.

"[M]y uncle and aunt call me a flipping idiot because I spent my life savings to enroll," says Abbott, who adds that his grandmother, who attends church on Sundays rather than watch him wrestle, helped him pay the \$250 lifetime enrollment fee.

Abbott and other wrestlers at BWC train to learn a business. They pay the enrollment fee on their first visit and then \$20 for every subsequent week of training. Some are approaching middle age. Some come prepared sporting elaborate green and

silver tights and matching boots. Others, bare-chested with sweatpants covering their legs, stand on the ring's apron while each takes a turn to enter the ring with a trainer. Once in the ring, the trainers teach various aspects of the in-ring choreography seen in wrestling: how to throw an opponent into the corner, how to be thrown into the corner, how to apply a headlock and move an opponent around the ring, and how to take a boot to the face.

The trainers challenge the students' endurance by torpedoing open-palmed slaps—real smacks, not choreographed—to their bare chests. The reddest chest and the largest handprint are a badge of courage and acceptance for the student who can wear them without grimace or tears. The wrestlers engage in this training and these tests for two hours then break. Their Sundays end with a wrestling card and actual matches, each offering 10 minutes to show how the wrestlers have honed their craft.

Training at this wrestling school may yield only one-tenth of the enrollment fee for wrestlers on a given night, if they get paid at all. That \$20-a-night life makes up wrestling's independent circuit, a common destination for many wrestling-school graduates around the United States. But not everyone wrestling on the indy circuit is sold on the value of such schools.

Too many schools

A wrestling promoter based in Raleigh, N.C., for more than 15 years, Greg Mosorjak finds wrestling schools problematic. Explaining that they used to have some value until so many independent promotions started to pop up in the 1990s and 2000s, he says they no longer ready wrestlers with the skills needed.

"Every promoter thinks they have a wrestling school," says Mosorjak, referring to the informal training that happens in promoters' rings on days they do not run shows. He adds that a number of people who train in those promoters' venues hold no qualifications to train. As a result, wrestlers do not receive the proper schooling, which leads to a lack of knowledge in how wrestlers protect their opponents and themselves from injury when they perform a simple move like a body slam.

Ty Bailey, director of talent relations for World Wrestling Entertainment, which holds no affiliation with Valiant's school, sees indy wrestlers who want tryouts at WWE's wrestling school in Tampa, Fla., everyday. But he says that the independent scene lacks quality schools and thus, quality training.

"There are very few reputable wrestling schools," he says. "What it takes to open a wrestling school is a ring and a space. That doesn't mean someone is training well.

Sometimes it's almost better to find a guy with less experience so we can teach them the way we want him to be taught."

Frank "the Tank" Parker, a graduate of Boogieland in 1993, agrees. "When I first started back in 1992, there weren't that many schools around," he says. "When you joined up at the school, that person put his name on the line. If you screwed up, it looked bad on a trainer. Now every Tom, Dick and Harry are opening up schools. How are they going to train you when they weren't trained?"

Abbott trusts that BWC will offer him proper training. Even though he didn't receive the support of his aunt and uncle, he has come to depend on another family—a group of men and women who attend the camp every Sunday with him. One of them is Josh Kirtley, whose 12-year-old eyes stare off into self-consciousness when asked a

question. The stare does not undercut his assuredness when he says with a schoolboy grin that wrestling is what he was born to do. He's one of the youngest students at Boogieland.

The dream maker

No matter their age, experience or look, the family members enjoy a kinship bound by their desire to learn from Valiant, 67, and his more than four decades of experience. A long, thin frame and gray hair have replaced the full muscles and Hollywood-blond hair he sported in the early 1970s. Covered with tattoos and scars, his flesh resembles parchment with the hieroglyphics of his life permanently painted on. He had his boots tattooed on both legs. On his right shin, an artist added one of Valiant's favorite sayings where the inked laces come together: "To teach is to learn twice."

Valiant built his school in 1991 on this Virginia hill where he and his wife, Angel, bought goats to clear the land of honeysuckle. The couple opened Boogieland in 1992. With the words "Come to Papa" tattooed across his stomach, Valiant is a surrogate father to his students, trading in his dream for theirs.

"The dream affords them a place to come and train to live out their dreams," Valiant says. "I've already done mine. I had over 10,000 matches. I drove 4 million miles on U.S. highways getting to matches, so my dream has already been lived out."

On this Sunday, as on most others, Abbott and other students run drills and practice throwing their backs to the mat. With each whack and thud, they come closer to understanding the technique and choreography used during a match. They run, some slower than others, aiming their arms under the top turnbuckle so they will not hurt their

chests on contact. They clap for one another, knowing they are linked by a taut string of hope.

Valiant's gray hair, which is pulled back in a ponytail, shows his age. His thin frame displays the frail body done in by years banging his body around in a ring. But here at Boogieland, he walks outside the ring and looks to counsel like King Hamlet's ghost. He's shirtless and wears a pair of denim shorts with "BWC" sewn in red on the right leg. He, too, claps and encourages as one of his prized pupils leads instruction in the ring, knowing that it will take more than just BWC for the students to truly absorb wrestling.

"It takes five full years just to understand everything in our business, and you still don't know it then," Valiant says. "You're still learning at 10 years, 15 years."

Justin Lafon works for an asphalt company, has a wife and an 11-year-old daughter, and teaches wrestling at BWC. His asphalt job comprises his 9-to-5, six-day-a-week worklife across the valley in Salem, Va., 15 miles away. On this Sunday, he removes his cap and lets his hair, altered with red dye, mushroom out. He teaches the students how to shoot each other into a corner with both bluntness and patience.

Instruction at wrestling schools around the country goes further than just showing the wrestlers how to choreograph the moves. Bailey says the WWE looks for wrestlers who understand what he calls ring psychology. "You have to tell a story," he says. "You have to bring the audience up and bring the audience down. You have to tell the story through the match. There's got to be an aptitude of understanding what it takes."

More like a country song

Instructors at BWC, all former graduates, teach the novices like Abbott how to come out of their shells. They show how to tell a story during a match by showing them how to "sell" a move with facial expressions. They remind the students to show how much a move hurts. They show how to aggravate the crowd for wrestlers playing the role of a "heel," a bad guy. They show how to avoid "cheap heat," or going beyond only calling the audience "stupid" or "hicks."

Lafon excels at doling out those lessons. "If it wasn't for this place, I wouldn't have any of my best friends," says Lafon, who has come home to his surrogate family. "It's more than wrestling."

Lafon's patience and willingness to teach come from empathy because in his 31 years, he has learned something about dreams—how easy they are to lose. He graduated from BWC in 2001 and spent six years on the independent scene, wrestling under the name Shawn Christian in small towns throughout North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee. An injury in 2007 ended his dream. He chose to retire after a severe hit during a match to his groin that almost caused him to have a testicle removed. But he came out of retirement to lace up his red and black boots and work with Valiant's students in the ring.

Despite injuries from wrestling and other ailments, Lafon says he believes his destiny involves wrestling. "My body was never made to do this stuff," he says in an email interview. "I have a bad back, knees are shot and neck problems. On top of all that, I was born premature only weighing two pounds. I could fit in the palm of my dad's hand. A valve in my heart was way too small, and my lungs collapsed five times. I'm

walking proof that God had something special for me. As funny as it sounds, I believe it was wrestling."

Now, Lafon contemplates returning to the ring come spring for a possible match against Valiant, who will have wrestled at least one match in six consecutive decades.

With his past injuries, Lafon still holds reservations about wrestling again. But even if he never performs again, he belongs in a ring, teaching other dreamers on Sunday afternoons.

Valiant's school welcomes other wrestlers who believe that a higher power brought them there. John Ayers, a 28-year-old with a contagious grin under a red-brown goatee on his boy-band face, says it was fate when Valiant approached him in a restaurant two years ago and asked him to join his school in 2007. "This never was my dream," Ayers says. "It was God's dream. He placed Boogie and me in the same building."

Though Ayers graduated from BWC in 2008, he comes on Sundays like other former graduates to help the new crop of talent learn. He goes from wrestler to wrestler, offering insight in how to improve their skills.

Ayers, who wrestles on the indy circuit as "Justice," also comes to network. Like with a promoter from West Virginia who pulls Ayers aside and asks if he'd be interested in running a mask gimmick for his promotion in the future. For Justice, that's consistent work on weekend shows for a couple of months.

Though they believe it a part of their destinies, BWC's students understand that, if fulfilled, a wrestler's dreams rarely involve fame or fortune. For Lafon, Ayers and other independent wrestlers, it's not always about making it on television or reaching a major promotion, like World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) or Total Nonstop Action (TNA).

And Abbott, too. He has just finished running at his opponent in the ring, locking one arm around the other's necks and the other arm over his opponent's outstretched arm, which happens to be locked onto Abbott's shoulder. This drill simulates how wrestlers begin their matches, a theatrical show of power for the match's prologue. Catching his breath, he sits on one of the wooden benches that sit only a couple feet from the ring. He quietly studies more wrestlers practice in the ring.

"I don't care if I get a contract," Abbott says in his deep, sluggish voice, never breaking his sight from the action in the ring. "I just want to get good at it, just to be able to do it. You know, go out there and have a good match where everything looks real good."

Wrestling the past two-and-a-half years on the independent scene in North Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia, Ayers says the indy life doesn't provide the glamour one might think. "You're not a superstar," says Ayers, who does landscaping and works in nutrition store so he can have money to supplement his wrestling income. "You're an employee. At times, it can be lonely because people love you, but at the same time, you spend a lot of time by yourself. Some of the people I work with, they're like, 'You've got girls everywhere and this and that.' If you were to sit back and take a look at my life, you'd see that it's more like a country song than the life of a rapper."

No BWC student understands those diminishing returns better than BWC graduate Frank "the Tank" Parker. As BWC's first student and graduate, he has carved out a living as an independent-circuit wrestler, making at least \$75 a night. And he comes back to Shawsville on Sundays, helping to teach the students about the industry.

Parker, a 39-year-old bulk of a man whose voice sounds like that of a kind, country schoolboy, is one of the few at BWC who doesn't live in the 9-5 world. Instead, he makes wrestling his full-time job.

"I find myself struggling without the supplemental income," says the 6-foot 3-inch, 295-pound Parker, who adds that he has come a long way, averaging \$100 to \$125 a night. He started 18 years ago and had to wrestle at least 15 professional matches before he ever got paid. "Shoveling snow. Hauling off garbage. I've got as much pride as the next guy, but if I have to go scrub a toilet to live my dream, I'm not better than anybody else. Sure, it's a little embarrassing to clean up after someone else took a shit in the toilet, but hey, you have to do what you have to do."

Dedicating his life completely to wrestling has forced other sacrifices upon Parker. "I've been engaged a couple of times, but it didn't work out," he says. "I was given a choice—it was them or wrestling. Maybe I'll end up a bitter old man one day, but I'm living my dream. Professional wrestling is who I am and what I do. It's my life."

Another BWC student, David Hedge Jr., will be content if he never makes it to Madison Square Garden as a headliner with WWE with 30,000 people chanting his name. An overweight, baby-faced 26-year-old from Salem, Va., Hedge has a gentleness that shines through casual conversation. When he speaks in a quiet, reflective tone, it's easy to believe that his grandmother once made him sing in the choir to overcome his shyness.

Once in the ring, Hedge becomes Big Daddy Dave House, a bombastic bouncer from Las Vegas who insults the crowd. Hedge dreamed of wrestling since he was 6,

when he would watch matches on TV with his grandfather. But people laughed at his dream.

So Hedge came to Valiant in the rolling Virginia hills because of what others told him he could not do. Their ridicule stung him more than any bump he would ever take in the ring. They told him he was too fat. Too slow. Too nothing.

"Being a big guy, a lot of people put me down and told me, 'You're not going to do it," he says with the quiet humility that contrasts to the loud thuds thundering out of the ring not 2 feet away. "And for the longest time, I believed them."

Just in his second year at BWC, he has excelled in the ring and will be named an instructor for the 2010 class. And thanks to Valiant's wrestling camp, Hedge finally got the girl. In 2009 year, he started dating Cynthia Mills-Coffman, Valiant's photographer for the camp. Hedge may not make it to the big-time, but he has found love.

Hedge and Mills-Coffman stand arm-in-arm on the apron and cheer on their wrestling brothers and sisters as they practice. That picture of family and love serves as a testament to what Valiant's camp can do, not just for wrestlers, but for people.

It's also a picture that counters the portrait Parker describes for the students who stick with their BWC instruction and pursue wrestling professionally on the independent scene. "Valiant used to tell me that when your career is over and you've made one friend that will be your friend the rest of your life, then count yourself lucky," Parker says. "You have a lot of acquaintances. You fade away. A lot of those guys fade away, too. You don't necessarily know who you can trust with your life and with a major secret that you're trying to keep from the world. You don't know who's there today and who'll be gone tomorrow. You put walls up to protect yourself."

But Valiant doesn't believe in walls at BWC. He says he believes in his wrestling family linked by dreams. He believes in giving his students the opportunity to dream, knowing they may only find modest success as professional wrestlers. "They're a weekend warrior," Valiant says. "They're lucky if they make it home with a little extra money or break even. It's like what the guy bowling does. This is their Saturday night instead of going out to a bar. At least they're doing something they love to do."

Pointing his heavily inked arm to a message painted in red on his wall, Valiant reads it to emphasize the positive message of his camp: "Can The 'Dream' Become A Reality? Only You Can Make It Happen."

For Charles Abbott, nothing stands in the way of his dream. "I've had girls who want to date me," he says with coyness. "I just tell them I'm focused on this."

Today he has focused on making it happen. Shy and taciturn outside of the ring, his demeanor becomes obstreperous during his last drill of the day. He trades sonorous barks with an opponent as they batter each other around the ring. Slingshoting himself off the ropes, he knocks his training partner down, leaning into him with his shoulder. He looks down standing over the fallen, and the roar he releases reverberates with the fulfillment Valiant's school offers him.

It's no different than the promise of any education. And the same condition, too.

"It can offer you everything," Abbott says of Boogieland. "You just have to pay attention and listen."

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE REAL REAL

It's the one question they all expect to hear from any journalist. The wrestlers always wait, looking me over with their suspicious eyes. They know it's coming.

They've seen the exposes, from John Stossel getting punched by wrestler David "Dr. D" Schultz on ABC's 20/20 in 1984 to more recent investigations about steroid use. And any time I conduct an interview, they know there's one inevitable question.

The wrestlers are like George W. Bush, setting out on a preemptive strike.

During an interview, they don't want to wait for the one question they anticipate. Most of them think they're heading me off at the pass and say, "Aren't you going to ask me if it's fake?"

One wrestler—actually one of my favorites whom I have met and gotten to know—who is named Scrapyard Dog, smiles mean and ambivalent, as if daring me to ask. He alludes to the bumps their backs and spines take after being thrown continuously with force to the mat by their opponents. He demolishes any preconceived notions, offering before I even ask, "You don't fake gravity."

What they don't understand is that I never wanted to know if wrestling is real or fake. Sure, there is an aspect to wrestling that's all show, but what I see is in their sweat after a match, in the red marks left by slaps across their chests, in the hugs they share

after a great match backstage with an opponent, and in the small wages they take home after a show, if they get paid at all.

Wrestling is very real to them. And that's all that really matters.

From April 2009 to March 2010, I followed two independent wrestling promotions in North Carolina. The promoters and their wrestlers let me into their realities. They let me see their lives outside the ring. Some let me talk to their families. But it didn't happen overnight.

Wrestlers are amicable individuals, but it takes a while to get them to open up. I learned that some sources require a journalist to invest more time than just a 20-minute sit-down in a coffee shop to get the story. Journalism instead can require writers to invest a great deal of time and even themselves wholly in a particular project. With wrestlers, I quickly learned that I needed to give them a lot of myself if I wanted to understand who they were both inside and outside the ring.

The wrestling industry proudly wore a cloak of secrecy for more than six decades until World Wrestling Entertainment's Vince McMahon admitted in the late 1980s that matches were not legitimate contests. So my main goal when I first started going to matches was to simply hold conversations with some of the wrestlers. I talked to some about my time teaching. Some wanted to talk with me about Carolina basketball. For the first three months, I basically did no interviews pertaining to my thesis. Instead, I just enabled them to know me and established myself as a comfortable presence around whom these men and women could be themselves.

But I found out after 11 months following the circuit that just because they let me in did not mean they wanted to be revealed. That would be the first of many lessons learned.

To test the marketability of a wrestling article, I wrote a story about one of the promotions I had been following and submitted it to *The Durham Herald Sun*. It ran in early November. The article featured W.C. Smith, who wears a mask and wrestles as the Wrestling Superstar. His is a flashy gimmick with sparkling images of his mask sewn onto his shirt. Wrestling on North Carolina's indy scene for 16 years, Smith highlighted in the article the struggles seen on the circuit today.

When December rolled around, a month after the article appeared, Smith e-mailed me, telling me to call him. When I reached him, he informed me that a client of his—Smith puts vinyl siding on houses in Henderson, N.C.—had told him his name was in the paper as a wrestler.

"A guy called me and said, 'W.C., do you wrestle?" he said. "I told him I did but asked how he knew. Then he told me I was in the paper."

Though he acted graciously, Smith acted surprised that I used his real name. I explained to him that we were on the record during our interview and that I had asked him his real name during that interview. In reviewing that conversation, what struck me was that Smith had trusted me with information he didn't want revealed.

Smith had once talked to me about the secrecy involved in wrestling. "There was a time when wrestling was hush-hush, like being in the Mafia," he said. "But now the business has been exposed, so I'm sure I wouldn't tell you anything you wouldn't know."

Thinking back on the last year and the development of these thesis articles, I keep returning to that Mafia analogy. The wrestlers wanted me to know what it meant to them to be a wrestler. Like someone who brags about a crime, wrestlers told me some of the secrets of the industry. And they shared those secrets because they had accepted me as an insider. They had seen me backstage with them at many shows over many months, not just appearing for a one-time peek at their world for a feature story that would appear and soon be forgotten.

But, I wondered, if they knew I was a journalist, did I have to be careful relaying those secrets to the world? Wrestlers might not quite be ready for that reality. The real real.

My thesis experience not only helped me produce a series of articles, but it made me a better journalist. Working with a group of men and women who clearly delineate between their day jobs and their extracurricular activity taught me that I had to show care for my subjects. The wrestling world shines Vegas-strip bright with oddity, and so many characters exist there. But I learned that journalists have to care about their sources.

Journalists should not objectify sources, leave them in the cold after they say a damning quote, and only look to profit from a great story. Even though they wear masks and act through their wrestling gimmicks, the wrestlers are people who could suffer injury by some of the things that I found out and that they said. I had to make a conscious effort to evaluate what information and which quotes I included so as to protect my sources.

I had to also remind myself that these men and women are not celebrities, so they're not accustomed to dealing with the media. The wrestlers got lost in my ties to UNC and thought I was only doing a research project. I had to constantly remind them of

my role was as a journalist, not student. I had to remind them that I aimed to get a story and to publish that story. Sometimes, they just couldn't grasp that idea. I would show even more care for them, and when they said something very damaging or embarrassing, I would remind them that their words could find publication. My own ethical guidelines steered me to give them a chance to retract what they said. And if the quote or information passed that test, if the wrestler signed off on his/her words after being given that chance, I felt comfortable including it in my stories.

Wrestlers escape on the weekends, but on Mondays, they go back to their families and to their jobs. Theirs is a temporary escape. And like the permanence of their real lives, my articles, if published, will be public record forever. In accordance, what I write and what enters that public record affects their lives forever. I'm not saying I felt the need to write glowing promotional pieces in each article. But I did discover the need for myself as a future journalist to develop foresight into the damage a story could cause an individual. And I learned to respect averting that danger, even if it meant losing a great story.

Another favorite wrestler with whom I spent time also was not ready for his wrestling world to crossover with his real world. A high-school civics teacher, William Happer wrestles on the indy scene as "The German Beef" Otto Schwanz, a borderline lunatic who shouts at the audience in a language discernible only to himself. He served as in invaluable source, feeding me background information and pointing me in useful directions. A Georgetown University graduate, he intrigued me because he spent his Saturday nights wrestling in small-town fire halls and armories.

As we talked more over a period of several months, I made a push to feature him in an article. I suggested I come to the high school where he teaches and see him interact with the students. I wanted to see how much of his performances from Saturday night spilled over into the classroom on Monday mornings.

Happer quickly and bluntly told me he did not want to go any further with the process. He said he didn't want to mix his wrestling with his professional world. Clearly respecting his decision, I didn't pursue him anymore as a featured subject. I learned I had to respect my subjects' choices because I wouldn't be the one negatively affected if a reader came away with a negative view of a subject. My subjects would suffer those consequences, and I believe it imperative as an ethical journalist to protect them from that suffering when their privacy faces compromise.

Though I answered my research questions and wrote three quality articles, wrestling's independent circuit has many more great stories to tell. In future articles, or even in book form, I would investigate the women who pursue wrestling careers on the indy scene and why there are so few or feature a wrestler who's dogmatic in his/her dedication to the profession, knowing he/she cannot make any money from it. An article tracing a wrestler lost in his/her characters/gimmicks would serve as an intriguing feature story, revealing what that dedication could do to an individual. And an article could detail wrestling as an art form, from how the matches unfold between their participants to the skill used in playing the role of a heel or babyface.

Though questions remain, I know one thing for certain. I'll never step in the ring and wrestle...

...But if I did, I'd wear a tweed jacket with suede elbow patches and Dockers. I'd carry chalk inside my jacket pocket. Wearing glasses and only using ostentatious language when addressing the crowd, I'd take the role of an English teacher called the Grammarian. And my finishing move would be an elbow drop off the top rope.

I'd call it the Dangling Modifier.

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