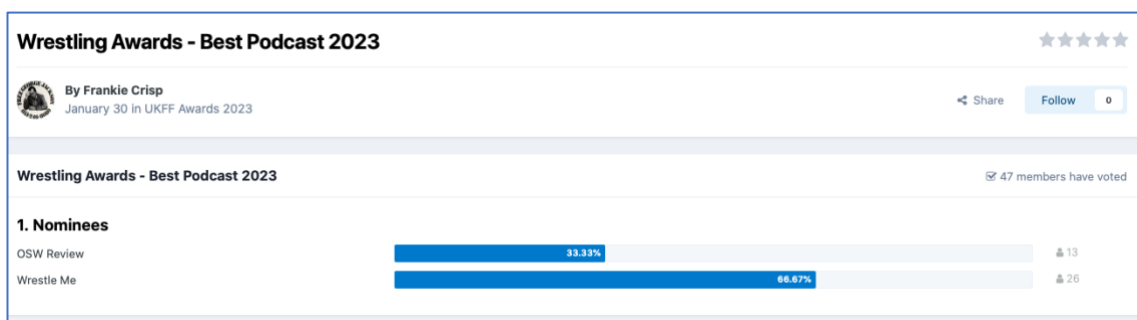


WRESTLE ME!

THE PAT PATREONSON'S MONTHLY FANZINE

Celebrating the Sport of Thieves since 2018

No.47 – March 2024



Oh, it's so unbecoming. Disgusting arrogance. And fifth time in a row, thanks UKFF!

Hello you!

Welcome to the newsletter/fanzine thing for March, covering February, that's out in May! Nothing like a *Wrestlemania* week to make it impossible to get the time to write something that contains more words than CS Lewis's *The Lion The Witch and The Wardrobe*. I think there's also more instances of the word 'fucking' in this one too, unless there's a bit I don't remember where Aslan says "What do you fucking kids want?" I've not read it for a while.

Right, let's get stuck in with over 40,000 words on the greatest form of entertainment ever invented. Although I should make it clear from the start, there's some bleak stories in the main bit that cover sexual assault, and just when you think we've moved on, we get plunged back into it all over again. And when we finally stop talking about the Vince McMahon allegations, we end up back in 1986 and some more. I don't want the newsletter to become too heavy month-in, month-out, but this has been a unique period and I feel like someone's got to record it who isn't just Dave Meltzer. If all elderly men could stop being fucking beastly for just one fucking month, that'd really help me out.



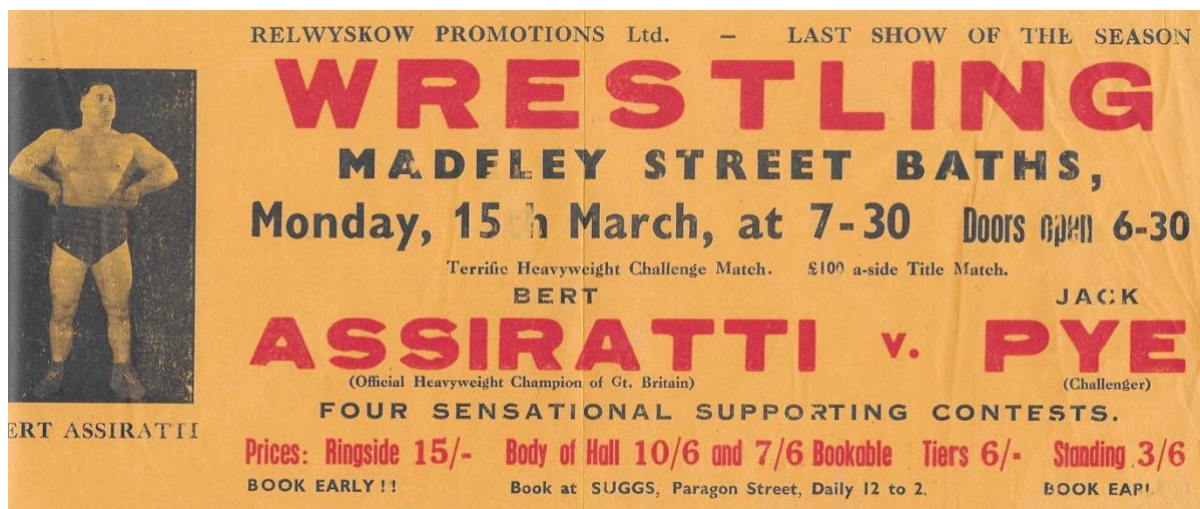
As a palate cleanser, here's a photo of Hulk Hogan hugging Noel Gallagher. And Christ, when we're using Hogan to lift the mood, you know that things have got bad. Same goes for using Noel. Until next time, thanks so much for your support, we send our love, and look! Sun's out. GUNS OUT.

Marc & Pete xxx

Now let's kick off with the longest, most comprehensive account of the legendary British wrestler Bert Assirati ever written. Unless there's another one, which would have really been good to know about before I did this one from scratch. It took *forever*.

FIVE-TIME WINNER OF THE UKFF'S 'BEST WRESTLING PODCAST', 2019-2023

THE BERT BUSINESS



Let's kick things off with a 1940s flyer where Assiratti's name is spelled wrong. Twice.

When it comes to British wrestlers, very few have both the timeless reputation and near complete invisibility of Bert Assiratti.

We reached out to the Lord Alfred Hayes Institute in Ghent (the world's leading institute dedicated to Hayes studies) to ask whether they would be amenable to giving us a grant to look at someone who is someone that Hayes would have been both aware of and deeply scared by. They kindly issued us a grant of 1 million Euros (admittedly, most of which I've spent on Mars milk) and here's everything we can currently find about the most feared, most notorious, most exciting and most unprofessional professional wrestler of the 20th century.



While he was once the most famous wrestler in Britain, Assiratti's story comes down to us today in tiny slivers – primarily through occasional fleeting mentions in obscure wrestling biographies. His name is there in the *Wrestling Observer* Hall of Fame, one of the inaugural Class of 1996 personally picked by Dave Meltzer – a list of 83 men who no-one could dispute formed the backbone of the greatest wrestlers who ever lived.¹ Alongside timeless names like George Hackenschmidt, Andre the Giant, Frank Gotch, Ed 'Strangler' Lewis, Hulk Hogan, Lou Thesz, Ric Flair, Rikidozan and Gorgeous George, Bert Assiratti was one of just two British performers to make the grade (alongside Dynamite Kid).

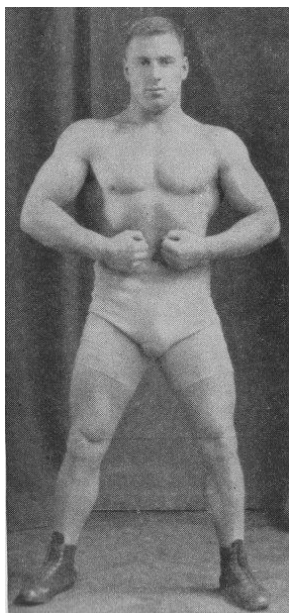
Bartolemo Assiratti was born in Islington on 9th July 1909, a third-generation Italian immigrant living in London's Little Italy, whose father Francesco, a cab driver, was said to be "more powerful and stronger than average".

¹ In more recent years, Assiratti is the only inductee from that initial batch whose inclusion *has* been disputed.

Using the nickname 'The Islington Hercules' throughout his career, Assirati was often billed as being from Highbury, a smaller area of the borough where Pete and I record *Wrestle Me!*, a show that Assirati would have loathed and longed to twist our necks for daring to do.

Catching diphtheria as a child (a disease which robbed him of his much of his sight and saw him attend a school for the blind), the puny Assirati was introduced to weightlifting and bodybuilding by his father and cousin Joe, "and as his frail physique slowly began to develop into a wiry, whipcord body, the miracle happened."²

Excelling at sports in school, the 5' 6" Assirati joined the Clarence Physical Club as a youth of 13. He claimed to the *Picture Post* in 1949 that "at 13, weighing 13 stone 9lbs, he was second in the All-England Gymnastic Championship" (it's worth mentioning, Bert claimed all sorts of exaggerated things throughout his life, knowing full well they'd be almost impossible to check). It was also at 13 that he was said to have been spotted lifting up his father's taxi by the back bumper.



Around the same time, Assirati also joined Islington's Ashdown Wrestling Club and began training in amateur wrestling under coach George Mackenzie, who'd represented Great Britain in four Olympic Games.

All the while, Assirati kept up his weightlifting and gymnastics, combining all these disciplines into something that had never been seen before: an incredibly agile, incredibly strong powerhouse with pectoral muscles that no one in 1922 had ever seen the likes of.

His cousin Joe (who was a lifelong bodybuilder, and conducted this interview when he was 87) told a weightlifting magazine about an incident that occurred when Bert was 14. With his uncle, Bert visited a gym in Camberwell to see a "strength exhibition by Alexander Zass, 'The Amazing Samson,' whose main forte was bending iron bars."

Before Zass started to bend bars in his exhibitions, he would hand around an iron bar so that any doubters could 'test' it. My 14-year-old cousin, Bert, happened to be the last 'tester,' having been immediately preceded by my father. When Bert returned the bar, it was noticeably bent.

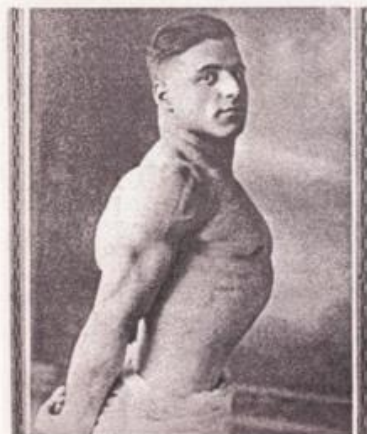
This, of course, created quite a stir, and many questions were directed at the young boy, who when requested, stripped off his shirt and showed his very muscular physique, especially his pectorals and triceps.

When my father described the evening's events to me, he whispered, 'Don't say anything to anyone, but I bent the bar before handing it to Bert.' You can

² *The Wrestler* magazine, where this quote is from, suggested that the weightlifting made also his eyes get stronger, but I'm not sure that's how it works.

believe this, when I tell you, many years afterwards, when Bert had travelled the world and seen all its strongest men, he confided to me, “Pop [meaning my father] had the most highly developed forearms I ever saw.”

Assirati was only 19 when he posed for this photo.



In later life, Assirati recalled he “dead-lifted 800 pounds back in 1938, and did a one-legged squat with 200 pounds.” He also was able to hold a one-hand handstand and do a crucifix on the rings at a bodyweight of 266lbs. At the same weight, he was also able to do a series of back somersaults “with the lightness and grace of a ballerina.”³ When talking about Assirati long after his retirement, the commentator Kent Walton didn’t mention his strength as his defining characteristic in the ring, but his “tiger-cat quickness”.

As soon as he left school, Assirati toured the music halls of Britain and Europe in a variety act called Mello and Nello (Bert was Nello), apparently appearing in a Royal Command Performance and starring on the same bill as the hugely popular comedians Flanagan and Allen at the London Coliseum. It was a gymnastic act made more spectacular as Assirati wasn’t just a remarkable acrobat, but an absolutely huge remarkable bodybuilding acrobat.

He was – even the advertisements admitted it – sensational, and certainly colossal. When you saw Mello and Nello in the mid-twenties, you laughed at Mello, but you marvelled at Nello, who seemed strong enough to invite an elephant to do a slow foxtrot on his stomach.



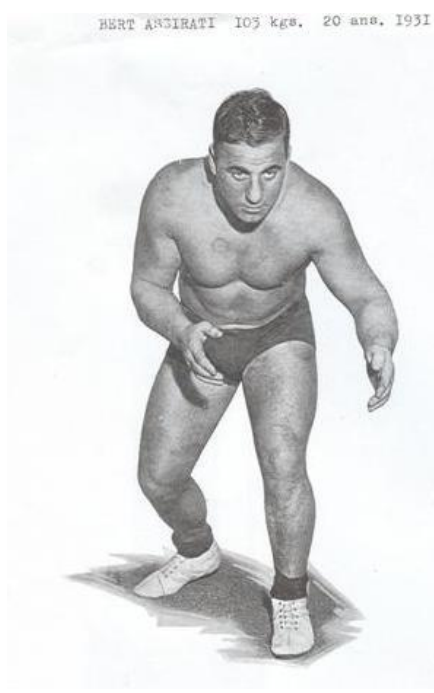
With wrestling soaring in popularity in the 1920s, Assirati was noticed by the wrestler and promoter Lord Atholl Oakley, and trained for the pro ranks by former lightweight world champion Peter Götz (1877-1959) and the Wigan-born Jack Carroll, who was nicknamed ‘Young Whistler’ (he may have taken his nickname from Clarence Whistler, a once-famous American wrestler who had died back in 1885) and who later ran a wrestling school out of South London’s Walworth Empire.⁴

Assirati’s professional debut is believed to have been in October 1928, when he defeated one of his fellow students from the Ashdown Club, Robert Cook. Within months, he was wrestling on cards in some of the country’s biggest venues and by 1930, he was one of the major forces in the sport, which was becoming hugely popular.

Within six months, he held victories over big stars like Atholl Oakley, Henri Irslinger and had held the British Heavyweight champion Douglas Clark to a draw. Their return match at the Bell Vue Grounds in Wakefield attracted 3000 spectators, ending in a victory for Clark when Assirati went over the top rope and couldn’t get back in.

³ Quotes from *The Super Athletes* by David P. Willoughy (1970).

⁴ In 1932, there’s a record of Carroll having a match with Miss England (likely a woman named Marjory Sword), who was probably a woman he’d trained. Carroll was disqualified in the bout at Lincoln for choking her. It might be the first intergender wrestling match to ever take place in Britain.



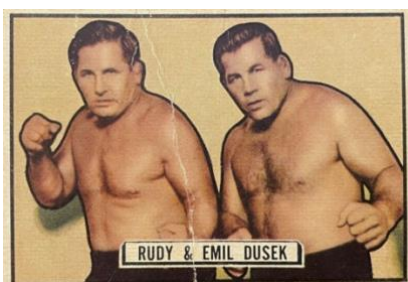
In June 1932, Assirati travelled to America to learn the new “All In” style of wrestling – a faster, more aggressive style than had been practiced in Britain. With the US promoters impressed by his physique, strength and unique acrobatic ability, he was billed as the champion of Italy, Berto Assirati.

He claimed to have had 65 American matches, of which he won 63 and drew the other two – a fictional record made easier to claim at a time when there was almost no way to easily check something that had happened on the other side of the world.

But some results of his American tour have been uncovered over the years and Assirati was, at best, a midcard talent. He lost more often than he claimed, but he was clearly getting a mild push when he arrived.

At a time when most matches lasted ages, Assirati’s initial wins came incredibly swiftly – a two-minute squash of August Benkert, a four-minute pounding of Ghafoor Khan and a 50-second win over Renato Gardini⁵ which was covered in the *Washington Post* of 17 June 1932.

A world record for Washington was set when Berto Assirati, a reformed circus rubber man, dumped fat Renato Gardini in 55 seconds. Assirati wrestles like an armless man chopping wood by holding the axe in his mouth and turning front flips.



During the second part of his US tour, Assirati was mainly on the losing end of matches to bigger names – he lost matches to Rudy Dusek (by pinfall in 15 and 30 minutes, by referee’s decision in 23 minutes, by count-out in 11)⁶ and had a series of half-hour time limit draws with fellow mid-card talent Tommy Marvin, Frank Brunowicz and Joe Nawrocki. It wasn’t all plain-sailing, as an October 1932 report in the

Philadelphia Inquirer makes clear.

⁵ Born in Italy in 1889, Gardini competed in the 1912 Olympics as a middleweight in Greco-Roman wrestling before emigrating to the US, where he wrestled professionally from 1917. He met Ed ‘Strangler’ Lewis for the World title in September 1922, losing 2-falls-to-1 in a nearly two-hour bout. Having defeated the former champion Stanislaus Zbkysko the following year, he received numerous shots at Lewis over the next two years, all of which he lost. He could, at least, claim a victory over future world champion Jim Londos, which happened in January 1924. He died in 1940 while promoting in Argentina.

⁶ Rudy (1901-1971) was a member of the Duseks, four tough wrestling brothers from Nebraska. Rudy was the least acclaimed – his younger brothers Ernie and Emil had more success, both as individuals and as the Dusek Brothers Riot Squad, a legendary tag team.

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Berto Asserrati, English Hebrew⁷, found his jaw pulled out of place after 23 minutes, 42 seconds of wrestling with Tom Marvin, the Oklahoma Indian, and was forced to surrender. Asserrati went 210, the winner 205.

The unreliable version of Assirati's tour states he set his sights firmly on the World Heavyweight champion 'The Golden Greek' Jim Londos. *Fight Times* explained what supposedly happened next.

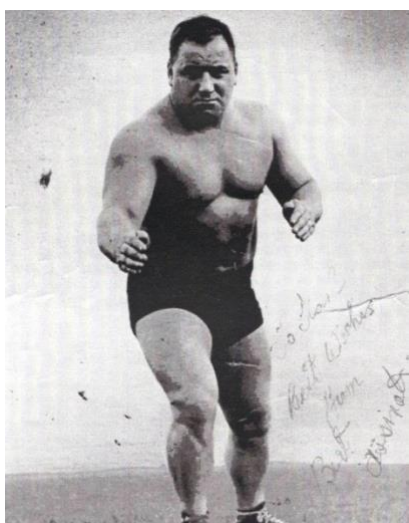
Bert had been promised a shot at Jim Londos' world crown if he first beat Jim McMillan and Ray Steele. It was a pretty safe bet, as both McMillan and Steele were ex-world champs and legends in the wrestling game.

Presumably Assirati didn't know this. He beat McMillan before many of the ringsiders had even settled into their seats, then met Steele a fortnight later. Steele, a handsome man, had speed and power, and he employed them both against Assirati. In the opening seconds, he threw Assirati halfway across the ring. The British lad bounced on his shoulder and landed back onto his feet like a rubber ball. Then Steele went for a backbreaker, a speciality of his, and nearly had his own back broken in the process.

There was an explosive almost unnatural strength in Assirati that stunned the crowd. Steele began to move backwards around the ring in a bid to lure his rival into a false and fatal move. But on every counter, he was beaten for sheer speed of reflex by the impassive Assirati.

Steele was taking the kind of battering he had never taken before, even from Londos himself, and it must have come as a welcome relief when Assirati ended the bout with his famous Boston Crab. The critics were loud in their praise for Assirati and, so too, was Steele. "This", he said, "is the greatest wrestler in the world. No one can stay with him, and that includes Londos".

Londos' handlers took the hint and suddenly wanted no part of Assirati. So, ironically, his greatest moment proved his downfall. He was cast into the international wilderness. No one with title aspirations would meet him.



It's been claimed that Assirati either proved too unruly in the ring (meaning Londos as a top-drawing world champion may have refused to work with him, fearing being injured or, worse, that Assirati might decide to take the belt regardless of what had been determined beforehand) or that he rubbed the promoters up the wrong way. Perhaps, it's been said, considering how the rest of Assirati's career panned out, it was a toxic combination of both.

But it's ever more likely that none of this ever happened. Assirati was little more than a foreign rookie to the American promoters, and came nowhere near challenging for the prestigious world

⁷ Bert was not Jewish. Nice inaccurate racial-profiling work, 1930s American press!

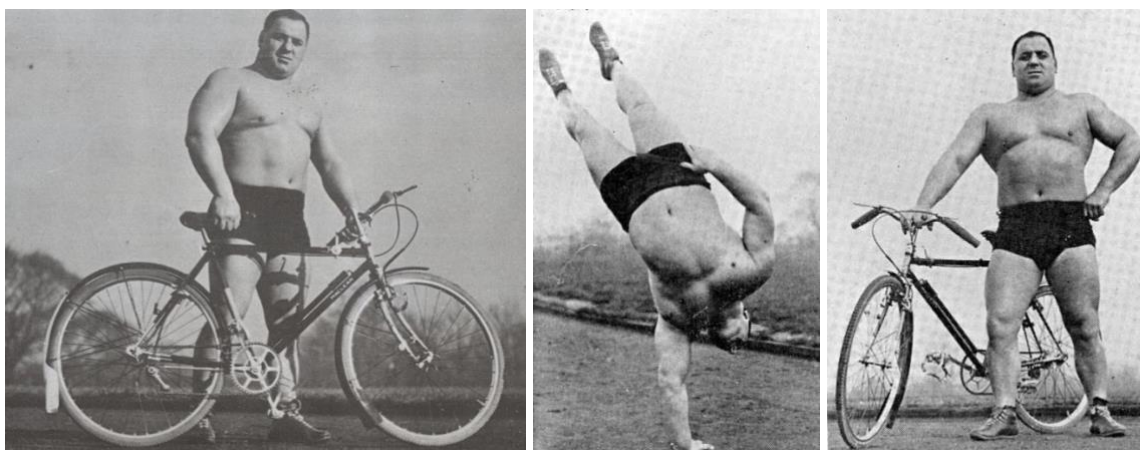
championship. There are no records showing he ever faced Steele or McMillan. And why would Londos duck Assirati? Wrestling was pre-determined: if the promoters had wanted the belt on Assirati or believed he would draw in a championship bout, they'd have made the match with the world champion. They didn't, so it never happened.



It was a tale most likely created by Assirati himself, a story to tell the incredulous people in Britain when he returned about how great his tour was, and how the big stars were too frightened to face him – and it worked.

Returning to England in 1933, and after learning submission style wrestling in the legendary Wigan training schools, Assirati quickly established himself as one of the top wrestlers in the country. Primarily wrestling in London, he faced most of the big names of the day – Jack Pye, Francis St Clair Gregory (the father of World of Sport era star Tony St Clair), Black Butcher Johnson and Ernie Baldwin.

Assirati was also famous for working out and swimming in the open-air ponds on Hampstead Heath (one source says he was a keen nude sunbather at the ponds, which I think about with a shudder every time I wander past them). Assirati believed strength without endurance was pointless, once commenting, “Of what use is it to be able to press 250 or 280 or any other great poundage if you can't run a good mile or wrestle for an hour?”



Assirati on Hampstead Heath (thankfully with some of his clothes on) in 1936



But it was also a lean time – “in London once, Bert's share of the takings worked out at exactly seven and sixpence. Again, on tour, making two appearances a day, there were times when the reward brought in less than enough to pay the hotel bills. At such times Bert must have wished himself in the stalls and anybody else up on the stage challenging all-comers to earn £25 by staying in the ring for ten minutes. This was a challenge he issued twice a night for two years on end. No one ever took the money.”



Assirati began to make serious money in the 1940s, as both his reputation and wrestling's popularity grew (and being run over by a car in 1942 didn't seem to have much effect on his rise). By the end of the decade, "as if in recognition of the fact that Assirati is supreme in the bone-crushing business as showman and drawing-card, a suburban billing may mean a guarantee of £20" (the average weekly wage at the time was around £6).

In one 1944 bout against Hooker Rawlins of Bradford, the *Edinburgh Evening News* reported the men "carried their fisticuffs...outside the arena at one juncture of their contest" which might be one of the earliest mentions of a wrestling match spilling outside the venue.

In 1944, the British heavyweight champion Douglas Clark retired, and the belt was vacated. Assirati beat Bolton's George Gregory at Manchester's Belle Vue on the 27th January 1945 to win the title.

BRITISH HEAVYWEIGHT WRESTLING CHAMPIONSHIP		
 GEORGE GREGORY	£500 SIDESTAKE Six 10-min. rounds—Best two of three falls —Two Submissions or one Knock-Out £500 SIDESTAKE	 BERT ASSIRATI
BETWEEN ASSIRATI AND GREGORY (LONDON) 16st. 3lbs. HOLDER (BOLTON) 15st. 2lbs. CONTENDER		
On Saturday night, January 27th, 1945 Bert Assirati wrestled the British Heavyweight Wrestling Championship from George Gregory. Will Gregory reverse the situation tonight and regain his former championship? Gregory, of course, is renowned for his famous Japanese wrist locks, counterbalanced by Assirati's terrific "Boston Grips"		
 CHARLIE GREEN	CHARLIE GREEN ✓ CLEM LAWRENCE (WIGAN) 14st. 1lb. Ex-R.A.F. P.T. Instructor. Lancashire Boy. Never knows when he has had enough.	 CLEM LAWRENCE
 EDDIE BARKER	EDDIE BARKER ✓ TONY BAER (CANADA) 13st. 8lbs. Ex-Speedway Rider (West Ham). Served 1939-45 war in Canadian Scottish.	 TONY BAER
 FRANCOIS MIQUET	FRANCOIS MIQUET ✓ DANNO DAVEY (FRANCE) 13st. 8lbs. Served in French Air Force during war. Second appearance in this country.	 DANNO DAVEY
Referee: DICK ROGERS (Under Wrestling Board of Control). All Wrestlers appearing licensed under B.W.B. of C.		
 Fine Ales EMBEE B.B. All Brewed by WALKER & HOMFRAY'S, Salford and Bottled by PALATINE BOTTLING CO., Manchester		 Sole Bottlers for these Gardens of GUINNESS (Harp Label) TETLEY - BASS YOUNGER WORTHINGTON JOHN SMITH'S SLACK & COX LIMITED HYDE ROAD, MANCHESTER 12 Telephone: ARDwick 3117 (2 lines)
BRITAIN'S GREATEST FIREWORK SPECTACLE OPENS MONDAY NIGHT, SEPTEMBER 2nd, at 9.0 p.m. and every night onwards at the same time (except Sundays) until further notice IT'S A COLOSSAL "BELLE VUE-BROCK" SPECTACLE ALL THE FUN OF THE FAIR. HUGE AMUSEMENT PARK IN FULL SWING		

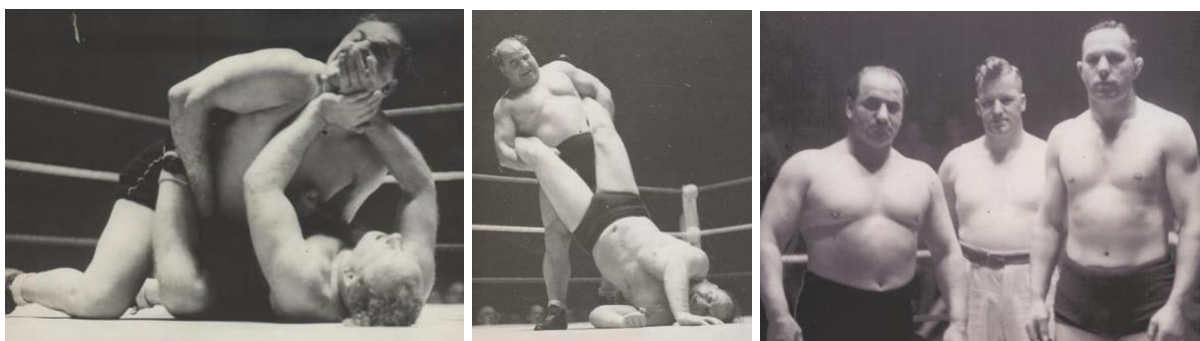
Here's a 1946 Assirati bout with Gregory (which ends in a draw) on the Pathe website, which is paywalled. Lads, no one is paying for ancient British wrestling clips, just put it up on YouTube and we can all be happy.

<https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/83671/>

Oh! Someone has – the beloved John Lister. NICE ONE JOHN!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6uF7Ac2skYw&pp=ygUNYmVydCBhc3NpcmFoaQ%3D%3D>

In February 1947, a single-fall world title tournament was promoted at the massive Haringay Stadium by Atholl Oakeley, featuring sixteen of the world's top wrestlers. 7000 fans watched Assirati defeat the Danish/Canadian Carl Van Wurden⁸, Greece's Milo Popocopolis⁹, French former heavyweight champion Gaston Ghevaert and the Dane Ivor Martinsen (who was papped arriving at Victoria Station ahead of the tournament) to win the world's championship. Assirati held the title for seven months, dropping it to Martinsen in front of a big Paris crowd in October.



Assirati vs Roy McClarity (1948), George Gregory in Manchester & Francis St Clair Gregory (1946)

One of his biggest matches came in August 1948, when Assirati took on the 'French Angel' Maurice Tillet.



The Lithuanian-born Frenchman Tillet had been a huge-drawing sensation across the world in the early 1940s, thanks to his unique appearance. His huge head and distorted features were the result of acromegaly: a benign tumour on his pituitary gland which led to his bones continually growing affected him from the age of 17, a similar condition to the one which Andre the Giant suffered from.

His seemingly-ironic nickname was an honest one: his mother had called him 'Angel' as a child due to his sweet and innocent face. Feeling that his features mean wouldn't be able to practise law effectively (he'd not long passed his law degree), Tillet turned to wrestling. The American wrestler (who shared Tillet's Lithuanian heritage) who encouraged him to do so,

⁸ Van Wurden (1898-1988) was a Canadian (or American, no one's quite sure) of Danish stock. He seems to emigrated to England sometime around 1937, settled in Manchester and wrestled well into the 1950s. He also competed as the balaclava-masked and caped Green Asp from 1939 until 1950 (when he would be billed as being from Norway or Egypt). Remembered as being technically brilliant but dull without the mask, Max Crabtree recalled him as "needing a little bit of panache."

⁹ Along with Johnny and Tommy, Milo (real name Andreas Yiannopoulos) was one of the three wrestling Popocopolis brothers. Moving from Greece to London as a teenager, Milo was known as the best of the three, wrestling from the 1930s until the 1960s. In the later years of his career, Milo was heavily involved in campaigning for better conditions and pay for wrestlers and was instrumental in one of the attempts to form a wrestlers union, the Professional Wrestlers Welfare Association. His brothers ran restaurants and bars on the side, opening the Acapulco Coffee Bar in Soho's Hanway Street in 1953.

Karl Pojello, also became his best friend, and the two became inseparable: they appeared on cards together throughout their careers.¹⁰

But Tillet also transformed his remarkable features into gold – he starred in films like *Mighty Joe Young as The Swedish Angel* (1949) and was a sensation when he came to America. The promoter Paul Bowser immediately pushed him into the main event and had him remain undefeated for nineteen months.

As promoter Paul Boesch recalled in his autobiography:

The fans crowded arenas to get a look at him and when the aberrant animal ambled down the aisle their curiosity was well satisfied. The Angel was difficult to wrestle. His size and his balance, along with a certain clumsiness that created an unorthodox defence, made you wary when you entered the ring with him.

‘Classy’ Freddie Blassie also worked with him in the 1940s.

He was a nice enough guy, but it was hard to have a conversation with him. Besides his French accent, his vocal cords sounded like they were stretched – a little bit like Andre the Giant a few decades later – and he bumbled when he talked. People have asked me what kind of condition he had but, to tell you the truth, I never thought to ask. The wrestlers would just say, ‘He was born that way,’ and that was that. Plus, he was growing money, and you couldn’t knock the pocketbook.

The Angel first appeared in Britain in 1947, and boy, did the promoters ever go to town with how he looked. “More ghoulish than the Ghoul!” yelled one. “Is it a Throwback? The AMBLING APE-MAN!” Another one from Sutton-in-Ashfield ruminated (and hilariously having its cake and eating it)”

A ghastly throwback? Horrible to look at certainly, but powerful and beyond our wildest dreams. Many (including ourselves) believe this enormity should not be allowed to wrestle here, but in difference to universal request he will make this one appearance. Can Hans Lagren overthrow this awful Angel?

Within weeks, the Angel was a sensation in England, and his match against Assirati was a huge deal, with magazines like *Combat* hyping it in the months before.

Bert Assirati, reigning British champion and England’s best, pursues his quest for the world heavyweight championship when he meets ‘The Angel’, ambling pre-historic horror-man of the mat world¹¹, in an eliminating bout for the world title. Rain or shine, the contests will go on. Nothing can halt the match which looms as the most exciting contest of the year.

Bert Assirati was the first to sign the contracts. He made a hundred-pound deposit with the promoters that he would appear as scheduled. The roly-poly

¹⁰ Pojello’s wife once claimed he loved the French Angel more than her, but said “dollar signs” immediately after. Pojello was believed to have taken 50% of Tillet’s earnings throughout his career, but at least he stayed loyal and Tillet seemingly never felt hard done by.

¹¹ This sounds exactly like something I’d say about the Big Show, but it’s genuinely by someone else in 1948.

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Londoner regards his meeting with 'The Angel' as one of the most important combats of his career and another stepping-stone towards the world title, held by Frank Sexton of Ohio, USA.

The match at the Tottenham Hotspurs Stadium attracted a reported 12,000 fans – it was the biggest attendance for a show in the London area for at least 20 years.

The grotesque 'Angel', looking like a reporter's nightmare, appeared to bigger and bigger than ever, but, in strength, Assirati seemed to equal him. Bert tried one hold after another to throw the ambling pre-historic man to the canvas. 'The Angel', his cast hands extended, sought to trap the London heavyweight in a body crush, his favourite hold with which he had beaten the Duseks, Caseys, Sonnenberg and other famed wrestlers. On several occasions it seemed as if he would crush the life out of the British champion.

Applying grip after grip on Assirati, Tillet, a former world title holder,¹² crushed him time and again, but Bert escaped and broke the hold. Every time the 'Angel' gripped him, the eel-like London veteran wriggled free. This defensive action baffled the Frenchman and Assirati's front headlocks caused him to protest to the referee.

Assirati, softening the ex-champion with headlocks, whipped in and grabbed the 'Angel' by the legs, a quick turn and Tillet was trapped in a 'Boston crab-hold'. Sweat poured from his face which was tortured in agony as he tapped the mat giving the first fall to our Bert.

'The Angel' proved he hadn't worn the world title for nothing and when the bell sounded he came charging back for more. His unforgettable features, grim – almost terrifying to watch – Tillet went in with a series of body crushes on the British ace. The equalising fall went to 'The Angel' as he pressed Assirati's shoulders in a body press. The third fall was Assirati's. We thought that he was lucky to win it. He certainly had to fight every ounce of strength to get it.



"The ANGEL" chats to MAURICE LETCHFORD
"I am prepared to meet Assirati anywhere, his winning fall was disputable."

The deciding fall took place with Tillet's feet under the ropes but the referee missed it, so Tillet was able to argue that he shouldn't have lost – it was a bit of business that led to Assirati being jeered and the crowd's sympathy shifting to the Angel. The two men would meet again in 1953, in the final match of Tillet's career. With his health failing, Tillet lost to Assirati in Singapore.

The French Angel died in Chicago the following year, suffering a heart attack when he was told that his long-time friend and mentor Pojello had died earlier in the day. They were buried together, with the inscription "Friends Whom Even Death Could Not Part".

¹² Tillet held a version of the world title from Boston from 1940 to 1942, but it was a belt from a time when there were a lot of regional championships proclaiming to be world titles. But Tillet did face the cream of America's wrestlers during this time, including Ed 'Strangler' Lewis and Lou Thesz. "He was very stiff and slow, had very slow reflexes, I really felt sorry for the guy," said Lou Thesz in a 1997 interview. "He was a lovely man, too. Very, very nice guy."

Heading into the 1950s, Assirati's legend continued to grow and he was reputed to be the highest earning performer in the country, being paid up to £100 a fight. In 1949, he was featured in a photo-essay in the pages of the esteemed *Picture Post*.

At 39, 5-foot, 6 1/2", 17-stone Bert Assirati, Free Style heavyweight champion of the Empire, has dominated the landscape for so long that he has forgotten when any of his countrymen last wrestled with him and prevailed.

He has won all but ten of his 400 contests; scored 62 victories and three draws in his 65 fights in America; and deposited the champions of Belgium, France, Denmark, Russia, Italy and Poland as flat on their respective backs as is compatible with the build of such balls of muscles.



Getting on in years, Assirati stayed in good physical shape, even if he looked like Jimmy Durante if he'd been born in the shape of a barrel. It was a novelty at the time – men in their 40s didn't stay in relative shape like Assirati did, and his then-ground-breaking interest in training and general fitness was highlighted by early wrestling journalist Charles Mascall in September 1947:

He pays regular visits to the Welsh Harp. This open space is an ideal spot in N.W. London which provides good training, swimming and sun-bathing facilities. The results of this training campaign [are] most noticeable when Assirati strips in preparation to face his opponent.



He toured Belgium (where he wrestled to a draw with Frank Sexton, one of the biggest US stars of the previous decade – Bert claimed he had influenza which held him back) and France. Here's some rare footage of him taking on Frenchman Felix Miquet: "un petit ballet!" To win the first fall, one of them hits what looks like an elaborate Boss Man Slam, and then there's a great dive through the ropes. You don't expect either of those to have happened in the 1940s, but Jesus, it's hard to tell who's who. Notably, Assirati loses (I think – I genuinely can't tell them apart without really concentrating).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQ3vShaHEUM>

But by the 1950s, the cracks started to appear.

The burly Assirati began to acquire a notorious reputation for intentionally hurting his opponents in the ring – something that was quite the achievement, considering most of the performers of the time came from tough amateur backgrounds and expected wrestling, even in the professional world, to be rough and tough. He quickly gained a reputation as a violent bully who would inflict pain on people at will.



Ordinarily, if someone became infamous for hurting his opponents, they'd be set right in a match by a noted shooter who acted as the 'policeman' of the locker room.

But there was a problem: no one could outshoot, out-brawl or outmuscle Assirati. His cousin Joe recalled in later life that, ever since he was a child, Bert had simply never been afraid of anybody.

The Swiss wrestler Rene Lasartesse wrote in his autobiography that Assirati was really brutal in the ring - when his opponent didn't hit him hard enough, Assirati would get angry and provoke him to not fall asleep "and start fighting!" If his opponents hesitated, he would

start punishing them. He'd happily take anything his foe could dish out, as he was looking forward to paying it back in spades.

The MC George Peake recalled Assirati finally coming "face to face with a continental star who had been shouting his head off about what he would do to the British champion when he got him in the ring. By the second round, he had got the message from Bery. "Stop!" he called out. He raised Bert's arm above his head, declared him "der vinner!" and sadly left the ring."

According to Adrian Street in the second book of his multi-volume autobiography, the wrestler Mike Marino's famous "badly scarred face, badly broken nose and two cauliflower ears...wasn't the result of many years' wear and tear in a very rough business. It all happened to him one night whilst wrestling with Bert."

Marino himself recalled a bout with Assirati, saying a 1961 match with George Gordienko "was the toughest I've had since I fought Bert Assirati in Aberdeen in the winter of 1955. Then I was knocked out and was unconscious for eleven days, but Assirati had to have eight stitches inserted in a wound on his chin."¹³ That seems, at best, a pyrrhic victory.

Johnny Kwango, who started wrestling in the late 1940s and continued all the way through to the glory years of the *World of Sport* era, recalled working with Assirati in the 1950s.

I remember when his opponent failed to turn up one night. Rather than disappoint the fans, Bert agreed to meet the winners of the three previous contests in a handicap match.

I watched him dispose of the first two in double quick time. Then it was my turn, The best plan of action, I decided, would be to run him off his feet, then finish him off with a head butt or two.

¹³ The *Sydenham, Forest Hill & Penge Gazette*, 1 September 1961.

I gave him one headbutt. He just grunted, As I came in for the second, he hit me with his open hand across the side of the head. I shot across the ring, went out through the ropes the other side and woke up in the dressing room 20 minutes later. They called it a handicap match. Brother, they weren't kidding!

A young Adrian Street also recalled watching Assirati take on a Tongan wrestler (who substituted for Assirati's billed opponent, who hadn't turned up) in London's Seymour Hall.

In years to come when I learned a lot more about Bert, I realised that it was a very common occurrence for Bert's scheduled opponent not to turn up. That night, Bert's performance gave me a very obvious clue as to why. The Friendly Islander got anything but a friendly reception from Bert, who brutalised him unmercifully from the sound of the first bell.

[After one particularly big move, the ring] collapsed completely as all four corner posts imploded into a tangled melee of wood, canvas, metal and rope that used to be a ring. Uncle Fred and I must have been two amongst no more than a dozen fans who were in a position to see what happened next.

Both Bert and the Friendly Islander were now struggling at the bottom of a canvas canyon in the middle of the wreckage. Bert was on top of the Tongan and was hacking down blow after blow down onto his defenceless opponent's unprotected face with the edge of his fist like a butcher chopping meat. Blood was splashing and splattering everywhere.

The best part of it all was that almost no one in the hall was aware of what was happening. They couldn't see either of the wrestlers from where they were sitting. So, the only reason Bert was punishing the poor Tongan so brutally must have been solely for his own enjoyment.

A member of the *Wrestling Heritage* board recalled seeing Assirati in action during this time, wrestling American wrestler Chick Knight in 1950: "Bert put the Boston crab on him, and it was thought he had broken Chick's back - he did spend some time in hospital. Alan Garfield towered above Bert, but it did not stop Bert from lifting him up over his head and dropping him with all of his weight on Garfield's head. Afterwards Mr Garfield left with his head on one side twice the size of the other side, and with a big bandage around him."

Adrian Street tells a great (possibly apocryphal) story about four unnamed heavyweight wrestlers driving from London for a show at St James' Hall in Newcastle. Three of them were tittering the whole way, the fourth unable to work out why – until he saw a poster on the outskirts of Newcastle city centre showing he'd been matched up against Assirati that night. He immediately demanded the car stop, got out, grabbed his bags and threw his thumb out to hitch-hike back to London.

Having driven on for a minute or so in gales of laughter, one of the three remaining heavyweights suddenly shouted for the car to stop, having realised that, now Assirati's scheduled opponent had dropped out, he'd likely end up having to replace

him in the match with Assirati. He got out, grabbed his bags and ran down to join the first one hitchhiking.

The two who remained in the car carried on, slowly realising that now one of them would end up having to face Assirati. After a minute of growing horror, they turned the car round, picked up the two wrestlers who were hitchhiking, and they all drove back to London in total silence. "Well," one finally broke the silence, "at least we've got back earlier than we would have."



While still British champion,¹⁴ Assirati set off a two-year tour to the Far East, wrestling in Singapore, Malaysia, Ceylon, India, Pakistan and South Africa. It was on this tour that Assirati's bullying seemingly became an integral part of his business strategy. While he lost to some of India's biggest stars – to Dara Singh, to Tiger Joginder Singh in front of 50,000 people in Bombay, and Aslan Pahelwan in front of 40,000 – he would only do so if he was paid what he requested. If not, he'd go into business for himself, as historian Mike Hallinan explained on *Wrestling Heritage*.

Any matches he lost were show matches, where he was paid five times the average pay to put over the Indian and Pakistan wrestlers. Assirati was never beaten badly by any wrestler. If he had to lose, he would go down in the first round to show to everyone it was a work.

I interviewed [wrestlers who] worked out in India with Assirati and they all said the same thing: he beat up most of the Indian and Pakistan wrestlers, and they didn't want to work with him. He once sent Tiger Joginder Singh to hospital after he had given 'Big' Bill Verna a bad going-over.

The only way to control Assirati was to pay him huge sums of money, which is what happened.



One of his opponents in India, the Australian Roy Heffernan¹⁵ had heard about Assirati's reputation and was worried. In a 1991 interview with an Australian wrestling magazine called *Piledriver*, Heffernan claimed Assirati was a sadist who everyone did their best to avoid, saying that five minutes into their match, Assirati had bloodied his mouth and nose. With Heffernan

fighting back, Assirati was busted open, and the match was stopped as the Indian promoters didn't want blood.

¹⁴ Assirati also held the British Empire title, but I can't work out where it came from and there's almost nothing about the title itself online, bar the fact Assirati is often billed as holding it.

¹⁵ Heffernan (1925-1992) was one half of the none-more-Aussie tag team The Fabulous Kangaroos with Al Costello. As heels who came to the ring to the strains of 'Waltzing Matilda' and holding boomerangs, they both dominated and popularised tag team wrestling in the US in the late-1950s and 1960s. They're in every Hall of Fame worth its salt.

In the tense dressing room afterwards, Assirati approached Heffernan, who was expecting a fight, but was met instead with a hug and Assirati saying, "You're a very good boy. Come to England and we'll wrestle all over!" A rattled Heffernan didn't take him up on the offer.



Returning to Britain in 1955, Assirati found the entire British wrestling landscape had changed. First, Joint Promotions had been formed – a nationwide cabal of regional promoters who had agreed to work together to further their own interests (which covered sticking to their own areas, helping drive out competitors, and working together to keep the wrestler's pay as low as possible). And with them, the Mountevans championship had been created – an attempt to have a nationally acknowledged single championship belt.

In October 1955, Assirati won the Mountevans Heavyweight championship from Ernest Baldwin, at the time the main title in the country. "He was powerful," recalled Baldwin many years later, "I remember riding home semi-conscious." But the win would mark the beginning of the end of Assirati's mainstream wrestling career.

No one's quite sure what happened, but the Joint promoters fell out with Assirati in a major way. He was stripped of the Mountevans title in 1958 – the reason given was that he'd headed off on a second tour of India. But when Bert returned from India in 1959, Joint's TV exposure had made them the country's leading promotional group, and from that moment on, they wanted nothing more to do with Assirati.

Based on the rumours, it's possible they felt Assirati had become impossible to deal with – he'd gained a reputation for refusing to lose to wrestlers he didn't think worthy of beating him, demanded a lot of money (which he was undoubtedly worth, although if you were part of an avaricious group of promoters conspiring to keep wrestlers' wages low, it would have been a dangerous precedent to pay him the rates he demanded) and for taking brutal advantage of opponents in the ring.



Some have suggested that there might have been more to Assirati's blacklisting than that. Magnetic, canny and fiercely outspoken, Assirati may also have posed a genuine danger to the Joint promoters' new cabal. He was so feared and respected backstage that if he told the wrestlers to demand better pay, chances are they would. If he told them to boycott a show, chances are they would. If he told them to go on strike, chances are they would. There was no other wrestler in the business as respected, feared, experienced and opinionated as Assirati, and he could feasibly cause the promoters behind Joint serious problems if he carried on being so uncompromising.

Time and again in the history of the wrestling business, the wrestlers who refuse to be taken advantage of are swiftly labelled troublemakers, their names blackened, and they're drummed out of the business as quickly as possible. Assirati might have been an unprofessional bully, but maybe there was more to the story than that. History is written by the winners. We'll now never know for sure.¹⁶

But one wrestler who worked with Assirati blows this noble theory out of the water. 'Dazzler' Joe Cornelius's bawdy and frequently grubby memoir *Thumbs Up!* confirms that people were just fed up of Bert hurting them.

In the mid-1950s the uncrowned worldwide king of the wrestling heavyweights was Bert Assirati. Ever since I started in the wrestling business, I'd heard stories about him, about what a sadistic bastard he was and how much he loved to smash up his opponents. He had just come here from a long tour of India where he'd beaten all the champions, leaving a trail of blood right across the continent. But back in this country he could not get a fight.

The reason was simple. When you know that from time to time you are going to come up against someone who is going to knock hell out of you, you just have to put up with it or pack up the game.

But when that person quits the circuit for years, the boys get used to working and not bleeding. So why should they start bleeding again just because Bert has decided to return? No one would go into the ring with him.

Cornelius did agree to a match to Assirati, telling him he'd wrestle so long as Assirati knew "that I know you're the gov'nor." Assirati gave Cornelius a lot of offence before he was counted out, having sailed over the top rope after a dropkick missed, but Cornelius felt that Bert had made "me look like a champion, and in the dressing room later, with everyone congratulating me, I really felt like one.

The fight was a riot and Bert taught me the greatest lesson – before you beat a mug, make him look like a champion. That's just what he did to me. Bert put the seal on my status in the wrestling business. After that fight I started getting invitations from various European countries, saying they had heard of me and asking if I would appear on certain dates. They never told me who I was to fight.

But when I arrived it was always the same old story – there to meet me was dear Bert. The usual had happened – when Bert moved in, the heavies moved out, and Bert had them send for me. He spread my fame for which I shall always be deeply grateful.¹⁷

¹⁶ Two years after Joint had washed their hands of him, Assirati was still so famous that the booklet *Sixty Years of Wrestling* by Charles Mascall (1960) still labelled him "the most feared and greatest English heavyweight of the past fifty years." The book was published by Joint Promotions, who had to acknowledge how big a star he was while also refusing to have anything to do with him professionally.

¹⁷ Adrian Street's book claims that Cornelius became a wrestler when, as an irate fan, he charged the ring during an Assirati match at the Blackfriar's Arena in London: "in an uncharacteristic display of mercy, Bert grabbed hold of Joe and hurled him head first over the top rope and back onto the seat that Joe had just vacated. If that doesn't sound too merciful to you, just imagine what Bert could have done as an alternative."

In 1958, a group of independent promoters led by Paul Lincoln (who worked as the masked villain Dr Death, promoted his own shows and owned the 2i's coffee bar in Soho) formed the British Wrestling Federation, recognising Assirati as the BWF champion.

One of the promoters seems to have been Assirati's wife Marjorie. Adrian Street claimed that Marge "had a reputation as the instigator of Bert's ultra-violent temper."

While her wrestling venues were full, she would be fine. Too many empty seats – then look out. When the doors were opened to admit the fans at Marge's wrestling shows she would always be in the box office selling the tickets. More often than not, Bert would be in there too, standing behind her. As the wrestlers she had booked on that night's card would arrive, they'd give Marge a wave as they walked past on their way to the dressing rooms.

If business was good, that would be fine. If Marge thought business could use a boost, she would make a special fuss of Bert's opponent that night, and after they were out of sight, she'd say to Bert, "What a nice young man he is, all the ladies love him. I'm not surprised either – he's really so good looking."

"Hurum," Bert would grunt and sentence would be passed. Bert's opponent might be good-looking going into the ring, but coming out he'd look like he'd had an argument with a combine harvester. That would satisfy the most hardened fan's bloodlust and by the time word went round, next week's turnout would soar.

Marge didn't do it to be spiteful or vindictive. It wasn't personal. Just business.

One of these nights in the late-1950s saw Assirati smash out the front teeth of Henri Pierlot (a Mancunian who would become better known for his work in America as Les Thornton).¹⁸

When the main event was over, Henri staggered back to the dressing room. His face looked like a squashed strawberry. As he examined his teeth in the small wall mirror, he found all that remained of his front teeth were a few jagged, bloody stumps. After assessing the damage, as tough as he was, the now-ex-handsome Henri broke down and cried like a baby. Not just for himself, but for the horror, anguish and distress his wife would suffer as a result of his injuries.

By the time Bert entered the dressing room, Henri was bent forward sitting in a wooden chair, weeping unashamedly. Bert looked down at him for a few moments. Then in an uncharacteristic and extremely rare show of compassion, he gave Henri a gentle slap on his shoulder with a ham-like hand and said, "Never mind, son – have a nice hot cup of tea. You'll be alright."

¹⁸ One newspaper I've seen records a 1959 match between Pierlot and Assirati which ended in a draw, which may be this match. They refer to Assirati as "indestructible". They don't say the same about Pierlot.

The next week, Marge's show was packed.



But in 1960, the BWF stripped Assirati of the title when he was injured (likely for the same underlying reasons as Joint had) and awarded it to the large Yorkshire lump Shirley Crabtree. Assirati was absolutely furious – both at being stripped of the belt and Crabtree's lack of anything approaching legitimate wrestling skill - and began to turn up unannounced to BWF shows where he would issue shoot challenges to a fearful Crabtree.

His threats were so real and so continuous (Assirati's campaign went on for six years) that Crabtree actually retired from wrestling for nearly seven years rather than deal with the terrifying Assirati.

Having amassed a huge tax bill on his return from three years in the Far East and blackballed by most of the bigger organisations, Assirati's only choice was to wrestle for smaller independents. With former wrestler Jack Taylor, he formed ASTA Promotions, who (according to historian Mike Hillman) "put on shows the length and breadth of the country, using top quality wrestlers, with Assirati as top of the bill. The match that drew the largest crowds were the matches between Assirati and the Polish champion Eugene Stezycki, which always ended in a blood bath."



A 1958 match with Stezycki, before (L) and oh god, during (R)

These bloodbaths weren't always approved in advance. Nottingham's heavyweight George Longdon (who also performed as Harry Longdon) was one victim of Assirati. Fellow wrestler Al Tarzo recalled one night when Assirati's scheduled opponent simply refused to go into the ring with him.

Harry volunteered to go on and saved the day for [promoter Jack Taylor]. After the fight the dressing room door opened and George walked in. His nose was flat on his face which was covered in blood. His first words were "I

conthider that an honour to have fought Bert Atherati.” He really meant it but his injuries meant he was unable to say it.

George’s son recalled, “I came downstairs the morning after the fight and there were three bloodied towels in the sink, I later spoke to my dad and he said got an extra £5 for taking that beating.”

As 1970s wrestler Al Marshall put it, “Bert Assirati was the hardest man to wrestle in the ring. He would pull your head off if he could.”¹⁹

Despite his continued dominance, the blackballing and smaller independent shows affected Assirati’s career significantly. A search of British newspapers shows that his name was seldom mentioned in the press from 1959, and not at all in the many years following that – a huge change from 1950, which returns hundreds of results.

Perhaps his last significant appearance came in December 1957, when he turned up at the opening night of Lou Thesz’s UK tour (which I wrote about last month) and challenged old Indian opponent Dara Singh to a match, much as he’d done with Shirley Crabtree. Here’s Thesz to tell you about it.

As Dara and I were headed for the ring, I noticed a commotion about 100 feet away from the ring. The Bobbies had surrounded a stocky fireplug of a man and were trying to escort him out of the building. I figured it was a security problem, so I didn’t pay much attention.

In the dressing room afterwards, I learned the cause of the disturbance was Assirati, an English wrestler with a reputation as a very dangerous man. When the Bobbies stopped him, he had been trying to get into the ring to publicly challenge Dara to a contest for the British Empire title. His dislike of Dara was obviously a subject of great interest in London, too, because the next morning’s newspapers carried stories about the episode.²⁰

The day after the match, I sat down with Jack Dale and the other members of the promotional group – there were five of them in all – to discuss my future matches and line up viable opponents. Dara and I had scored a public-relations triumph with our match, and I was anxious to build on it as quickly as possible. The promoters, however, said they had only one opponent for me: Dara Singh. Well, we’d just wrestled a draw and it was too soon for a rematch, so there wasn’t much left to do. We badly needed another strong wrestler to keep things rolling, but the promoters insisted there was no one else around.

Based on what I’d heard in the dressing room the night before, Assirati sounded like the obvious solution. He was supposed to be a top-flight wrestler, a graduate of the famous hooker’s school in Wigan, and he had a following in England among fans who knew their wrestling. A couple of boys in the dressing room the night before had even insisted he was the best they’d ever seen. “So what about him?” I asked the promoters.

¹⁹ Marshall debuted in 1969, so he never wrestled Assirati, but as a young wrestling fan, he saw Bert wrestle from the safety of the crowd.

²⁰ Not that I could find.

It was immediately obvious that the promoters and Assirati were old enemies because they wouldn't even consider it. No one ever said anything to help me understand what the problems were, so I concluded it was probably just another case of promoters disliking a guy because they couldn't control him. Still, he seemed like the logical choice, and I continued to argue in favour of him for a couple of days. The promoters simply wouldn't listen, though. "That bloody bastard," they'd say, waving their arms in dismissal. "We don't even want to talk to him."

I became even more persuaded that Assirati was the man, however, because I continued to talk to other wrestlers about him, and what I'd heard was nothing but awe for the guy's ability. I became convinced that the three of us - Assirati, Dara Singh and myself - could wrestle some great matches for big houses all over Europe and Asia, so I decided to approach him on my own. I sent word to him through some other wrestlers, urging him to contact me, assuring him that our conversation would be absolutely confidential, strictly between the two of us.

I never heard a single word from the guy, which disappointed me tremendously, and not just for business reasons. I could understand he might not be interested in talking to anyone associated with the promotional group, but I couldn't understand why he would refuse the invitation of a fellow athlete, if for no other reason than to find out what was on his mind. It was discourteous, which said a lot to me about Assirati. He obviously wasn't a businessman. He let his ego and pride get in the way of making money, which means his talent was a waste.

Does Assirati deserve to be remembered as one of the greatest wrestlers of all time? I'm not in any position to say because I never saw him wrestle. In fact, the only time I ever saw him was that night at Lord Albert Hall. He was obviously very good and very tough — he was only 5-foot-6, but he weighed 280 pounds, and I'm told it was all muscle — and I've talked with wrestlers who say he was one of the best they'd ever faced.

But I've also talked with wrestlers who worked out with Assirati and had little or no trouble with him. These same wrestlers say he earned his reputation as a dangerous wrestler by doing things like 'accidentally' head-butting on the break, or knocking teeth loose with an 'accidental' elbow. He was notorious for hooking and hurting opponents when they were supposed to be performing. Of course, those are the same sort of tactics Frank Gotch employed during his career, and they haven't kept him from appearing on a lot of all-time-best lists, so maybe Assirati belongs in the club. It's one thing to be a great gymnasium wrestler, though, and another thing altogether to make money at it. He may have succeeded at the one, but he was definitely a flop at the other.

It still pains me today to think about what Assirati passed up, but maybe it wouldn't have worked out, anyway.

For Assirati, it was a last desperate howl into the gathering darkness. He retired sometime around 1962, his aging body riddled with accumulated ring injuries, and forced out of the business that he'd dominated for nearly 40 years.



In the years as his wrestling career was winding down, Bert used his brawn and violent nature working the doors of a lot of nightclubs in the West End of London. During the early 1960s, he was a regular on the door of La Discotheque, a Wardour Street nightclub opened by the notorious slum landlord Peter Rachman, which was one of the first discos where DJs played records instead of having live bands playing.

A venue with a reputation of being the “worst of a bad bunch” of West End clubs – it was a regular hangout for the Kray Twins and a doorman had been kneecapped with a shotgun when he refused the wrong people entry – Assirati manned the door, a position he handed over to fellow wrestler ‘Mad’ Norman Rondel.²¹

Rachman used a number of wrestlers as enforcers, intimidating any sitting tenants that he wanted to move out of the many run-down properties that he bought, so he could sell them on – including *World of Sport* performer Peter Rann.²²

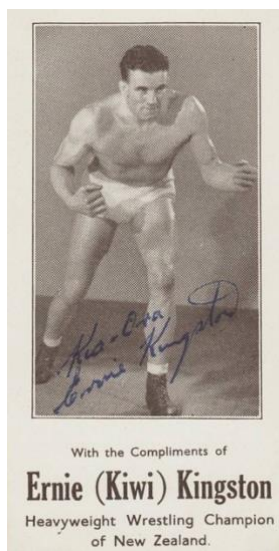
Assirati also kept the door at the Harlesden Ballroom (where a teenage Adrian Street saw him from a bus and was shocked that Assirati didn't make a full-time living from his wrestling) and later the Ebbisham Halls in Epsom, Surrey, where he was famed for crushing a metal drink cap between each finger on both hands. “I used to work as

²¹ Norbert Rondel (1927-2009) was a character and a half, by which I mean a strange and violent man. Saved from Nazi Germany via the Kindertransport, he grew up in Manchester, where he later studied to be a Rabbi. Moving to Hampstead, he worked as a gardener for the council and in 1950 became a wrestler under the names Vladimir Waldberg, the White Eagle and The Polish Eagle (although he was born in Berlin). Adrian Street says that Rondel filled in for one of Assirati's no-showing opponents and was given “some harsh lessons” in his first fight. Battered and bloodied after the bout, he asked where he should turn up the next night to wrestle again. Impressed with his toughness, Assirati worked with him frequently – Rondel, who often slept rough, was said to turn up for the bouts with Bert with the blood from last night's beating still matted in his beard. Having worked as Peter Rachman's main heavy, he was charged with GBH in 1959 following a fight at a dance, for which he was found guilty and sentenced to 18 months inside. In 1965, he attempted to sue his lawyer, saying the defence had been professionally negligent as he had not cut off his victim's ear as alleged in court, but merely bitten it off. He lost, but having been denied legal aid during his appeal and forced to represent himself, he earned a place in legal history when the court ruled such a lack of representation must never be allowed to happen again. Rondel then appealed to the House of Lords over the negligent barrister claim, who ruled that, as a matter of public policy, a barrister could not be sued for negligence. The law finally changed in 2002 to allow litigants to sue barristers who had acted negligently. Rondel later owned a nightclub called The Apartment in Soho's Rupert Street and was behind a robbery at the Knightsbridge Spaghetti House restaurant, which ended in a siege which lasted days. Amid allegations that he nobbled the jury, Rondel was acquitted of all charges. In later life, he became a devotee of chess and yoga and became a second-hand car dealer in South London.

²² Wrestling from 1951 until 1974, Doncaster-born (although he was often billed as being from Camden Town in London), Rann was a mysterious suave hard-man described as “a likeable rulebreaker” by Kent Walton. His career survived being unveiled by the press as one of Rachman's heavies in the 1960s and he lived an affluent life in Chiswick, one which didn't equate with the money he'd have made via wrestling. Reportedly unpopular in the dressing room (Adrian Street recalled buying a ring from Rann which turned out to have been stolen from another wrestler), rumoured to have pulled knives on people and said to have served time in prison, he had a TV match in 1972 with Les Kellett that ended in a bloodbath, could have been a shoot, and which saw Kellett suffer a rare loss. There's only one of his *World of Sport* matches on YouTube, when he was the Southern England Middleweight champion (a title which disappeared with him when he dropped out of wrestling around 1974); “Peter rann is my uncle he is dead” adds one commenter. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1A8x5INQ8pk>

a bouncer with Bert,” recalled someone called ‘Mad Dog’ Jan Terry on Facebook. “True giant of a man who was gentle, most of the time.”

Assirati’s occasional connection with the Krays wasn’t just through the nightclub business. In December 1963, Reggie Kray promoted a charity all-in wrestling show at the York Hall in Bethnal Green (local businessmen were pressured into buying the tickets, and it’s unlikely any of the proceeds went any further than the Krays’ pockets) and put Assirati on the top of the bill without telling him.



His opponent was to be a 6’5” New Zealander named Ernie ‘Kiwi’ Kingston (1914-1992), who performed under the name The Great Karloff, as he’d appeared in a Hammer Horror film called *The Evil of Frankenstein*.

Assirati made it clear he wasn’t going to be appearing (he’d retired by this point) and perhaps giving an indication as to how intimidating Bert was, Kray backed down. The lesser wrestler ‘The Docklands Strong Boy’ Ed Martinson took Assirati’s place instead.

Kray promoted another couple of cards in the same year, using young wrestler Tony Scarlo as the matchmaker. Scarlo recalled meeting Assirati (who he later became friend with) when he was a youngster in a Facebook post, which I’ve edited for clarity.

As a 16-year-old kid, I was working in Smithfield meat market. The market was full of villains, ex-boxers, hard men all trying to make a name for themselves. When they heard I was a wrestler, they all had a dig at me. I got into lots of fights - some I won, but mostly lost and got badly beaten on a regular basis.

One day, two giants came to the shop I worked at, followed by half the men at the market. One of the big men spoke through his nose and said “Who’s the wrestler?” All hands pointed at me. He said “Come on, son, let’s lock up.” I linked up with him. It felt like a giant vice. I couldn’t move, then he pushed me to the other giant and they body-checked me from one to the other. Each push felt like I had been hit by a truck. I managed to hit one. He just laughed, then shook my hand and said “You’re going to be a good wrestler one day!” As they left, the crowd outside parted to let them through. I didn’t know then it was Bert Assirati and his protege Angelo Pappini but, from that day, no one picked on me. They all wanted to be friends.

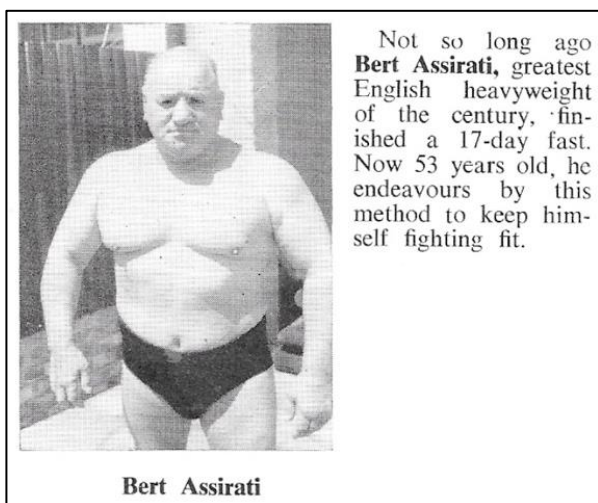
He was incredibly strong, the weights he lifted were so heavy, and when he wrestled, he wrestled hard: he hurt a lot of wrestlers, but never complained when you hurt him. They didn’t come much harder, but to me he was a gentleman.

The insanely violent gangster ‘Mad’ Frankie Fraser (who worked with the South London crime family the Richardsons in the 1960s, but became friends with the Krays during his long stints in prison) mentioned Assirati in his mental 1998

autobiography *Mad Frank and Friends*.²³ As a youth, Fraser “looked after” the cars parked outside The Ring pub in Waterloo on nights when they hosted boxing, in exchange for a few coins.

Sunday afternoon was terrific. You’d get all-in wrestling there and sometimes you got Bert Assirati, one of the Italians from the Angel.²⁴ He was a hard man. He used to let you take a free swing at him on condition he had the next one. Years later he was the doorman at the dance hall where Ronnie Marwood got done after the copper was stabbed.²⁵

I met Bert much later when he lived down near Seaford.²⁶ He was crippled with arthritis and in a wheelchair by then. He was a great friend of my wife Doreen’s uncle, Georgie Shillingford.²⁷



In 1970, having been retired for a decade, a profile of Assirati closed out *The Mick McManus Wrestling Book* (which was not written by McManus, but Charles Arnold), entitled ‘The Golden Legend of Bert Assirati’ and which proclaimed him the greatest of England’s wrestlers.

“He dominated the scene for over 30 years. He is legendary. Bert Assirati worshippers say ‘He was like the British oak. It never fell.’ Such is the magic of his name he will never, never be called a has-been.”

Assirati slipped into obscurity by the mid-1970s, spending the last decades of his life living in Brighton (outside Woodingdean) with wife Marjorie, keeping fit and messing around in gyms and youth clubs with prospective wrestlers three times a week.

According to Lou Thesz, Assirati “ended up a cripple, blind in one eye and walking with two canes because he had all of his knee and ankle joints fused together.” One fan who visited in his last years recalled Assirati was blind, couldn’t walk but was still

²³ An almost stream of consciousness splurge of names – a sample, chosen at random: “I was done for a warehouse in Bedford. Charlie Gibbs was with me then, one of the top thieves before the War, and during and after too. His sister Carrie was Alfie Hind’s first wife. Terry Gibbs was on it and all.” Imagine 240 pages of that and you’re close.

²⁴ Fraser knew ‘the Italians from the Angel’ as they formed one of the notorious gangs operating in London at the time.

²⁵ This was a December 1958 incident which occurred outside Gray’s Dance Academy near Highbury Corner, when a policeman attempted to break up a fight “between the so-called Finsbury and Angel mobs” and was stabbed to death. Sheltered by the Krays, Marwood surrendered in January 1959 and was hanged in May. Reggie Kray believed their decision to shelter him led to them getting significant ongoing unwelcome attention from the police, which shouldn’t have come as a surprise.

²⁶ Seaford is outside Brighton, but Fraser is the only one to place Assirati there over Woodingdean. Bert’s wife Marjorie death certificate shows she died in 2009, her home address given as 58 Crescent Drive, North Woodingdean, Brighton BN2 6SN, so that’s most likely Bert’s old house.

²⁷ This is how a lot of Fraser’s anecdotes pan out – “there was a person, I met them, there’s no detail about that, but I’ll wrap up by telling you they were friends with someone you’ve never heard of and who I won’t be mentioning again.”

“arrogant” - his house was apparently named ‘Assirati’. He died in 1990 of bladder cancer, aged 82.

There’s barely any footage of his active career known to exist, so, as *Wrestling Heritage* admit sadly, “the passing of time makes it impossible for any of us to evaluate the greatness of Bert Assirati.” There are even some wrestling journalists who question why he was put into the *Observer’s* Hall of Fame, worried he’s there more due to his own self-mythologising over the genuine accolades of his career.²⁸

Any assessments we make are based on the myths perpetuated by those of an earlier age. His strength, agility and skill are beyond question. Doubts begin to emerge around the word ‘professional’. Can superlatives be added to the word professional for a man who seemed so reluctant to lose in a sport where co-operation with an opponent was an important element of the spectacle? The myths of his invincibility do nothing to enhance the legacy of one of British wrestling’s greatest participants.

We leave the final word to *Wrestling Heritage* member John Shelvey: “If he had worked with his fellow professionals, went along with the wishes of the promoters, conducted himself as a professional for the good of his profession, the good of the entertainment, his career would have probably been far more successful and we wouldn’t need to perpetuate myths.”

But sometimes those myths might just be real. Because in retrospect, Assirati changed the course of wrestling history, even if he never realised it.

In 2007, Bruno Sammartino – who was angered at the short shrift that Thesz’s memoir gave to his friend Antonio Rocca – was asked on a Prodigy Webchat which great wrestler he’d wished he’d faced in his long career. His answer was a surprise.

“I would have liked to wrestle Bert Assirati of England,” he replied. “He had an enormous reputation out of England. I’m told he was one of the toughest to ever live, but I never had the opportunity to see him.”

Everybody that I’ve known including Karl Gotch said the guy was an animal when it came to the ring. Thesz makes him out to be a guy he could have mopped up the floor with. Karl Gotch told me around 1961 or 1962 that he’d been in the Olympics for Germany and when he went to England to wrestle Assirati, he got an inferiority complex.

Assirati was a great submission wrestler. Gotch went to Wigan, England, to a guy named Kelly [he means Billy Reilly], who was a specialist at submission wrestling because he was so devastated at how this guy had handled him, so he wanted to be good at submission wrestling. Here comes Thesz making this guy, who’s also dead, out to be like he wasn’t really anything. I’ve never met a human being who met Bert Assirati who wasn’t in awe of him as to how ridiculously tough he was.

²⁸ I don’t agree with this, as everyone who ever met him seems to have thought he was the most incredible wrestler of all time, even if they questioned how professional he was when it came to the pre-determined side of the business.

The Belgian Gotch's trip to Wigan after being humbled by Assirati would change his wrestling style entirely (he trained there for eight years, according to Adrian Street's autobiography), and when he began working in Japan, his style was revolutionary. Gotch retired and became the trainer at New Japan in the early 1970s, where his teachings influenced the whole of the Japanese wrestling industry, and he's still known in the country as 'the God of Wrestling'.

In a 2004 interview, an elderly Gotch recalled the time in 1971 when he was working for the WWWF in New York²⁹ and was interviewed on television by Vincent McMahon Senior (the father of Vince McMahon Jr).

That was the end of interviews. I never gave one again. I told him, "If that's the way you guys go do it," I said, "count me out". I was up in New York State, and I'm talking...the guy [Vince Sr] was a good talker. He was the father of this clown that does the wrestling now. What do they call him? He's got the last name. The promoter there in New York...*McMahon!*

They said, 'Oh, yeah, you're from Europe? You're European champion?' Oh, yeah. He said, "Well, you're living in America, now? You're here in America?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "What do you think about wrestling?" I said, "It's a living."

I didn't say much. He said, "Who do you think is the best wrestler in the world?" So, at that time, you had [Lou Thesz] and all that. I said, "Me."

I said, "You've got two. One guy - he's a real strong guy. He's Italian descent, but with an English background. Bert Assirati. He's a real powerhouse and he's built like a cannonball. Very hard to handle. The other guy looks like nothing, but he's like the same, only a little better built, a little bigger."

I said, "His name is Billy Joyce. He's a magician on the mat." He said, "What do you think of Lou Thesz?" I said, "Not." He said, "What about the wrestlers here in America?" I said, "I'm sorry. At one time, they used to be the best in the world, because they all had them here. All I see now is the leftovers of a chicken dinner."

Well, I was not surprised, but that was my first and my last interview on television.

Without Gotch, Japanese wrestling would be entirely different. But without Assirati, a humbled Gotch would never have gone to Wigan to be taught those skills that changed wrestling forever.

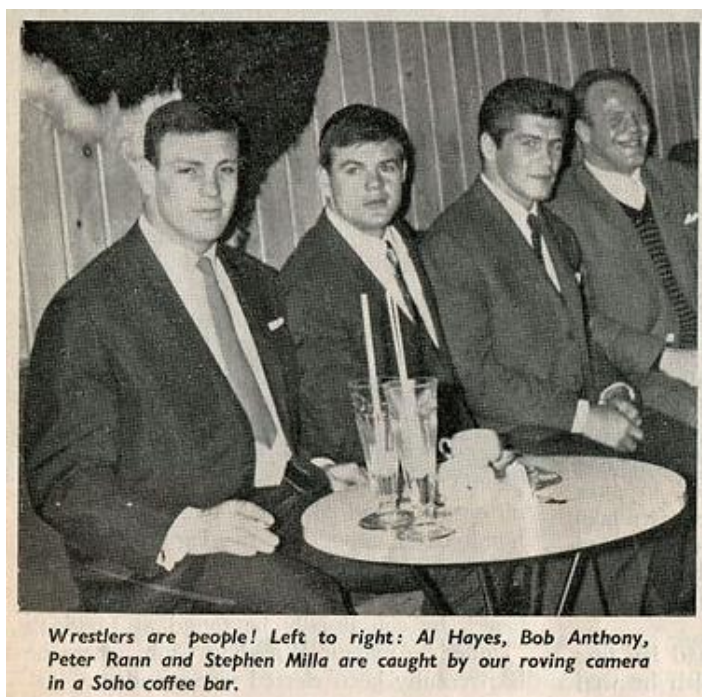
So was Assirati one of the best of all time? I think what we can all agree on is that if one of the undisputed best of all time says that Assirati, *who he wrestled*, was one of the best of all time, then that should be good enough for us.

²⁹ Gotch was one half of the WWWF tag team champions with Rene Goulet, who would become a long-time WWF backstage producer. The second team to ever hold the belts, here they are defending against the Rugged Russians, Igor and Ivan (who were actually a Spaniard and a Cuban). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1bUGi-wGal>

And no, I'm not talking about Gotch (it was a classic swerve to end the article, brilliant work by me, this) – I'm talking about *Lord Alfred Hayes* in the March 1971 issue of the British magazine *The Wrestler*.

Ask Al his opinion of whom he considers to have been the hardest opponent he has ever met. He won't name Eduardo Carpentier. Nor will he name Primo Carnera, who has also faced him in the ring. Nor will the name of any of the current crop of British wrestlers pass his lips. No, the man who impressed him as being the best wrestler he has ever fought in fifteen years of professional wrestling was the one and only Bert Assirati, British heavyweight champion for more years than any other holder of the title before or since.

I couldn't find a photo of Alfred with Bert, but here he is on a night out with Peter Rann, the wrestler who worked for Peter Rachmann. Oh Alfred, naughty lad, you've ordered two Knickerbocker Glories and scoffed the lot.



Wrestlers are people! Left to right: Al Hayes, Bob Anthony, Peter Rann and Stephen Milla are caught by our roving camera in a Soho coffee bar.

And remember – *wrestlers are people!*

WRESTLE ME, THE MONTH OF FEBRUARY

1st February – JOHNNY HOPES HE HOLDS AN ACE

Co-accused in the same civil suit launched by Janel Grant alongside Vince McMahon and WWE, former executive John Laurinaitis broke his silence today (through his lawyer) and launched a surprising defence: he wasn't a predator as claimed again and again in the suit, he was actually a *victim* of Vince McMahon as well.

Laurinaitis' lawyer Edward Brennan told *Vice News*: "Mr. Laurinaitis denies the allegations in the misguided complaint and will be vigorously defending these

charges in Court, not the media. Like the Plaintiff, Mr. Laurinaitis is a victim in this case, not a predator. The truth will come out.”



Hmm, that strikes an odd note – Laurinaitis’s lawyer denies the allegations against him, calls the suit “misguided”, and then says Laurinaitis is a victim “like the Plaintiff.” It suggests that Laurinaitis accepts Grant has been the victim of *something*, just not anything that involves him, although if it did, it was because he was also a victim. I mean, it doesn’t sound particularly clear. So, *Vice News* went back to Brennan.

In response to a follow-up question seeking to clarify that he was indeed saying that McMahon was the predator and that Laurinaitis, like Grant, was a victim, Brennan wrote, “Read the allegations. Read the Federal Statute. Power, control, employment supervisory capacity, dictatorial sexual demands with repercussions if not met. Count how many times in the complaint Vince exerts control over both of them.”

I’m going to tell you, I think this is a bold, unexpected and not unflawed defence³⁰, but there’s the possibility it hints that Laurinaitis will be willing to spill his guts about everything that went on if some sort of agreement could be reached with any legal or governmental bodies who may, or may not, be investigating this in a criminal setting.

And those legal and governmental bodies most certainly are. *The Wall Street Journal* revealed that the July 2023 search warrant executed by the FBI against McMahon (which was reported shortly after his first departure from the WWE, but without any detail) was so the police could seize his cellphone, in order to look for “documents related to any allegation of ‘rape, sex trafficking, sexual assault, commercial sex transaction, harassment or discrimination’ against current or former WWE employees’.”

As a 78-year-old megalomaniac billionaire, I do not believe that McMahon will have been capable of deleting any private emails or texts. It’s just something that people over 60 cannot do. So along with the civil case brought by Grant, it means the Feds are also hot on his case (and have been for months), and all this could end up being criminal.

2nd February – PLEASE DON’T DIE! PLEASE DON’T DIE!



Sometimes good people make bad decisions. And on that note, enter Mick Foley, who mentioned on his podcast *Foley is Pod* that he was thinking about one final match: and it was going to be deathmatch! If this was a relative of yours who came up with this plan, you’d have them sectioned.

The 58-year-old, who had to finally retire in 2012 when the WWE’s doctors refused to medically clear him for a

³⁰ Also, whether it seems like a credible defence to you or not, it’s about the only avenue open to Laurinaitis to try and mitigate what’s been alleged against him.

Summerslam match against Dean Ambrose³¹, said that it might be a fun idea to return to the sport that basically crippled him. Oddly, it didn't seem to be about any sense of unfinished business or an itch he'd felt since walking away – bizarrely, Foley was approaching it more as a way to lose weight.

60's right around the corner. Thinking of doing one final match for my sixtieth birthday, a deathmatch. I'm not kidding. I think it'd be a great incentive to drop those 100 big ones [he's talking about 100lbs of weight]. I think it might be fun

I think it would be a pretty gory spectacle. I'm just thinking about it. I put it out there to two of my kids and they were like, 'Would you get hurt?' 'Yea, probably.' I wouldn't have to get my brain rattled. I'm not adverse to getting a few sticheroonies here and there. I mean, it won't be for everyone, and rightfully like, 'That's not good for you.' It could help me lose 100 pounds. That's what I'm missing. I did drop the hundred, but I had the *Wrestlemania* thing. I was already down 50. I had Vince in my ear where I made the promise to him that I would be down 80, but I don't have any type of incentive, so it's something I'm throwing out there.

In terms of opponents, Foley suggested "Moxley or Matt Cardona. I think Moxley would be the easiest, but Matt has that heat in the deathmatch world that could really make it something cool."

A month later and Foley's weight-loss plan wasn't going well. In that he'd lost absolutely nothing.

I'd have to lose an extraordinary amount of weight and it's not falling off like I hoped it would. So, I'm gonna have to re-examine where I am at a certain point. It's not about the money. I wanna have a fun match, but I am having trouble. I've been working out, I feel better, moving better but it's not showing up as of yet on the scale. So, I'm not sure. I'll have an answer by the beginning of the year... There's a lot of different options [opponent-wise] to do such a thing.

The one opponent I'm scared that he'll be facing is Death. That guy always gets his shit in.

3rd February – RHODES TO NOWHERE

For four years, we'd all hoped that one day we'd get to see the Rock taking on Roman Reigns at *Wrestlemania*, a match that had been hinted at but never delivered. And the moment we finally got it, absolutely none of us wanted it at all and we all started crying.

The WWE couldn't have had any idea that giving the fans what they'd dreamed of for years would end up being so poorly received that they'd have to pretend that

³¹ His final mainstream match was taking part in the 2012 *Royal Rumble*, where he did six minutes before being eliminated by Cody Rhodes. Foley took part in some indie matches until 2015, although they tended to be surprise appearances and short, safe matches.

suggesting it had actually been a cleverly-worked storyline swerve, and not having Rock vs Reigns was the plan they'd had all along.



The *Wrestling Observer* reported that Rock getting the main event of *Wrestlemania* against Reigns was part of the deal he'd made to join the TKO board back in January. It had been a closely-guarded secret but, up until today, it was very much the main event.

Dave Meltzer mentioned that Cody was booked to win the *Rumble* and he wasn't sure how the WWE would square that, but the WWE's plan seemed to simply have Cody step aside to let Rock take the main event, like a big wussy baby.

On *Smackdown*, Rhodes came down to the ring to announce which champion he was going to face as a result of winning the *Rumble* – there could only be one answer: Roman Reigns, the man who beat him at last year's *Wrestlemania* and the man who's promo he'd just interrupted. Unless, of course, Cody did a mental swerve and chose instead to go for the World championship held by Seth Rollins. But that would be mad! Absolutely stupid! Never happen in a million years!

Speaking more like Dusty than ever before – “I talked to frennns, fam'ly, leggggendz” he slurred – Cody told Reigns that Rollins's world belt had the same name as the title that his father had chased (it's the world belt, not the Universal one Reigns has), and so he could finish his story with this one. In fact, maybe it was even better to go for that belt instead of going for Roman's! Throughout this, Rhodes struggled to make it sound convincing – it sounded like he was speaking through a mouthful of ashes. Cody then mentioned that he still wanted Reigns's title and that he was coming for it – “but not at *Wrestlemania*.”

The crowd genuinely didn't know how to react. It sounded like they'd collectively misunderstood what Rhodes had just said and all just went a bit distant. The Rock's music then hit and out he came.



As they hugged, Rock whispered something to Cody which made him smile incredibly sadly – he was probably saying something painfully patronising, like “kid, your time will come” – before Rhodes just walked off to the back, leaving Rock alone with Reigns. Cody had happily walked away from his long-held dream, given up the match he'd been building to for a year without any fight or complaint, and *Smackdown* ended with Rock and Reigns face-to-face – Reigns disbelieving the impudence of Rock, while also looking unsettled, which was a hard look to pull off and which he did really well. Rock just stared at Reigns. You'd not have guessed which of them was the successful actor.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58PpNo_VzQg



As the WWE posted a video charting the history of Rhodes vs Rollins (which was the surest sign that this was the direction they'd locked into), "WeWantCody" became the number one trend on Twitter. The WWE's official YouTube video of the face-off got 71,000 likes but a staggering 267,000 dislikes. The Rock's Twitter began being bombarded with negative comments

and his daughter Ava (who's currently on NXT as the non-wrestling general manager, which suggests she's not a natural in the ring like her dad was) shut down her social media after receiving death threats in the wake of the angle.

Instead of everyone being excited, people were getting clearly, really and loudly upset (and in the case of Ava, some people were clearly becoming genuinely deranged). The problem was that Cody 'finishing the story' had clicked in a way that most wrestling storylines never manage – it was a two-year-long storyline that became hotter with each passing month, hadn't put a foot wrong and was just about to finally, joyfully conclude. And now a 51-year-old TKO executive had just flexed and slid himself into the main event slot, and absolutely ruined everything.

It was like reading *Lord of the Rings* but in the final chapter, just as Frodo's about to throw the ring into the volcano, JRR Tolkien decided Vin Diesel turns up unannounced in a helicopter, grabs the ring off Frodo, chucks it in and then goes back to the Shire to get all the applause.



In the future, WWE would attempt to retcon these four days by claiming this was all part of the Cody Rhodes storyline – that the swerve of inserting Rock into the main event was brilliantly crafted to create a storm which would propel Rhodes to even higher levels ahead of his *Wrestlemania* match and his story finally ending. That did happen, but that *wasn't* what they planned. It's what they jammily ended up with once they undid the damage of what would otherwise have happened if the audience had kept schtum.

4th February - VENGEANCE DAY APTLY NAMED

"THEY BOOING PRESS CONFERENCE PROMOS MAN ITS SO OVER LMAOOOOOOOO" tweeted someone who summed up things better than I could ever. During NXT *Vengeance Day* (with a main event of Ilya Dragunov pinning Trick Williams), an advert for the upcoming *Wrestlemania 40* Kick Off press conference was played and the crowd booted it because it featured a photo of the Rock in the ad.

For the first time, it showed that the discontent over Rock main-eventing instead of Cody was real – it didn't just exist online, it also existed in the mouths and throats of the people who paid to see live WWE shows, less than a day after the match had been mooted.



When that press conference rolled around four days later, the WWE had realigned everything to allow Cody Rhodes to come back, say the word “bullshit”, turn the Rock heel, and get back not one, but two *Wrestlemania* main events. Just like they’d always planned it, cough cough *bollocks* cough.

5th February – ROSSY NOT THE BOSSY

The founder of STARDOM, the slightly unsettling Rossy Ogawa, was fired by Bushiroad, the company who own both STARDOM and New Japan.

Suddenly, after yesterday's game, I was notified that my contract would be terminated. The truth of the matter may be told someday. I'm worried about the players right now. Thank you for supporting STARDOM for the past 13 years. From now on, it will be STARDOM created by Bushiroad.



There had been rumours that Ogawa had been struggling since STARDOM was bought in 2019 – the classic tale of a promoter selling out and then being unhappy when they're not allowed to continue running things the way they always have, and getting the hump when anyone else sticks their oar in.

The 66-year-old Ogawa has worked in Joshi wrestling since the late-1970s – first as a ringside photographer and then the head of PR for All Japan Women (in which role he made the Crush Gals absolutely massive in Japan), and later as president for ArSION, a promotion he set up with Aja Kong in 1997.



With women's wrestling practically dying out in Japan in the mid-2000s (it was also a bad time for men's professional wrestling too as PRIDE and MMA began to dominate and both New Japan and All Japan had terrible years), Ogawa founded STARDOM in 2010.

Having been out of the Joshi business for a number of years, he was contacted by Fuka Kakimoto, a female wrestler who'd worked in the twilight years of the 2000s and had retired at the age of 25.³² She had been giving basic training to a group of young girls who'd been brought up on the Crush Gals (including a youngster named Mayu Iwatani) and, although it had seemingly been just for fun, and invited Ogawa down to see them practice. Impressed, Ogawa found himself thinking “I have to create a place for these young girls to work.”

He named his new promotion full of total rookies STARDOM, the name expressing his intention to make the women stars. The first group he used included Mayu Iwatani and Yoshiko; the second Act Yasukawa, Kairi Hojo (now Sane) and Azumi.

³² Back in the 1980s and 1990s, AJW enforced a mandatory rule that all Joshi performers retire at the age of 25, a sexist rule which has been eradicated in more recent times. Listed as the co-founder of STARDOM, Fuka was the ring announcer and storyline president until 2018, when she retired before the birth of her first child.

Small shows began to sell out and within two years, they'd graduated to Korakuen Hall.

The rise of STARDOM occurred at a fortuitous time – streaming services began, making his shows accessible to wide audiences across the world, just as social media took off. Ogawa was never hesitant about pushing STARDOM's talent in ways that might seem exploitative to Western eyes, with seemingly weekly new photo shoots of the wrestlers, often skimpily dressed, being posted online to garner attention. Ogawa also instigated the industrial merchandising of STARDOM, where he instructed the wrestlers to all line up in the foyer and sell (and sign) their own merchandise after the show and pose for photos in their little costumes with the largely male fanbase.



In positioning himself as the very visible male boss of an all-women's promotion, there's always been something faintly unenjoyable about seeing Ogawa profit so openly from a lot of hard-working young female performers, almost none of whom deviate from being what you could most decently term 'photogenic'. The production of glossy photobooks with the promotion's stars in swimsuits or underwear also added to the sense that not everything in

Ogawa's masterplan was about wrestling - a lot of it seemed to be about selling something more primal alongside the matches.

For years, Ogawa's been the sole employer and booker of dozens of young Japanese women wrestlers, and while there's no doubt he's found and nurtured elite talents, he's also happy to make it clear that he's in complete control. "My instructions have absolute influence," he said in an interview with *Monthly Puroresu*, "but the wrestlers have the talent to take my instructions and make it their own, expound on it further." It's very much not a collaborative enterprise - but then it's only fair to note no past or current members of the STARDOM roster have seemingly ever voiced any complaints about the system.

STARDOM's president Taro Okada later claimed that Ogawa had been sacked as Executive Producer for "poaching talent."

I had interviews with all the players [I think this is a mistranslation of 'wrestlers' but we'll go with it] in January and December, and what I found out during those meetings was that things related to professional wrestling were left to the players and Mr. Ogawa. Then, we learned from several players that they were planning to leave Stardom and form a new organization.

One player said, 'If Mr. Ogawa quits, I will follow him.' So we first looked for ways to work together [with Ogawa]. However, when I first met Mr. Ogawa, he told me that he was quitting. At that time, I thought it was a matter of physical strength [again, it's a funny translation, but Ogawa claimed he had some health issues].

Then, in January of this year, I heard that Mr. Ogawa was talking to many players who were going independent. If the company splits up like this, it

would become an unstable business as a subsidiary of a listed company. If that happens, the [parent] company may downsize its business or separate from the group. While I was in a contract where I was paid to do work for STARDOM, I was [witnessing] things that caused damage, so I had no choice but to stop this chain of events [and made] the decision to terminate [Ogawa's] contract.

It turned out that Ogawa had lost his complete control of STARDOM not just months, but years before. It was said that Kairi Sane returned to WWE in November 2023 as she understood Ogawa no longer had complete power, and rumours of Guilia also leaving were attributed to Ogawa being sidelined. I wonder if Ogawa will ever be involved in wrestling again, wink wink, nudge nudge, who's writing this in April, me.

One person wasn't sad to see him go – AEW's Tony Khan, who tweeted "Bye Rossy!" above a GIF of Larry David giving 'the big goodbye' following the news. Khan had an uneasy relationship with Ogawa, who was reluctant to allow his performers to work with Khan. Since Ogawa's departure, several STARDOM talents such as AZM and Mina Shirakawa have appeared on *Dynamite*.

Here's Mina meeting Anna Jay...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uiVQms5IcgQ>

And AZM taking on Toni Storm.

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

6th February –LIV, LAUGH, LOVE GETTING BAKED

It was a big month for leading wrestlers facing avoidable criminal cases today. First off, Liv Morgan made the uniquely-American plea of Nolo-Contendere³³ in regard to a possession of cannabis charge, which stemmed from an arrest back in December 2023.



A second charge of possessing a synthetic cannabinoid was dropped – when the police pulled her over, having seen her weaving across the road, there was a vape pen found in the back. Having fessed up to the doob, Morgan told police that the vape pen wasn't hers, claiming that lots of people sat in the back of her car, and the police felt there wasn't much chance of being able to pin the charge on her. Bet she wishes she'd said the same thing about the hash now. Still, never mind – one out of two ain't bad.

The Nolo-Contendere (it translates as 'no contest') plea means Morgan neither accepted nor denied responsibility for the charges, but waived the right to a trial in return for accepting the penalty of being found guilty. She was fined \$543, which would have otherwise bought her two ounces of Apple Fritter Aeterna flower strain marijuana from the New York Weed Dispensary, and still have enough left over to

³³ Actually, I've got no idea whether it's unique to America, I've just assumed that and not checked. But this is a wrestling fanzine, not the *Law Journal*.

buy eight Party Size bags of Nacho Cheese Doritos from her local Walmart for after. What a senseless waste.

7th February – SCOTT D’NOMORE



Long-time TNA president and creative Scott D’Amore was fired by TNA’s parent company Anthem, suddenly and in circumstances that weren’t entirely clear. It’s been quite the month for backstage men being booted off the promotions they ran for years by the financial company who took over.

D’Amore had worked with TNA since 2003, when he was a road agent and on-screen talent as the coach behind the Team Canada stable. He became the head of TNA’s booking team in 2005 until leaving in 2010. After a stint in Jeff Jarrett’s failed Global Force Wrestling, he returned to TNA in 2017, becoming Head of Creative.

In March 2023, he was promoted to become the President of IMPACT wrestling, where he was a vocal cheerleader for the constantly underperforming promotion and was frequently praised by the wrestlers who worked in the company. He seemed to take the idea of improving TNA seriously (which so many previous bosses don’t seem to have done) and was the main creative force behind dropping the name IMPACT (which never really helped them in any way) and rebranding back to TNA (although that doesn’t seem to have helped them in any way either).

In recent months, TNA seemed to have more wind in its sails than it’s had for years, although the momentum didn’t seem to be hugely noticeable in any other metric than a lot of people who work for TNA saying “oh, it’s really got a lot going for it at the moment.” It certainly didn’t seem to be doing any better on PPV and attendances at shows didn’t change in any meaningful way, but it did have a brief and ephemeral moment of not seeming as doomed and tragic as it had for the past decade.

What happened behind the scenes isn’t entirely clear. It was rumoured that D’Amore had asked Anthem for more money to improve IMPACT by making more signings, which they countered by suggesting budget cuts. That led to a stand-off that D’Amore couldn’t ever have won. It was also rumoured that D’Amore had made an offer to purchase TNA from Anthem outright a few months back, which they’d rejected. If that was the case, it wouldn’t be a surprise if they were spooked by the realisation that the man running their product had spent months working out how he could run it without them.

A number of unnamed TNA talents wrote an open letter to Anthem to say they were “deeply saddened by the decision to remove Scott D’Amore from the TNA/IMPACT family,” and while paying tribute to Anthem’s support – they hold the purse strings, after all – they voiced their strong feelings that “a wrestling person’ needs to be intimately involved at a high level to ensure the amazing company we have all built...continues to grow and flourish. It is our opinion that the best possible person for that role was, is, and will be Scott.” The letter then conceded that “we do not necessarily know all the facts and details around the decision to remove Scott.” No, love, no one seems to.

If it was just a case of a corporate company deciding to get rid of someone for thinking they know the wrestling business than any of them do, then it's fittingly TNA-esque – they just seem allergic to success. If anything looks like it's starting to finally go well, they nip it in the bud as quickly as possible.



It was later reported that Ariel Shnerer – a suit who was formerly the General Manager of Fight Network and who was instrumental in the TNA+ streaming service, which I've only just now heard of - would be overseeing all TNA content going forward, having the final say on all talent and creative decisions (although he's helped by a booking committee who include Tommy Dreamer, Gail Kim and Delirious). Shnerer will be working in close contact with TNA's new president Anthony Cicione, another man who has no experience of working in the wrestling industry.

A few years back, I was part of a big meeting with the head of Amazon's European TV division, who was openly puzzled by a lot of the fairly-common industry terms that were being used. Not highly technical terms, but fairly well-known things like "transmission date", and "in the edit." It turned out he didn't come from a TV background, and didn't really seem to have much interest in the industry – but he'd previously done very well as the head of Amazon's Packaging division, so they'd rewarded him by moving him across to become the head of TV. It was the first time I'd seen with my own eyes how the modern corporate world cannot distinguish between the creative arts and cheap envelopes. Everything is just another commodity that can be monetised by the magic men with ties on.

What an exciting year it's been for wrestling fans who love the industry suddenly being run by businessmen who have previously showed no interest in the unique and complex artform of pro wrestling. If any deep-pocketed stupid venture capitalists out there want to buy *Wrestle Me!* in the misguided thought it's an untapped source of potential revenue, and then sack us so a couple of boring suits can take over, please don't hesitate to let us know.

7th February – ASHLEY MASSARO ALLEGATIONS COME TO LIGHT



In the wake of Janel Grant's lawsuit against Vince McMahon, *Vice* reported that they'd been shown an affidavit written by the late Ashley Massaro (as part of the long-since dismissed CTE class action made against WWE in 2016) which recorded specific allegations of sexual harassment she claimed to have witnessed from Vince McMahon. The affidavit was removed from the final submission in the class action and had remained in her lawyer's possession since 2016.

During my time with the WWE, I had observed Vince McMahon making-out with other divas in the locker room, but he never paid attention to me, and I assumed I was not his type. This changed after my *Playboy* cover was released. I was fortunate enough to be allowed to fly on the company jet and

stay at the same hotels as the executives for a period of time so that I could get home faster to spend more time with my daughter.

On one of these occasions, Vince was attempting to get me alone with him in his hotel room late at night and I felt extraordinarily uncomfortable. He began calling the hotel room phone and my cell phone nonstop. I called Kevin Dunn to explain the situation and he said I should tell Vince I was not feeling well and would see him on TV the next day, so I did.

Immediately after that night, Vince started writing my promos for me. Vince does not write promos for female wrestlers—that is the job of the creative department—and he certainly wouldn't have, under any normal circumstances, written a promo for me. But he did, and the promos were written with the clear intention of ruining my career. I brought the first script Vince wrote for me to the WWE employee in charge of Creative at the time, Michael Hayes, and he said, 'You're not saying this, who the [expletive] wrote this?' and I told him that Vince did. He said, 'Well kid, these are the breaks,' meaning that Vince wanted to end my career and destroy my reputation on my way out.

He is known for this type of behaviour and also did this to [REDACTED] upon her departure from WWE. In addition, after that night, each time I walk by him he would make vulgar sexual comments that were clearly designed to make me uncomfortable.

There is no criminal behaviour alleged in this statement, but the recent allegations against McMahon mean that Massaro's claims provide clear evidence of a pattern of McMahon's long-term behaviour, and how it was acknowledged and tolerated (perhaps begrudgingly, if we're being generous) by senior people within the company.

Vice noted, "A spokesperson for TKO, WWE's parent company, declined to comment when provided a detailed accounting of the allegations in the statement and questions raised by it, aside from confirming that a top backstage employee named in the statement, Michael Hayes, currently works for WWE and clarifying the nature of his job. A lawyer said to represent McMahon did not respond to a request for comment."

But things were about to get worse.

The decision to not include this statement in Massaro's signed affidavit in the CTE lawsuit was, according to her lawyers, because the decision was made to focus on a much more serious sexual assault allegation made public by Massaro.

In the 2016 statement (which also details a number of concussions she received in the course of her WWE stint), Massaro claimed she was drugged, paralysed and then raped on a US military base during a 2007 WWE tour of Kuwait by a man posing as a doctor.

Massaro then claimed that she was interviewed upon her return to the US by a WWE doctor, who reported her allegation to executives at the company including McMahon, Laurinaitis and Kevin Dunn, amongst others.

Dr. Rios then informed Vince, who informed Kevin Dunn, John Laurinaitis, and several other company executives or lawyers that I had never even met but were all present at a meeting that I was called into shortly after. Vince led the meeting with these men and asked me to recount what happened in Kuwait. Then he said it was not in the best interest of the WWE for me to make the information about my attack public. I was still completely traumatized at that point and I just agreed. It was clear that there had already been a conversation and that they had reached a decision on their own prior to consulting with me as this was not a debate but rather Vince instructing me to keep this confidential.

Vince did at least apologize for what I went through, but then stressed that if I disclosed this incident it would ruin the relationship between the WWE and the US Military. He told me not to let one bad experience ruin the good work they were doing. His lack of sensitivity in referring to my ordeal as “one bad experience” left me speechless.

Vince approached my rape in the same manner he approached all wrestler injuries. He did not want to damage the reputation of the WWE by making them public knowledge, so he exerted extreme pressure on us to stay silent, to perform whether or not it was safe to do so, and had almost no regard for our well-being. We were treated as replaceable commodities. WWE’s top priorities seemed to be generating profits and avoiding liabilities, regardless of how this affected its workers.

Suffering from terrible depression, Massaro took her own life in May 2019, at which point the story she told in the lawsuit was more widely spread. WWE then officially denied that Massaro had ever reported any such claim to them.

At no time was Vince McMahon or the management of WWE ever informed by Ashley Massaro or anybody else that she had been sexually assaulted, drugged, raped or sodomized by a military doctor with a nurse standing guard while on a goodwill tour in 2007 to U.S. military bases in Kuwait. In fact, if she ever articulated such a claim to WWE, we would have reported it immediately to the Base Commander.

At no time was there ever a meeting with Vince McMahon, Kevin Dunn, John Laurinaitis or other company executives in which she told them of such a claim and was instructed to keep it quiet.

But today, Edward Brennan, the attorney representing former WWE Head of Talent Relations John Laurinaitis, responded to *Vice*, who had raised the issue of whether WWE management had ever been aware of Massaro’s allegations.

Any allegations that Mr. Laurinaitis helped to cover up an alleged rape allegation is an outright lie. Johnny, like most upper-level management at

some time became aware of the allegations and ensured all proper WWE protocols were followed, including privacy for the alleged victim. We object to the use of the term 'cover up' as no such plan or plot ever took place to hide or assist in the alleged rape.

In denying there had been any 'cover-up', Laurinaitis's lawyer seemed to state that "most upper-level management" were aware "at some time" of Massaro's claims, and that "all proper WWE protocols were followed" as a result.

This statement would seem to contradict the WWE's 2019 statement which denied "McMahon or the management of WWE" were ever informed of the allegations by Massaro – after all, no "proper WWE protocols...including privacy for the alleged victim" would need to be followed if the allegation had first come to light as a result of her 2016 statement (as she'd made the statement publicly, Massaro wouldn't require WWE, who would then have been her former employers, to offer her "privacy").

Vice News also reported that in June 2019, an investigation was opened by the Naval Criminal Intelligence Service looking into Massaro's allegations but it was closed in January 2020. The results weren't known, until a Freedom of Information request was filed in March 2024 by *wrestling-online.com*. It provided nothing in the way of conclusive proof.

A review of Ashley Massaro's medical record was conducted by a US Navy OB/GYN Speciality Leader, whose name was redacted, and the record did not indicate anything indicative of the allegations of sexual assault provided in the affidavit by Massaro.

Many of those interviewed who were deployed to Kuwait at the time claimed no knowledge of Naval Clinic aboard Camp Life Support Area and no recollection of Ashley Massaro. The investigation noted several inconsistencies in stories given by Massaro in her affidavit as well as by others who were on the trip and a meeting in August 2019 with WWE's attorneys at K&L Gates LLP failed to unearth additional documentation relevant to the case.

The NCIS summed up its conclusions: "The record review did not indicate anything indicative of the allegations of sexual assault provided by MASSARO. All logical investigative leads have been identified. To date, no subject, scene, or witnesses have been identified. The reported victim is deceased, and no prosecutorial venue exists within the NCISRU Corpus Christi, TX area of responsibility. This case is closed."

But what the claims of 'who knew what when' in the Massaro case did was cast a spotlight on another ongoing case of 'who knew what when' – who knew about the ongoing allegations against McMahon and when, which centred around the WWE's internal investigation into McMahon when the reports of his payments to numerous women first became public in July 2022. And could anyone in WWE's management be trusted to tell the truth when asked? As Brandon Thurston of *Wrestlenomics* put it:

FIVE-TIME WINNER OF THE UKFF'S 'BEST WRESTLING PODCAST', 2019-2023

In November 2022, the WWE Board concluded its investigation into allegations of sexual misconduct against Vince McMahon, John Laurinaitis, and WWE culture.

Nick Khan and Paul Levesque were among the Board members who in December 2022 unanimously agreed (per SEC filing) that Vince shouldn't return to WWE due to non-public information that would paint him and the company in a negative light.

In January 2023, when Vince unilaterally forced his way back onto the Board, Khan and Levesque were among those who didn't resign from the Board and unanimously voted to approve his election as Chairman. At that point, the investigation has uncovered whatever it uncovered (or didn't).

How much further knowledge of alleged misconduct did Khan and Levesque have following the investigation? And in light of that, why were they (and Steve Koonin who was on the WWE Board then and is on the TKO Board now) comfortable approving of Vince as Chair? I want to emphasize this is an important question in particular because Khan and Levesque are the #1 and #2 executives in WWE (and Koonin a current TKO Board member).

Did the WWE Board investigation fail to unearth the details alleged in the Janel Grant lawsuit and other publicized allegations? Was there a lack of effort by the Board to include her in the investigation, as she claims? Was approving of Vince as Chair for Khan, Levesque, and Koonin (and the other Board members who didn't resign) merely a matter of putting self-preservation above workplace safety? Do these leaders view the allegations as not serious enough to keep Vince out and something that would simply blow over, as Khan indicated in a January 2023 interview with Bill Simmons? Or is there more to the story that would make them look less complacent to sexual misconduct in the workplace?

Do you remember when wrestling news used to a MPEG of someone falling over on the way to the ring, or some indie promotion putting a dog named 'The Great Kurli' into a match and have it pin someone? Boy, what I wouldn't do to be back there.

8th February – BURY IT TOP LEFT

Thank God, something light – an old corpse appearing in the human-rights black hole of Saudi Arabia. Well, we'll take what we can get at this stage.



Dressed as the Deadman for the first time in a few years, the Undertaker did his slow walk down the pitch ahead of the Riyadh Season Cup final between Saudi Pro side Al-Nassr and Al-Hial, before presenting the cup to the winners once the game was over. I don't know about you, but this seems to trivialise something that you'd expect Princess Margaret to be doing.

FIVE-TIME WINNER OF THE UKFF'S 'BEST WRESTLING PODCAST', 2019-2023

One delighted young fan was Cristiano Ronaldo, who was smiling in abject delight as Undertaker made his first appearance. Although sadly he didn't get to meet Taker at the end with the cup, as his team Al-Nassr lost. Poor little Ronaldo.



9th February – HART BYPASS

Bret Hart did an interview with *Slate*, which turned out to be a fitting name for what he then did to Vince McMahon, because he slated the horrible old worm.

I'm going to speak my truth. I'm not worried about Vince's feelings. He's never cared about mine. I don't have any problem with everybody kicking his head around the parking lot. I'm OK with the truth coming out. I don't think this is the only incident of this kind of predatory behaviour. I think you'll find that it's everywhere [in WWE].

It's like Jeffrey Dahmer, Harvey Weinstein, or Jeffrey Epstein: Vince will be a joke. He'll be used for humour, and you'll shake your head at the shock value of some joke about, 'What did Vince McMahon do?' He'll always be associated with this story, especially as it gets bigger and bigger and bigger.

I always had a respect for him. Now it's tainted. I'm embarrassed that I thought so highly of him. I think, despite all of the issues I ever had with Vince, I know, deep down, I always respected him; but now, knowing what kind of a weirdo he became, I have absolutely zero respect for him. I do not think I could ever shake his hand if he extended it. Too creepy.

Without being glib about it, it's hard not to be delighted for Bret after all the shit that McMahon put him through over the years. And to our knowledge, Bret is one of the only people in the industry who ever got to punch McMahon full in the face, which he did following the Montreal Screwjob. It's America's version of the match Adrian Street had with Jimmy Savile. Enjoy it, lads.

9th February – I'M NO LONGER THE WORST HAYNES IN WRESTLING

Former 1980s WWF wrestler, long-term Portland-based territory star and my shameful namesake, the 70-year-old William 'Billy Jack' Haynes was named as the sole suspect in the killing of his wife, Janette Becraft.



Neighbours reported hearing gunshots from the couple's home at 6000 SE 100th Avenue, Lents, Portland just before 10am, and after a two-hour standoff with police (during which he "was not co-operative", meaning a special tactics team were summoned), Haynes was taken away. Local reports stated that Becraft was subsequently found dead in the home.

Unusually for a wrestling uxoricide,³⁴ this one had a tiny sliver of tragic mitigation - neighbours of the Haynes's reported that Becraft, who was 85, had suffered from severe dementia, and Haynes also has brain-related issues, most likely stemming from his years in wrestling.

Brilynn Matthieu, a neighbour with ties to the family told KPTV FOX 12 stating, "It's a tragedy all around. Recently, I was just taking care of his wife who had ongoing dementia. I was pretty decently close to both of them and loved them very much."

It was also reported that the recent death of their pet guinea pig had hit the couple like the death of a child, and that seems to have led – in whatever way two people with brain damage managed to get there – to the death.



Haynes was hospitalised after being taken into custody for "a medical issue not related to his arrest," but was arrested and charged with Murder in the Second Degree and Unlawful Use of a Weapon as soon as he was released.

During the 1980s, Haynes was a huge star in the smaller but well-established regional territories. Trained in Stu Hart's Dungeon, he debuted in Stampede in 1982 when he was 28 – no one's sure what happened in the years before wrestling, but it was rumoured he'd spent time in prison on a manslaughter charge.

Looking a bit like a buff Peter Sutcliffe, with a muscular body that was remarkable even for the steroid-heavy times and a deeply-one-dimensional brawling style, he moved to Don Owen's Portland promotion, PNW (Pacific Northwest Wrestling),

³⁴ That's the technical term for 'wife-killing', so it's surprising considering how often that happens, it's not a more used term. Oh, patricide and fratricide, they get used all the time. But uxoricide? Never. Comes from living in a patriarchy, dunnit?

where he'd have his biggest success over the years. Having worked as Billy Haynes, he adopted the name Billy Jack, after the 1971 movie of the same name about a mixed-race Navajo former marine who defends a counter-culture hippy college against the ordinary townspeople who don't like them. It's a film that preaches peace through near-constant violence. That sounds *fucking fantastic*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AK3gq9omrqY>



However, *Billy Jack*'s lead actor, writer and producer Tom Laughlin threatened to sue when he found out, so Haynes added his surname to the end. And why not, it's a wonderful surname (now sadly tarnished). He kept the hat that had featured in the film as part of his gimmick, and liked it so much he was still wearing it in the late 1980s.

Haynes moved to the Von Erich's World Class territory in 1985, but didn't last long. That was a recurring motif of Haynes' career – he'd come in a territory, get over, and then quickly leave when something went wrong behind the scenes, and return to Portland, which seemed to be one of the few places where he was able to hold things together. He was known for having a hot temper, a healthy ego, and a willingness to fight at the drop of a hat.³⁵



Here's Haynes and Sgt Slaughter hyping up a match with the AWA tag team champions The Road Warriors on a Portland afternoon TV chat show in early 1986. Imagine the staggering amount of cocaine that was taken in the 20 minutes before this show. When the Warriors have stomped off, there's a more conventional chat, where Haynes mentions his elderly father who was blind, which was something he often

mentioned as a face and gave him a uniquely humble gimmick. Slaughter then takes a bit of the heat out of proceedings by talking about how he's signed a toy deal with Hasbro and he's got a record out.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2NV6WmPxhvY>



Having worked in Florida (where he was a leading babyface and feuded with the likes of Dory Funk Jr, Rick Rude and Superstar Billy Graham), some NWA title matches with Ric Flair in Portland and a New Japan tour where he was rarely pinned (apart from dropping the obligatory match to Antonio Inoki), he was signed by the WWF in 1986, who were in the middle of one of the hottest periods of business they'd ever seen. It wasn't a spectacular run, but it was solid. Most famously, he took on Hercules at *Wrestlemania III* in a battle of the full nelsons (and with whom he'd feud on house shows for the majority of his run), and was made into an action figure in the classic LNJ line.

³⁵ Is this the reason he later wore a hat as his concession to a gimmick when he was in the WWF? Might be.

But Haynes also kicked things off with a hot *Superstars* TV match against the IC champion Randy Savage, which makes you realise Haynes looked like he could have been Savage's big brother, right down to the shape of his hair.

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

Here he is taking on Paul Orndorff in a battle of intense 1980s men. Orndorff's opening interview is a perfect example of why they didn't get him to do many promos: he starts talking about how he doesn't do drugs when the interviewer didn't even bring drugs up at any point, and then nearly says 'NWA' when he means 'WWF'.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ya9J7HU0ouA>

And Harley Race. Haynes doesn't seem to hold much back here, even though Race seems unusually generous in his selling right from the off.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFxdgvyi-M>

"He was a little off," his former house show opponent Jake 'The Snake' Roberts recalled after his arrest. "He had some nuts loose, you know? He wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer-type guy. He just had a quirk about him that I never felt safe around him."



Haynes left the WWF in February 1988 – no one's ever quite worked out why, but he claimed he'd refused to lose a match in Portland and was fired over his principled stand. However, Greg Valentine has also said in interviews that Haynes was fired after passing out on a flight, and a flight attendant thought Haynes was having a health emergency, which led to the flight making an

emergency landing. Valentine's version of the story was that Haynes had used GHB, which rendered him comatose - and when Vince McMahon found out about the incident, Haynes was fired. There was said to have been an incident before this where Haynes, unhappy with being hit hard in the ring by 'Iron' Mike Sharpe, got into a scrap with him backstage at a show in Detroit and knocked Sharpe out, which meant he was already in the boss's bad books.



Haynes returned to PNW and his own minor (and short-lived) promotion the Oregon Wrestling Federation. As the huge star of a crumbling outfit, he was a local hero, if nothing else. That led to him lending his name to a local gym and doing some local adverts, including this one for a local tanning salon, where he's very much locked into that "I'm a

1980s wrestler so I scream instead of speaking" vibe.



“Always clean!” mentions the voiceover, which I would demand having seen the state of the people who turn up (by which I mean Billy Jack in those trousers. Also, some of his teeth are noticeably missing. There were rumours that he was heavily involved in drugs at this time, both as user and terrifying muscle, which everything about this advert would seem to confirm.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7GSZzCbft8>

It may also have been at this point that he married Jeannie Clark, who would later marry ‘Stone Cold’ Steve Austin and was the long-time partner of Chris Adams. Has she written a book? I would read that book. I would read that book like my life depended on it. Just checked, she has, it’s already in the post.



After a six-month spell in WCW in 1991 as the masked Black Blood (he left following a pay dispute), Haynes again returned to Portland, which was entering the last impoverished years of its life. A knee injury hobbled him, but he returned for a brief and surprisingly exciting stint in Memphis’ deeply struggling USWA, where he won the USWA belt from Brian Christopher as an unhinged proto-Big-Booty-Daddy-era Scott Steiner.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZCbIFEt53U>

Here’s one of his final matches against Brad Armstrong (who he swapped the belt with in a three-day period), before he retired in 1996: his final match a win in the USWA over Tracy Smothers.

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=961824050560818>



Having largely disappeared after this (as most 1980s wrestlers did in the era before the glorious After Wrestling industry), Haynes became infamous in the 2000s for his absolutely batshit-insane shoot interviews, where – looking almost completely unrecognisable from his heyday, appearing to be a cross between Anne Widdecombe and a 1970s gnome - he made a

never-ending series of utterly demented claims, such as claiming that Nancy Argentino was pregnant with Hulk Hogan's baby when Jimmy Snuka killed her, and that the WWF didn't make him the booker as he'd have exposed it. He also claimed that Vince McMahon had ordered Chris Benoit and his family to be murdered, as Daniel Benoit was Vince's illegitimate son. All of this is utter, utter nonsense.

He also said he used his travel schedule while working in the WWF to traffic cocaine, during which time he claimed to have witnessed the murders in the infamous Boys on the Tracks case in Little Rock, Arkansas, a 1987 murder which conspiracy theorists relate to Bill Clinton. Haynes claimed he'd been working as a muscle for a drug trafficking gang at the time. A cursory glance at Cagematch shows that Haynes was working in Florida at the time, which means he was unlikely to be Arkansas on the night of the murder. Annoyingly to conclusively blow his ramblings out of the

water, Haynes didn't work on the key date of the 23rd August, but did work on the nights of the 20th and the 25th.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7Zjy8rita4>

In 2014, he resurfaced as part of the now-dismissed CTE class action brought against the WWE, which was thrown out. In the lawsuit, Haynes alleged he was dealing with depression and exhibited symptoms of dementia due to his time in WWE.

Haynes's trial is set to begin in April. I should imagine the above statement will be a key part of the defence his lawyers are preparing.

10th February – THEN. NOW. NOT FOREVER.

I don't know if being removed from the credits of a TV show is admissible in a court of law as a confession, but Brock Lesnar was removed from the WWE's 'Then Now Forever' montage that starts all of their TV shows, and was replaced by LA Knight.



Making heavy irony out of the word 'Forever', WWE have done this loads of times before – we've had both Hulk Hogan and Ric Flair dropped and reinstated over the years, so it's nothing to worry about. Oh, hang on, no, they dropped them for a racism scandal and allegations of sexual misconduct, so it is. Sorry.

It was also confirmed that Lesnar wasn't going to be a playable character on the roster of the upcoming 2K24 game (something he shares in common with McMahon), although all his files will be baked into the game (meaning some 12-year-old whizz kid will be able to unlock him,

I'm sure, so they match him up against Io Shirai for the shits and giggles) and might feature in some of the storyline modes, which the developers probably can't be arsed to take him out of.

The full list of playable characters contains some rum sorts, amongst them Doink, Ultimate Warrior, Jim Neidhart, and Jerry Lawler. Imagine not being morally fit enough to be in the same game as Doink. And Eric Bischoff has also made the list. Looks like someone's finally won the wrestling war.

10th February – YOU CAN'T STEAL ME³⁶

Almost-a-real-boy inspiration-droid John Cena made his professional baseball debut as a surprise run out for the Savannah Bananas. Turns out they're a baseball version of the Harlem Globetrotters, so it's effectively artificial, fake baseball. What a strange thing to have sunk money into, and what a genuine surprise that it seems to be attracting crowds of people.

³⁶ 'Stealing' – it's a baseball reference. And it's the only one I know.



Cena struck out (“he still has his hat on under his helmet” noted someone on Twitter), which seemed to be part of the script as he made no attempt to hit the ball, and spent two of the pitches in a low crouch. While I understand that wrestling is openly pre-determined, I’m not convinced that it transfers to other sports - but I suppose it doesn’t help that I’m not interested in genuine baseball in the slightest,

let alone a new variety-show version of it. His appearance does, however, make Cena a two-pre-determined-sports superstar, which might be a record.

11th February – H’ACCUSE

At a conservative estimate, 60% of wrestling’s backstage stories are about Haku attacking members of the public in the 1980s. But *why*? With a solid steel noseguard in place, *Wrestling Inc* interviewed Haku and asked him why he got into so many hideous fights while he was an active wrestler.

Some people that I beat up, but that was how it was in those days. Some town, guys had a few drinks and they think they can beat you up, but they have no idea. Pro wrestlers are the toughest people in that time of the 80’s.

You always protected the business. You were always taught to protect the business but look at how it is now. There was a time for everything. Things changed from how they were in the 60’s, 70’s, 80’s, 90’s to how things are today. We can’t control it, it’s just part of life and the journey that we have in life.

My thing is that I am not the toughest, I was just trying to make a name for myself in the business. Coming in from a Third World country, the family is waiting. The island is waiting because we were sent to Japan to represent the country, so the spirit is still there. So, when you represent the country with the way we live in the Sumo world, you are a Samurai, and we came to United States, my goodness, the language... you are trying to run and think about your family and your country and you try to represent them well and you try to send money to the family, those were the biggest things for me.

It's not that I am the toughest, but because I am a protector. A protector of my family, of my country. I had a Samurai mentality, a Third-World mentality, who always looked back and never forgot where he came from. It wasn't because I wanted to be the toughest, but things happened and I am sorry that they happened.

I am very glad not to have been part of Haku’s journey in life. And that my eye never made the journey into his mouth and down into his belly.

12th February – PILLMANS NEED TO MAKE UP MINDS ABOUT GUNS

Considering his grandfather might have been one of the only wrestlers to famously wave a gun around on TV, it was a sweet turnabout when Brian Pillman’s grandson

prevented a school shooting, for which he was honoured with a National Student Hero Award.

The nephew of WWE's Alexis King (who used to be called Brian Pillman Jr in AEW), 15-year-old Jackson "Boom" Swallen (who sounds like he was invented by NXT) was at Mariemont High School in Cincinnati when he saw "a fellow student's written plan for a mass shooting at the school."

Despite being threatened by his classmate to deter him from doing so, Swallen called his father Zach to share what he saw. Zach Swallen alerted authorities. After police discovered other evidence including a list of eight students and a teacher the suspect planned to target, the 14-year-old whose plan Swallen saw was arrested. They've been charged with conspiracy to commit aggravated murder.



Hmm, it sounds like he saw a drawing, told his dad and now a child is facing conspiracy to commit aggravated murder charges. To someone from Britain, this sounds like a bit of an overreaction, but then I don't live in a country where these shootings happen, so I'm not going to get involved. No, hang on, I was being naïve. The 14-year-old had a fucking *arsenal*.

"The kid had the firearms and had a very elaborate plan and had every intention of carrying out that plan," explained Boom's father, who isn't a Pillman, and thus will not be given the honour of being named in this wrestling newsletter. "My son, he doesn't lie. He's very literal, I could tell by his tone. And it was told to my son that if he disclosed anything about the plan to anybody, he would be shot and killed. But my son literally told me he didn't care if he got killed as long as he could protect his classmates."

The photo of "Boom" showed him flexing next to an unidentified man in a Hi-Vis, who might be his dad, or could be some type of American celebrity we don't have over here (it's Larry the Cable Guy all over again). Hang on, just checked, it is his dad. Glad they both dressed up for the most important photo of their lives.

13th February – FIRST POSITIVE WWE EXPERIENCE ALL MONTH



The first ever WWE Experience – "a unique experience where both WWE superfans and casual visitors can fully immerse themselves in the action of WWE", which is something casual visitors will have absolutely no interest in doing – opened today in the wrestling mecca (not literally, but Mecca is nearby) of Boulevard City, "one of Riyadh Season's entertainment zones".

Mmm, this story is so deeply corporate, it makes me hunger to sack some of my zero-hour employees.

Along with the WWE Super Dome (“a fully immersive arena where fans can feel the excitement of being at a WWE event”, which you can also do by being at a WWE event), WWE Backstage (“create your very own character and Become a Superstar with a custom Superstar Entrance” – no idea how this works, but it sounds like there’s a dressing-up box and someone with a MP3 player full of rejected WWE themes)³⁷, the centrepiece of the Experience was The Undertaker’s Graveyard.

It featured a glass box full of the bones of everyone who Undertaker had defeated, exhumed from their resting places due to a cleverly-placed clause in all WWF contracts dating back to 1992. Fans were able to peer at the remains of Jimmy Snuka, King Mabel, and a handful of shoulder bone fragments removed from Edge during neck surgery.

Sorry, no, I’ve just re-read the PR sheet, and it’s actually some weird semi-escape room game where you have to solve Undertaker’s puzzles to get out. In all the years he performed, Undertaker never had any interest in puzzles, but as soon as he retired, the WWE are constantly having him demand you solve things. He did in a haunted house on Netflix four years ago, and now he’s doing it here. As I have proved, it’s *absolutely non-stop*.



“I wish Kazakhstan had a WWE Experiencekz” said someone on YouTube who I would lay money on being from Kazakhstan (spelled it right, wants WWE to put a permanent museum there, has thought about Kazakhstan once this year besides when reading this comment). “Your country is not popular, so they will not open in your country,” explained someone else, which made me laugh. “Your country is not popular.” Poor Kazakhstan.

14th February – BURIAL OF McMAHON CONTINUES, MORE SPADES AVAILABLE

Sketchy dark-vibes former WWE wrestler Matt Riddle was on the *Sunday Night’s Main Event* podcast, and was asked about Vince McMahon.

When I’ve seen Vince do all the things he’s done from the ‘80s, ‘90s, early 2000s, everything, I was not surprised. I mean, some of it, a little, but the guy’s a billionaire that owns a company and has probably done it all and seen it all and wants to do more and see more. I don’t know, I’m not a billionaire. I

³⁷ Heartbreakingly, the opening saw Jinder Mahal demonstrating the Become A Superstar area, as if he was not already an actual WWE superstar. Even worse, he seemed to enjoy it more than he does when he’s doing his actual gimmick.

really have no comment other than that. I'm not surprised, I hear people say they are surprised, I'm not surprised - I mean, the guy is a maniac.

Riddle also made it clear he was not the UFC-fighter-turned-WWE-superstar who was mentioned (but not named) in the Janel Grant lawsuit.

I wasn't the dude, Brock was the dude [Vince] was talking to or whoever else, it wasn't me.

Riddle then spoke to Ariel Helwani's *MMA Hour*, where he mentioned the 2020 sexual assault allegations made against him during Speaking Out (which he claims were false, although that's obviously at odds with the person who made the allegations against him).

I've never heard anything about Vince. I've seen certain people, I'm not going to mention names, I've seen certain people make passes at certain female talent by saying, 'Come to my locker room' or that creepy kind of thing.

The woman I talked to didn't go and was above that. She's a stallion and was like, 'I'm not doing that.' Like, 'Here's my number; come to my locker room.' That's where it ended, but it could have escalated, and if that person was in fear of their job or wasn't as over as they are, they probably would have gone there because 'what am I supposed to do?' Damn, I probably would have went there, 'I just need the job.'

I know my situation and how it was. For me, I feel like that's how I feel about situations because that was my experience, being falsely accused. I don't know, maybe he's falsely accused, but those texts, there are a good amount of texts. It's a pretty big trial situation. A lot of money involved. NDAs were issued and signed at one point. I don't know.

There are a lot of red flags, for sure. I don't think it was great. There are a lot of red flags in professional wrestling, period. There are a lot of red flags in Hollywood, period. It's not a knock on Hollywood or wrestling: when you run billion dollar industries that are fuelled by athletes or good-looking people or actors or entertainers, and how you choose said entertainers, there's a lot of room for mess.

While Riddle might not have heard anything about McMahon, the former ECW performer Francine – who spent a handful of days working with WWE – had heard plenty, as she revealed on her podcast *Eyes Up Here*.

I know there are in a million stories out there about Vince with talent, other people in the office with talent. Never knew if they were true or not. You know, a lot of sources tell me a lot of the girls got their push because of the casting couch. I don't know if that's true or not.

I mean, when I worked there, there were stories floating around. And again, when I worked there, I was told by somebody higher up, if you want to, you know, be seen, you need to go get a bottle of oil. I mean, I don't know if I was

supposed to be cooking oil. What kind of oil this is oil? I don't know. Rubbing oil all over my boobs and knocking on Vince's door and going in there and leaning on his desk and trying to get noticed. That's what I was told to do, and I said, "absolutely not, I'm not doing that."

So, you know, I kind of believe what this girl is saying, although you know, I wasn't there, so we can't prove it 100%, but I can see this kind of thing happening. He is a millionaire. He has so much power. The way that the guys would follow him like the you know, the corporates. When I would go to *Raw*, I would see him walking down the corridor and he'd have four or five guys just following him around everywhere, I mean, they would do whatever he told them to do.

The man's got power, you know, power, money. I just don't understand why she didn't walk away.



Oh, that last line is a disaster. Why don't young people who are targeted for sexual victimisation just walk away from the billionaire groomer who controls their highly-paid job that they're underqualified for? Come on Francine, you took barely any chair shots in your career, there's no reason your brain shouldn't work. Francine then went on to answer her own terrible point as to why she couldn't comprehend why this different woman might have acted differently.

I had so much experience under my belt. I had thirteen years in the business when I when I went to work there, and I was very, very confident on my ability to speak on the mic, to take bumps, to work. I kept myself in shape for my age. I mean, I was thirty-four years old, and to be told that I needed to do these things to be recognized and you know, to be put on the TV taping like, I was like, you can take this and stick it up your ass. I'm not doing this, you know.

And maybe that's why I got fired. I don't know. I had asked for my release and they had said no, and then a month and a half later it was like, Johnny Ace, "I got nothing for you." And I'm just like, "Oh, really, you have nothing for me. I guess you didn't think hard enough."

And let me, I'm going on record: Vince never made a pass at me, Like, he's never been inappropriate...like, one time went on [with] Vince, that was just weird. It was like...I guess he liked the way I looked when I came out of a makeup chair, but he's never, never done anything inappropriate towards me. I just want to put that out there before this, you know, blows up or whatever.³⁸

I was pissed off because, and I'm not trying to be, you know, an asshole, but I know I have talent. I know I'm talented. I know what I can do in the ring. And when you have somebody who has experience and who knows what they're

³⁸ This sounds very much like something inappropriate within a workplace environment happened.

doing to be told to just, you know, go in there and just do something like that, I've never been told to do anything like that in my life.

When I worked for ECW, I didn't have to sleep with Paul or anybody. It was just my talent. I go to a place like this and it's just all I hear is like, 'This one's doing this, and this one's doing that, and this one's with this one.' I'm just, good Lord. Do they not look at a person and say, 'Well, they're a really good worker,' you know, or 'They're really good on the mic'? Really, to me, that wasn't in play. It was like, "what are you gonna do to get him to notice you?"

Even when people are half-waving it off, it all adds to the sense that WWE had a toxic work environment for women for *decades*.

15th February – DREAM NOT STONE COLD YET



With *Wrestlemania* round the corner, the annual "is Stone Cold going to perform" dance started once again. Honestly, you come back once, absolutely storm it, and then they never leave you alone again.

In an interview with *ESPN*, Austin was asked whether he had any more matches left in him, said he didn't know (although he revealed he'd watched back the match with Kevin Owens and "dissected what I did, and I know that I can improve on what I did").

I said I'd never get in a ring again unless all the stars aligned, and for some reason, somehow, they all did. And at the age of 57, I headlined the first night of *Wrestlemania*. I never thought I'd do that. If you'd have told me that when I retired in [2003], I'd have said, 'You're crazy.' So, I'm not gonna sit here and say no to anything, because you never say never in this crazy business of sports entertainment.

He was asked whether he'd be interested in meeting CM Punk, in a proper dream match (I can't work out why it'd be so good, but it *would* be so good.)

I like Punk, and I think Punk likes me - so, as long as he can take a Stunner. I consider him a great friend, a great guy and a great wrestler who's had a great career. We'll see.

To some degree, this was a little bit of confirmation he wouldn't be coming back for this year, as Punk is currently out with a shoulder injury for at least the next six months, Stupid Punk. Austin was less keen on getting it on with the Rock at the upcoming *Wrestlemania*, as he explained to *Sports Illustrated*.

I think that would be in slow motion. I don't know about that, but Philly would be a great place for it to happen. I worked with The Rock at *Wrestlemania XV*³⁹, and we rocked the house. I pinned his shoulders to the mat, one-two-three. But I don't know about that happening now.

³⁹They had three WM main events – the other two were at *Wrestlemania X7* and 19.

If you want to recreate it, that's why WWE 2K24 is so great. We'll see what happens in Philly. But if you want to see it happen, make it happen in your own house.

Hmm, something tells me Austin was doing promo for WWE 2K24. If he wasn't and you want to see it happen, then just get a copy of WWE 2K24 and you can make him doing promo for WWE 2K24 happen in your own house.

"I love the sports entertainment business more than anything I've ever done in my life," Austin told ESPN.

And you get a dose of it, and you want more. And so here I am talking to you a couple years later about doing it again. And that's how addicting it is to me, just to talk about it. And I get excited, and I'll start talking too fast.

But it's not gonna happen.

But it could.

Textbook. I look forward to him doing the same thing and making me similarly excited next year, before delivering nothing.

16th February – ROCK CRUMBLES

With Cody Rhodes seemingly ruining his plans to steal Cody Rhodes's *Wrestlemania* main event by being popular, the Rock decisively and publicly backed out of the *Wrestlemania* XL main event. It was one of wrestling's biggest handbrake turns and thank god they committed to pulling that handle as decisively and powerfully as they could when it became clear that the car was veering off the road. It wasn't elegant, but the car stopped, which is all that mattered.



Rock performed this volte-face by turning up to *Smackdown* dressed like a Versace twat and slagging off everyone in Salt Lake City who'd come to see him, before saying he was now a baddie. It was that simple and he did it perfectly. It was better as it was what the crowd wanted, but weren't sure they'd get (a lot of people compared the shift in booking to the similar crowd-based pushback against WWE's preferred booking which ended up with Daniel Bryan getting the *Wrestlemania* XXX main event, and Kofimania at *Wrestlemania* 35.)

"You broke the all-time record for the largest gathering of trailer park trash The Rock has ever seen," he shouted into the mic, just like he used to do in the old days. "Finally, your life has meaning! Finally, you and your 50 wives will have a story to tell and you know what I'm talking about. You'll have a story to tell your 600 inbred grandchildren one day and that is what it's like to look at greatness in the flesh because finally The Rock has come back to Salt Lake City!"

Calling the crowd 'Cody crybabies' – a term of abuse we've often mentioned on *Wrestle Me!* and now will be serving WWE with one of those copyright takedowns

they love so fucking much whenever we upload something to YouTube – Rock announced that “the fans had lost the biggest *Wrestlemania* main event of all time, saying “you flushed it down the toilet...the same toilet that you sat your fat asses on and tweeted “We want Cody! We want Cody!”



He called the crowd “cry-baby bitches” and said he’d do everything in his power to end Cody’s story, before joining with Roman Reigns and raising his hand in the tribal salute, yelling “If youuuu smell what The Bloodline is cookin’!” It was actually great to have Dickhead Rock back. It’s so much better than Non-Dickhead Rock, especially because Rock does genuinely seem like he’s actually a bit of a dickhead in real life.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_IqiDsEldI

The *Wrestling Observer* reported that Rock had made the (right) decision to turn heel himself, having previously made the (wrong) decision to put himself in the main event against Reigns: “It was Johnson [Dwayne Johnson, that’s the Rock, keep up] who then pitched the heel turn and he did pitch the idea of the Reigns and Rock vs Rhodes & Rollins match for Night One. So, that was his idea if that is how it turns out.”

It did, Dave! *It did!* So it was, Dave! *It was!*

17th February – CONFUSING DREAM

Former NXT standout Velveteen Dream returned to wrestling today, having not performed since May 2021, when he was released by WWE following a back injury that kept him out of the ring for five months. They don’t normally release people who are injured, do they? Weird. Oh, no, hang on, there was some more stuff, wasn’t there.



In April 2020, Dream (or Patrick Clark, as he’s really called) was accused of having sent a sexually explicit photograph to an underage girl and instigated “inappropriate communications” with a number of underage boys. The WWE ultimately investigated the claims, but found nothing they were concerned enough about to take action against him. It never, as far as anyone

knows, became a police matter. Clark has always denied any impropriety, but it was enough to leave people angry that his return to wrestling came in an unannounced surprise appearance on a show for an independent in Albany, New York called *Dynasty*.

Called the Velveteen Man to circumvent the WWE lawyers, Dream won the main event match against Alec Odin as a babyface and then high-fived fans around the ring. “Last night,” tweeted *Dynasty*’s promoter Chris Envy, “we did what most others wouldn’t.” Not ‘couldn’t’. ‘*Wouldn’t*’.

We took a risk on a person, & gave them an opportunity for a 2nd chance. A 2nd chance to fulfill their DREAM. We stand by that decision. Thank you to the PACKED house for last night's event! #WearetheDynasty



Dynasty received a lot of flak online as soon as the news broke. Firstly, some people felt that using Clark without having announced he'd be on the show in advance didn't let people in attendance make an informed decision of whether they felt comfortable attend a show he was performing at, considering the seriousness of the unproved accusations that were made against him.

The appearance also came in the immediate wake of the recent events with Vince McMahon, and while Clark was cleared of wrongdoing by WWE, with hindsight it's fair to question whether their internal investigations have proved to be robust.

Clark's appearance was made more uncomfortable that Rita Chatterton, a former WWF referee who was paid a seven-figure sum after she alleged McMahon had raped her, was present in the audience, having been invited by the promoter. Having a victim of sexual assault in the WWF watching a wrestler who was embroiled in sexual misconduct accusations while he was in WWE was a troubling combination. Well, not for the Dynasty promoter, Chris Envy.

We got a lot of flak because we also had Rita Chatterton on the same show. She was in the news for other things as well. She was super supportive of Velvet, super supportive. She was like, 'He's such a nice guy.' They were shoulder-to-shoulder, there was nothing uncomfortable about the situation. She told me to give him her number and have him reach out to her because he needs people who are going to support him. All these people that are coming at me, 'you're not family entertainment.' It's easy to say that, but if I had Vince McMahon on my next show, all those clowns would still be buying tickets.⁴⁰

A former member of Dynasty's roster, Terra Calaway tweeted "As a former member of your roster and a sexual assault victim, I am so beyond disappointed and disgusted. Thank you for showing other victims they are not safe in your locker room or your crowd."

The huge problem for Clark is that he was cleared of wrongdoing by WWE, but there remain accusations against him (some in the form of screenshots) which still float about online. He's never been charged with anything, but, at the very least, he was in text communication with some children, which is inappropriate *at best*.

On his podcast, Booker T weighed up some of the issues, and as you might guess, Booker is all over the shop with this and it soon becomes, if we're being frank, a mad, confused mess by someone who hasn't thought enough about what he thinks before he started talking.

⁴⁰ Defending someone by saying "look, these people would turn up if I booked Vince McMahon" doesn't seem like the sort of defence I'd want.

I know the Velveteen Dream made his return back to Dynasty Pro Wrestling. Over the weekend, upstate New York somewhere.⁴¹ And he's getting mixed reviews as far as - I think the promoter is just getting mixed reviews as well...a lot of negative comments are being made, and my thing is this. Okay, I understanding being accused of something like me and then...like me, I was accused. I was guilty. I went to prison, I served my time. And thank God, [Booker's former boss before he began wrestling] Bruce Gasarch looked at me and looked at my heart after I've worked for him for quite some time and said 'this guy, he's not that bad of a guy.' And he gave me a chance, but I wonder — I just wonder...what would I be if I did the same thing here in this [day] where they can cancel you or they can say bad things about you because of your past? You know, what would I be at? Probably wouldn't be where I'm at right now.

And one thing about Patrick Clark, he got arrested for some stuff, where I think he had some cocaine. That was one strike. I think he got arrested for a fight at a gym or something like that. Got arrested for a probation violation or something like that.⁴² He had three arrests, but he's never been arrested for a sex crime. He's not a registered sex offender.

And that's the part right there that I don't understand. I can understand if he was convicted of that, I can understand if he was charged with that. I can understand if he was registered as that. But these days people can make accusations on you, and people take it as fact. There have been no notable crimes on paper with any police department, as far as that goes.⁴³

And the thing is, I wonder what you have to do to get a second chance in this day and age that we're living in right now? What do you really have to do to get a second chance?⁴⁴

Because these days when the social media world...because it's not just people coming down on him that was at that show that night? I think it was...it's probably less people coming down on him from that show as opposed to the people from around the world. I'm talking about overseas. I've seen comments from people who have never been to America before, making comments.⁴⁵

And that's what...everything is so connected, where people can make you make your life miserable: where you can never get a job ever again in your life. And you've never been charged for that crime that people have convicted you

⁴¹ Albany, Booker. Him not knowing that set my alarm bell ringing immediately – I'm worried he's not delved that deep into this difficult story and we're only two lines in.

⁴² Having been fired from WWE the year before, Clark was arrested in Florida in August 2022, firstly on charges of first-degree battery and trespassing on property (after he got into a scuffle in a gym). Six days later, he was arrested for possessing drug paraphernalia. He pleaded not guilty to all the charges, which all ended up being dropped.

⁴³ Worth noting that many of the names blacklisted from wrestling following Speaking Out – from David Starr to Marty Scurll – never faced any police investigations, as far as has been publicly reported. Don't know if Booker thinks they should all get to have another go.

⁴⁴ I know I'm picking this to shreds without any chance of Booker having a right to reply, which is unfair, but you normally only need a second chance after you've done something wrong. That's why it's called a second chance.

⁴⁵ In fairness, Booker, I think crimes are fairly universal. We have them in a lot of countries. It's not just an American issue.

for in the public opinion, you know? It's really a slippery slope that we're living in today.⁴⁶

Did Patrick Clark make some huge mistakes? Of course, he did. Anytime you talk to underage kids online and say anything to them, that's a problem.⁴⁷ It's just like [Booker's promotion] Reality of Wrestling. We take kids 16 and up, and I won't talk to not one of those kids without the presence of their parents. I've never called them on the phone, and I've definitely never tweeted or texted them or anything of that nature. Just because, anyway, people — no matter how you look at it, it can be misinterpreted. Any way you look at it, there's no way you can get around it. Because that's just not something you should be doing. And that right there was a huge mistake on Patrick Clark's head.

And the thing is, he's - of course, 19 years old, 20 years old. You might consider yourself still young, too. You might consider yourself still a kid too.⁴⁸ But in the eyes of the public and in the eyes of the law, you're in trouble. So, I really think he put himself in a bad position as far as that goes.

But as far as people having their opinions, and they really don't know or really haven't read the situation? It blows my mind how people can really take you down to where your life could be miserable for the rest of your life. I just don't feel like you should be persecuted forever if there is not a real crime.⁴⁹ If there was a real...if there was a victim, of it was one of these kids that has accused him of something, and the police came and picked up Patrick Clark and took him to jail, and he was prosecuted for that? I will be all for everything that these people are talking about.

But when none of that is proven, and people have already convicted him of it, it's really...a slippery slope, that any one of us can find ourselves going down that same slippery slope. Somebody can say, 'I touched them'. And I know I didn't touch them, but if it gets to public opinion and they take it and believe that person, my life could be ruined.⁵⁰

...If someone has not been convicted of it, and there's just been a lot of allegations thrown around? And the police have investigated it?⁵¹ What do I gotta do to prove myself? There's no way I can prove myself.

Well, that very quickly stopped being about Velveteen Dream and swung to Booker fighting off fictional sexual harassment charges that he can't think how to argue his way out of.

⁴⁶ It feels to me like Booker wants to start saying "Woke's ruined everything, hasn't it?", but doesn't have the guts to say "Woke's ruined everything, hasn't it?" Also, aren't the Woke supposed to be involved in child trafficking? It's so hard to keep up with the actions of this fictional group of people who only exist in the minds of old men.

⁴⁷ Is it a mistake or a problem? They seem like two very different things. From this point on, Booker is going to start saying stuff to support Clark which will make you not support Clark.

⁴⁸ Absolutely not a defence. A 20-year-old adult who considers themselves a kid is a 20-year-old adult.

⁴⁹ Following this logic means that Booker does not feel being caught preparing for a terrorist attack should be a crime.

⁵⁰ This is an entirely different hypothetical scenario to the position Clark found himself in.

⁵¹ Not sure the police ever investigated the allegations against Clark, although the WWE claimed to have done so.

I don't know what's next for Velvetten Dream, and to be honest, I don't know what should be next. If you're an entertainer who appears in front of a paying audience, then some of your actions – whether innocent or not - may encounter a lower threshold of public acceptance than people outside of that position would perhaps have to meet, and it's up to you to decide whether the accolades are outweighed by the backlash. But please God, can we just talk about some actual wrestling this month? What a delightful change that would be.

18th February – MAKE BRITAIN GREAT AGAIN

After decades watching pro wrestling, Dave Meltzer called it “one of the best matches I've ever seen.” Scoring it six stars, the match went for over 47 minutes, delighting the hot sell-out crowd. “This was a match where the two guys set out to have the match of their lives and everything clicked,” added Meltzer. It was the fourth highest rated match in the Observer's history.⁵²

And, unbelievably, it took place in Britain between two British wrestlers. In his last independent date before going full-time with AEW, Will Ospreay submitted in the main event of RevPro's *High Stakes 2024* to the RevPro champion Michael Oku.

“The Will Ospreay vs. Michael Oku match that took place today at the Crystal Palace in London was beyond any words I could write about,” added Meltzer. “Their match two years ago was the best storytelling match I've seen in many years. This match was far better than that.”



Was I there? No. It took place in South London, which is like travelling to space when you live in North London. Do I regret not going? Oh, with every fibre of my being. I almost bought a ticket on about ten separate occasions and then changed my mind. Missed the best match in modern British wrestling history. I think of all the *terrible* matches I've paid to witness over the years and I could literally cry. On the plus side, by missing such an important night in British wrestling, I'm now qualified to work for WhatCulture.

It was a brilliant, seemingly-never-ending, thrilling match with an ending streak that featured a tribute to the late Kurtis Chapman in the form of his Sega Megadrive finisher, which is both slightly awkward-looking and thrillingly dangerous, before Oku managed to make Ospreay tap to his single-leg Boston Crab.

⁵² The other three matches to achieve a higher rating were Ospreay vs Kenny Omega at *Wrestle Kingdom 17* (6.25 stars), Omega vs Kazuchika Okada at the 2017 NJPW *G1 Climax* (6.25 stars) and Omega vs Okada at NJPW *Dominion 2018* (7*). That means all four top matches in the Observer's history took place outside America.



He did so in front of AEW boss Tony Khan, who was in the crowd for a show that also featured a surprise appearance from Orange Cassidy, who defended his International belt in a multi-man match. And RevPro brought in big-name Japanese stars like Shingo Takagi, Shigehiro Irie and honorary Japanese man Zack Sabre Jr, which has been very much the key to their years of success.

But for me, there was also a melancholy sense that this could be the first truly great modern UK match with UK talent, and possibly the last. It's almost like a last hurrah for a scene that seems to be contracting more and producing fewer obvious stars than it has at any other time over the last decade.

The card featured a lot of leading British talent – Luke Jacobs, Ricky Knight Jr, Robbie X, even Anthony Ogogo - but no one that I can see drawing crowds in the way that Ospreay has, or being able to deliver the level of match he brings out of his opponents.



Notably, there's been no AEW or New Japan contract suddenly materialising for Oku in the wake of the match. Six weeks later, I saw him over *Wrestlemania* weekend in both of the two matches he had – one a loss with Man Like DeReiss against the Bollywood Boys on a DEFY morning show, and a successful defence of his RevPro belt against Mexico's Titan at the Mark Hitchcock Supershow (look! That's where I took this photo!) Neither seemed like the high-profile matches

you'd think someone who's just had a six-star match would normally have been offered. It seems astonishing no one even booked him against Speedball Bailey.⁵³

Hopefully that will change. Oku spoke about how the star rating, which is so widely derided by so many people online, had a tangible effect on his career straight away.

There's a lot of people putting in their opinions about whether his star ratings matter. I can nearly tell you that they objectively matter. Because I could feel the change in my career from when the match happened to people talking and getting loads of buzz about it to then when he watched it and then gave it the five stars to then how many different promoters were then messaging me after I got that star. So, no matter what people want to say, people hold his opinion in high regard. So as a young wrestler, one that's not decades in the game that's already a millionaire or whatever, to get that recognition from someone who has such a wide reach, did me a lot of favours, 100%.

⁵³ Over the years, Oku and Bailey have had three singles matches – Oku won one in Britain, Bailey won one in America, and Oku won the third at sea on this year's Jericho Cruise.

This classic match is here in full on YouTube (but shouldn't be.) If you're a goodie, head to the RevPro streaming site at revproondemand.com instead. Also, when are RevPro going to get some proper cameras and mics? They basically produce shows that couldn't be broadcast on TV, which seems like a choice they need to rethink. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GyBFfOolvwQ>

19th February – RELENTLES THORNTON⁵⁴



With Taylor Swift releasing her latest album of oddly-hookless pop that's incredibly popular but you never hear the postman whistling, one of the strangest wrestling facts is that Swift grew up close to the mansion of Jeff Jarrett (bought by his dad Jerry, Jeff's a big nepo baby) and used to babysit his kids. This means that Swift has definitely watched some TNA. She may even have seen the Sinister Minister.

We've explained this story in an old newsletter, but today Mick Foley went on Facebook to recall Swift and Jarrett – or as I call them, TayRet.

My thoughts of Jeff Jarrett and Taylor Swift are indelibly linked, as it was at this incredibly difficult time in Jeff's life, just after the passing of his wife [from cancer], that I heard Jeff say something that has obviously stuck with me to this day.

I'm paraphrasing here, but the words were to the effect of 'Taylor took the girls out for the day' and how important that time with her was to them. I was literally stunned to find out that the Taylor he had mentioned was Taylor Swift, who in 2007 was already well on her way to being a global superstar, with eponymous 2006 album, *Taylor Swift* several months into an astonishing 157 weeks on the Billboard 200 charts.

Oooh, someone's worked out how Wikipedia works.

As touched as I was by this story, I thought it was a random act of kindness done on a one-time basis. But I came to understand that Taylor, who had become a neighbour of Jeff's in Hendersonville, Tennessee and was a regular part of the girls' lives as they grew up.

She did not just take them out for that one day; she was there for them during the most difficult part of their lives. She baked cookies, she sang in their living room, she babysat while Jeff was at his wife's bedside; she was a true friend and a shining example of kindness when kindness was needed most.

True story, my cousin Julie went out with the very pale and scrawny rave DJ Adamski, who was at Number 1 in the UK charts with *Killer*, featuring Seal on vocals. He came over for family Christmas dinner at my uncle David's one year, and looked incredibly awkward and uncomfortable the entire time. I suspect he was on a massive sweaty comedown as my uncle told him stories about the time he hit an owl in his car

⁵⁴ Les Thornton has been referenced about four times in this newsletter. It's like I can't think of any puns beyond the last wrestler's name that I typed.

(the owl in question was now stuffed and balanced on top of the TV) and how he had an unlicensed shotgun. My family all knew how to drink heavily while roaring with laughter, and that seemed to unsettle him even more. I think Adamski said a maximum of three words in all the time he was there. We never saw him again.

20th February – IRON CLAW FAILS TO GRAB AWARDS



Despite its uniformly excellent reviews, *The Iron Claw* was nominated for precisely no Oscars. Having already received zero noms at the SAGs and the Golden Globes, it completed a hat-trick that absolutely nobody wants to complete. “*The Iron Claw* receiving zero Oscar nominations is wrong at this moment,” said *Digital Trends*, “but in five years, it will look even worse.”

Most of the disbelief swirled around the lack of a Best Actor nomination for Zac Efron, for whom it was a stunning and unexpected performance from a former teen idol (who’s surprisingly now 36). But it also suggests that wrestling films simply cannot win proper awards as posh people think wrestling is base and stupid - 2008’s *The Wrestler* was nominated for two Oscars (Best Actor and Actress) and struck out with both.

None of this bodes well as we start principal photography on my new film *Catweazle’s Sex Year 2099*.

21st February – SPEAK ILL OF THE DEAD, PART 32

Having had time for all the McMahon reports to sink in, some of the biggest WWE superstars were asked how they reacted to the news. The first up was Randy Orton, who was asked about his former boss by *Sports Illustrated*.

I would not be where I am today without Vince McMahon. But, fuck, I'm reading this shit. What you've seen and read, I've seen and read. As for as commenting on that, it fucking hurts my heart. It hurts my heart.

Orton then elaborated when he was asked the same question by the *New York Times*.

I've seen the horrible things online that I don't want to believe because this man has done so many things for me. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't have been given second and third chances [in WWE]. I wouldn't be in the position that I'm in now if it wasn't for that man.

So, part of me wants to not believe it and then the other part of me understands that he could have done all these wonderful things for me and the business and created this amazing thing that will go on and on well after he's gone, but on the other hand he's human and he made some fucking terrible mistakes.

There's three sides to every story: their side, the other side and then the truth. I think a lot more has to come out before I can really speak on any of this. I

think that would be the case for any talent that you ask, but I do know about Vince McMahon, the man that I've known for the past 24 years personally, and I owe him for everything he's done for me.

I say that with conviction, because I wouldn't be in this position without a lot of help from him. But if these allegations are true, then it's some horrible shit right there. I'm torn. It's hard.

Kevin Owens told the *Mail* that “there's really no words to describe how sad this makes me feel. If the people [who] spoke out went through what they went through, that's terrible. It's shameful and it can't ever happen again. That's what it comes down to.”

Becky Lynch also commented to the *Mail*, saying “I have been fortunate in my career that I have always felt supported by the company. These allegations are horrible and it's hard to reconcile as a talent and as a woman. But, my experience in WWE has only ever been amazing ... some of these things are hard to reconcile.”

Appearing on the Howard Stern show (which you'd think might have some pause for thought about the type of shows they were broadcasting throughout the 1990s), John Cena gave his take. And spoiler: he speaks like a load of men's self-help podcasts have been put into an AI generator by a hippy, who also happens to be an asshole.

I don't think it's complicated to talk about. It's complicated to listen to. That's why I don't necessarily put a lot of time and equity into it. There's still a long way to go. I can say this, I'm a big advocate of love and friendship and honesty, and communication, in the same breath, I'm also a big advocate of accountability.

If someone's behaviour lies so far outside of your value system that the balance shifts of, ‘I can't operate in a world where this works.’ That's the end result of being accountable. Right now, I'm gonna love the person I love, be their friend: ‘I love you, you have a hill to climb.’

There is the saying of, ‘You don't know who your friends are until shit hits the fan, or your back is against the wall.’ That doesn't make any of what's going on any easier to swallow. Just telling someone you love them, it's a hill to climb, and we'll see what happens. That's that. It sounds so cliché, but it has to be one day at a time.

I've openly said I love the guy; I have a great relationship with the guy; and that's that. It's largely my construct of operating with honesty and communication. Those are strong leads to handling any problem or achievement. The whole thing is super unfortunate and it sucks. It deals with an individual I love and an entity I love. I want everyone to have the experience that I have. Not only do I tell a friend that I love them, but I switch to the entity and say, ‘How can I help?’

I'm not going to tell John Cena how to live his life, but this does nothing to convince me he's not a robot created in 2001. I hope someone tweaks his empathy chip on the next full service.

21st February – CRASH WHEELER

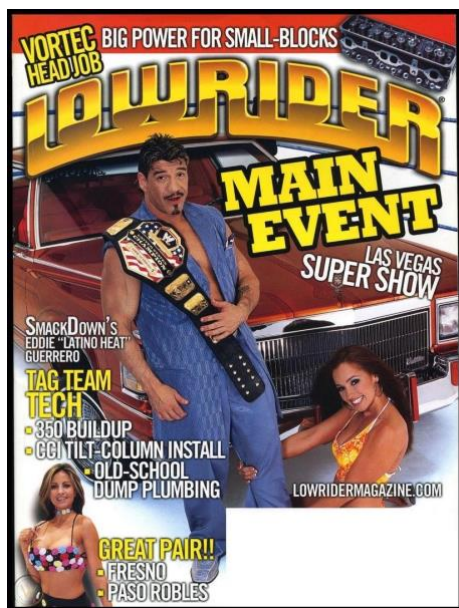
AEW tag team man Cash Wheeler saw his July 2023 road-rage incident - in which he flashed a semi-automatic handgun at a motorist – finally end up in criminal charges. While he'd previously entered a plea of not guilty, the decision was made to charge him with Aggravated Assault with a Deadly Weapon, which in Florida (where the incident took place) could lead to five years' imprisonment. His trial is set for 20th May.

Hearing about this reminds me, sadly, of my old grandma's favourite saying: "Don't act all Billy Big Bollocks and start flashing a piece at mugs, you fucking moron." My grandmother's name? *Reggie Kray*.

22th February – (EDDIE)-TYPE JAG

1990s one-hit wonder Vanilla Ice told *Icebreaker* that he owned a lowrider that he'd discovered belonged to someone famous: Eddie Guerrero!

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



Eddie was featured lounging about on the orange 1985 Cadillac Fleetwood that now belonged to Vanilla Ice on the February 2004 cover of *LowRider* magazine. "I'll never forget the Eddie Guerrero Lowrider cover," said a man on Twitter. "That's one of those magazine issues you had to fight for in the school library." What kind of rough school library stocks a magazine about lowriders? Ice bought the car for \$15,000, and discovered its famous former owner (who he hadn't heard of before) after the sale.

Only one problem: Chavo Guerrero did a run-in to say that Vanilla Ice *didn't* own Eddie's lowrider – Chavo did. This orange one was just a lowrider that the magazine provided for the cover shoot. It wasn't Eddie's car. It was a car he stood next to for a couple of hours. Vanilla Ice had bought a car Eddie Guerrero had once been near.

"Sorry Ice," tweeted Chavo. "I have the original Lowrider that Eddie and I went out in Worcester at a PPV, then purchased by John Cena. After Eddie's death, Cena gave it to me, and I had a complete frame off restoration."

A story about a one-hit wonder buying an old car that didn't belong to a wrestler. This newsletter has hit a new low.

23rd February – LGBTQ+V

Formerly fun wrestler turned non-fun ex-wrestler Val Venis went bananas today when he noticed a tweet which showed Cody Rhodes holding up a fan's trans flag.



Val, who's been provoked to fury a lot over the past few years (on everything from the bogus Covid vaccine to having to pay taxes to a corrupt government who sex-traffic children and pronouns o he gets angry about pronouns a lot), added his own Community Notes to the photograph, which means he literally had to open the photo, download it, then import it into Paint, open a text box, type some madness, choose a font, resize it, rotate it, save the file as a JPEG and then post it. It's a lot of work when you could just take a deep breath and have a nice hot cup of tea instead (thanks for the rec, Bert Assirati).

My favourite bit of this is the two lines "His name is Lucifer. You can call him Satan," like anyone might go "Right, who's this Lucifer? Not heard of this cat. Oh wait! Turns out he's Satan! That cunning Satan, with his two names, both of which are as well-known as the other!"

"Brother, you played a porn star to an audience of mostly children" replied @LibrarianJoe_ to Venis's post. "Sit this one out."

"I never once encouraged kids to become porn stars," bellowed Val. "I play that character the exact way it should be played. I played the part of an immoral, unethical, slimmy⁵⁵ porn star. The exact way a porn star should be portrayed." Well, you made it look like a lot of fun when you were doing it, so not sure the clever double-think behind the character worked, mate.

"Does Val Venis not realize this text is photoshopped onto this image?" said someone, who is either an excellent troll or might not be bright, I genuinely can't tell.

24th February – CALL THAT AN ELIMINATION CHAMBER? NOW THAT'S AN ELIMINATION CHAMBER



For the first time, the Elimination Chamber (although the show is known in Germany as No Escape, for *reasons*) headed to Perth in Australia, making it the second big PLE in the last 12 months to come from somewhere else in the world other than America. It meant that British people could watch a WWE show live without ruining the next day at work, which is the only thing I can't criticise about those terrible Saudi Arabian shows.

Hometown hero Rhea Ripley was given the main event in front of a massive crowd of 48,777 – a fan-pleasing decision that would probably never have happened if Vince McMahon was still alive and not, to all intents and purposes, very dead. Slightly disappointingly, her opponent was Nia Jax, who you knew would never beat her for the title (although having someone beat the hometown hero *was* the kind of ending you might have got from McMahon). Should

⁵⁵ Venis obviously means 'slimey', but I didn't correct it because I don't want to help him out.

they have squandered the *Wrestlemania 40* match with Becky Lynch here so Ripley could have won in front of her home crowd? Yes, of course they should have.

There were only four matches on the main show (all of which ranged from good to OK), with two elimination chamber matches bulking up the time. But with the pre-show match (the Kabuki Warriors beat Candace La Rae and Indi Hartwell, who was on the card as she's also an Aussie), there were more women wrestling on the card than men (12 to 10), which might make this the first non-specifically-chick-based WWE show to ever cross that threshold, a fact which wasn't mentioned at all (which is either because true equality means not noting that fact and that's commendable, or, more likely, because no one at WWE realised).

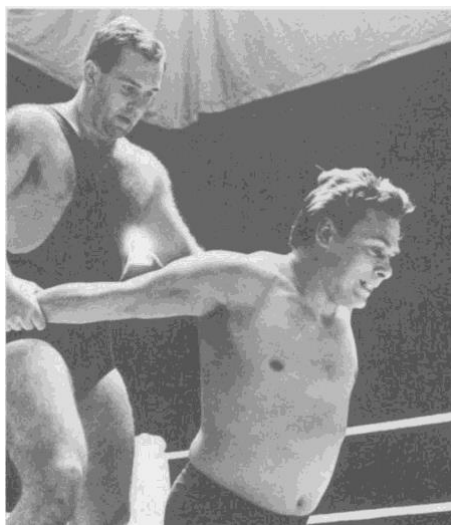
24th February – HEAVEN IS A LITTLE BURLIER TONIGHT

Leeds-based wrestler 'Burly' Barry Douglas was the first wrestler I ever saw in real life, walking to the ring to take on schoolboy Mark 'Bozz' Berry in the opening contest of a Joint Promotions show in a Brighton hotel ballroom in 1990. As he trudged to the ring, my friend Elliot yelped "Jesus, he's *ancient!*" in uncontrollable delight, which Barry heard. It stopped him in his tracks, leaving his foot hovering above the ring steps, looking as if he'd had all the air knocked out of him. Well, I realise now he wasn't ancient. He was 50, which is just old. Within eight minutes or so, 'Burly' Barry Douglas also became the first wrestler I'd ever seen in real life to get pinned.



The nephew of the Leeds-based wrestler and promoter George Relwyskow, and grandson of the Olympic wrestler George Relwyskow Senior, Douglas (whose real name was Barry de Relwyskow, which he changed so he would judged on his own merits) debuted in 1959, meaning he'd got 31 years under his belt the first time I saw him. He was old enough to have faced Sky High Lee, a 6'8" US wrestler who died two years before I was even born.

"Despite his long service, international standing, popularity with fans, exemplary work ethic and those family ties there were no stand-out moments for Barry," states his profile on Wrestling Heritage. "No titles, no Royal Albert Hall glory, no memorable feuds."



Douglas was, however, a useful and talented hand, who made some 57 wrestling appearances on TV. "A new lad who could do with testing? Send for Barry. Unknown overseas visitor who needed a bit of looking after? Barry will do the job. A stiff worker who could do with a bit of help making it flow? Barry could do that." And that's how I saw him in the twilight of his career – having a bout with a teenager who might end up being the next big thing (but wasn't).

He worked for a while as the masked Battlestar, which was "no more than an insignificant postscript to an outstanding career," note *Wrestling Heritage*, with a confusing use of the word 'outstanding', as Barry didn't really ever do anything to stand out. To call the

Battlestar gimmick “insignificant” also seems kind, as not a single one of Battlestar’s matches are recorded on Cagematch.

One of the only memories his contemporaries seem to have of him is that he took his own sandwiches wherever he went, even on a three-day tour of Scotland.

He was also one of the first British wrestlers to compete in Japan in 1968, for which I bet he had to pack a lot of sandwiches, and wrestled a lot in Europe, for which I bet he also had to pack a lot of sandwiches. His final recorded match took place in Worthing in 1999, so I think he’d only have needed to pack one sandwich for that.

A contemporary recalled him as a private man who also worked as a painter and decorator. He died at a nursing home in Leeds.

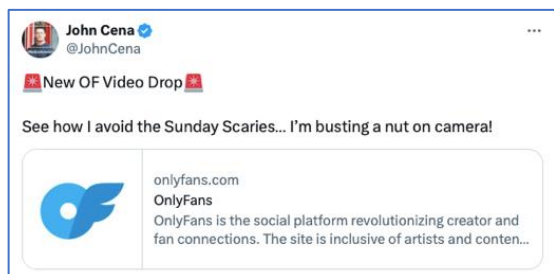
Here’s Barry in 1986 taking on Marty Jones – the night I saw Barry, Marty was in a staggeringly hot main event against Fit Finlay. A man in the crowd stubbed his cigarette out on Finlay’s back, so Finlay punted the camera case the man had by his feet on the floor, which sailed clean across the ballroom. What a night.

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

I’ve seen 100s, if not 1000s, of wrestlers since, but Barry Douglas was no.1. Godspeed, you burly beaut.

25th February – YOU CAN’T SEE ME DICK

In a confusing moment, John Cena announced he was starting an OnlyFans, where he’d show close-up photos of his cyborg recharging tube going in and out of a box of batteries.



When strange men signed up, they were disappointed to find out it was just a confusing marketing stunt for his new movie *Ricky Stanicky*. I’ve not checked, but I hope there were crossed wires and Cena has been uploading actual pornographic photographs of himself every week, having misread what he was supposed to do.

26th February – THOSE THAT CAN, DO. THOSE THAT CAN’T, DUPRI.

At a house show in Oakland, California, a WWE wrestler got booed. Normally, that’s exactly what you want, but here it caused a big scene, as people weren’t booing Maxine Dupri because she’s a baddie. They were booing because she’s just *bad*.



Dupri is part of Alpha Academy, has model looks, and has wrestled less than 20 times in her whole career. When she was signed by WWE, she’d never had a wrestling match. In the past year, she’s been a regular on TV and has started to have matches – her first ever match was live on *Raw*, and 14 of her 18 matches have been televised. But unsurprisingly, she’s not got this wrestling thing down-pat yet. And at this house show against Nia Jax, the crowd loudly booed her when she left.

<https://twitter.com/alluringbanks/status/1762691532933435730>

That reaction went down very badly with some WWE stars, like Rhea Ripley, who tweeted “I really wish that some of you got booed and ridiculed in the public eye while being new at your job. Learning and getting better is all a part of being human. Be better as humans.”

I mean, hold on a second. The people booing had done their regular jobs, spent some of their wages on a ticket, and were watching someone who couldn't do, to an acceptable standard, the very thing they'd paid to come to see. If I got a job as an opera singer, had only sung live a few times (none of which had gone that well) and then proceeded to sing opera badly for thousands of paying concert-goers in California, I don't think the correct response is to blame the crowd for not enjoying it. You want to have a word with the company who thought it was alright to put me - someone who's not ready to go out and sing *Nessun Dorma*, and is definitely honking parts of it - in front of a paying crowd of opera lovers.

There was a suggestion that some of this criticism was sexist – that Dupri is pretty and therefore men enjoyed making her feel bad and lording it over her – but I think the bigger problem is that Dupri clearly isn't ready to be working matches in front of paying customers in WWE, where a certain level of ability and experience is expected and, frankly, required. If she's still training on the job (which is a gimmick she's been given), then why isn't she in NXT, the place where wrestlers, er, get trained to go to WWE?

“It's unfair, but people paid money and are allowed to voice displeasure,” said someone who I've lost any detail about where they said it, or who they are. “You literally just have to get better or quit, it sucks but that's the life. A lot of the hate is sexism, but a lot of the sympathy is too.”

On *Wrestling Observer Radio*, Dave Meltzer made the point that “if you're a wrestler, get mad at the company for putting her in that position.”

Don't get mad at the fans. If the fans see a bad match, they've got the right to boo. And even if they see a good match, they've got the right to boo. “There's a line and now I think we're getting way too sensitive. I'm gonna get ripped on this because it involves women, but that's just my feeling. If you're a pro, Jesus Christ, that's part of being a pro-wrestler.”

If they say something racial, if they say something really badly sexist, in this day and age at an arena, fucking shut them up. Yell back at them. Tell security. Whatever. But just booing someone or saying ‘you suck’, that doesn't cross the line of behaviour that fans shouldn't be doing.

In the interests of gender balance, I should mention here that I think Austin Theory is also very bad at his job and I would boo the shit out of him if I saw him live.

27th February – ‘OLE IN THE GROUND’

A main eventer of the 1970s and 1980s, along with being a key backstage creative for nearly 30 years, Ole Anderson died at the age of 81.

In some ways, he died as a cautionary tale. A repeatedly successful booker whose works really stands up today, he leaned ever further into his vision of what wrestling should be as the years passed – and was unwilling or unable to adapt as wrestling changed. Ole remained convinced that wrestling should be believable, logical and realistic, and never hesitated to continually make his feelings known that modern wrestling had utterly lost its way (usually in the bitterest, most argumentative way possible, which often hid the interesting points he had to make.)

As the industry brought in more fans and more money, Ole's critical voice carried less and less weight, and he seemed to dig his heels in more and more. In short, there's an argument that his very successful active wrestling and booking career was slowly eclipsed by his deeply negative after-wrestling one, where he became the living embodiment of the old man yelling at clouds.⁵⁶

His visceral hatred of Vince McMahon meant he was effectively banished from the mainstream (there would no Hall of Fame induction for Ole, even as an original member of the Four Horsemen) and his bitter loathing of the modern wrestling scene meant he isolated himself from any sort of legend-role within the industry (although in fairness he didn't seem to want either one.)

As the wrestlers who had worked alongside him in his glory days got old and died, there were very few people left who had anything positive to say about Ole (or could even recall much about his glory years) and he spent years effectively chipping away at the reputation he'd once built.



A Minnesotan who'd served in the US Army, he trained under Verne Gagne and debuted in the AWA 1967 as Al 'The Rock' Rogowski (he appeared on WCW TV in the late 1980s wearing a T-shirt with the words 'The Rock' on it, which made him a pioneer of Rocks in wrestling).

In 1968, he moved to Jim Crockett Promotions in the Carolinas where he was renamed Ole Anderson to team with his 'brothers' Gene and Lars. Gene and Lars Anderson (who were also unrelated) had formed the Minnesota Wrecking Crew, a hugely successful heel tag team during the 1960s, but Lars was keen to move on to pastures new.

I liked the idea of wrestling as an Anderson, but when I asked, 'What's my first name?', Lars suggested Ole. I thought it was a rib, so I just laughed it off. I didn't know they really meant it until I got into the ring and the ring announcer introduced me: "In this corner...from Minnesota...at 270 pounds - Ole Anderson!"

I realized then that it wasn't a rib, but I thought, what's the difference? From that day on, I've been known as Ole Anderson.

⁵⁶ I worry this is probably the way we're eventually going with Jim Cornette, isn't it? It also happened to Vince Russo, a man who is probably the most extreme polar opposite to Ole Anderson you could get.



The name was supposed to sound Scandinavian to match the Anderson surname (although some say it was chosen it as a shortened version of 'Oleander', a poisonous plant, which sounds a bit too clever for a 1960s wrestler to have come up with). Ole didn't really have any familial resemblance to Gene, but the two quickly recreated the success of the original pairing, winning tag team titles in Mid-Atlantic territory seven times.

The rule-breaking, tough Andersons wrestled hard – they were stiff and snug, wanting to make everything they did to look convincing. Even in 1970, they seemed like throwbacks to an earlier era.

A promoter asked me one time, he said “You don't have any robes, you don't have any jackets.” I said, “We do one thing better than anybody. We *wrestle*.” We wrestle. Gene and I got to a point where we believed we could beat anybody. Take it shoot, make it a work, we didn't give a shit. We'll beat your ass.

While their serious, find-a-limb-and-lock-on-it style might not sound like a thriller today, they were masters of building heat, and became one of the most in-demand and top-earning acts of the 1970s.

In 1975, they became the inaugural holders of the NWA tag team titles – until this point, each NWA territory had their own tag titles, but this was an attempt to have a single set of belts. They'd hold them seven times in the next six years, and Ole would also have a reign teaming with Stan Hansen, having beaten the Briscos in a tournament final.⁵⁷

They were so hated that, while Ole was arguing with a group of fans after a 1976 match against Dino Bravo and Tim Woods in South Carolina, he was stabbed in the arm and chest by a 78-year-old pensioner (who he then punched, which led to the old man suing him). It took four hours for surgeons to sew the cut tendons back together. Ole claimed he'd been stabbed by fans seven times during his career.

There isn't a great deal of footage online of the Wrecking Crew in their primes. Here they are taking on Jimmy Snuka and Paul Orndorff in 1979. If you enjoy the sound of a VHS audio track fuzzing, this is the one for you.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Na4bfJw6xho>

And taking on Bob Russell and Bruno Sammartino's son David in 1981. Ole looks the same here as he did in the 1970s and the same as he looked in the 1990s. Normally, it's a good thing to keep your youthful looks, but poor Ole seemingly looked 58 from the day he was born.

⁵⁷ Some of the teams they lost them to and then regained from included Ric Flair and Greg Valentine, and Dusty Rhodes and Dick Slater. Big old names. There's also a 1982 matches I noted with Ole and Stan Hansen taking on (a) the Blond Bombers of Ray Stevens and Pat Patterson, (b) Stevens and Dusty Rhodes, and (c) Dusty Rhodes and Terry Funk, and I cannot help but feel deeply sad that those matches are lost forever. Ole and Hansen were named the Wrestling Observer's tag team of the year in 1982.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6vPhBh4oYrM>

It's revealing that Ole never had a singles career of note – he won some minor belts but spent the vast majority of his career in tag teams, something that suggests he lacked something when he was on his own. His few solo matches tended to be in relation to bigger tag programmes he was in, but his CV includes victories over Ric Flair in 1978 and Roddy Piper in 1982, and he had a handful of shots at Ric Flair's NWA belt in the same year, all of which he lost (the majority look to have been cage or Texas Death matches, which might hint that Ole as a challenger needed the lift of a big gimmick match to help ticket sales along.)⁵⁸



In 1976, Ole became the booker of Georgia Championship Wrestling (GCW), which saw him take home some \$140,000 per year (equivalent to \$704,000 today). One of the biggest angles he booked was in July 1980, when he spent weeks begging Dusty Rhodes to team with him, before turning on Rhodes during a steel cage match against the Assassins. It was a set-up that, he boasted to Gordon Solie, he'd been planning for over a year. It led to a series of main event matches that Rhodes dominated.

Ole was unusual in that he was both a booker and an active wrestler, but was rarely accused of pushing himself in the same way as, say, Dusty Rhodes or Kevin Nash: "I did put myself over when it was needed, and I also put myself in a position where I'd let other people beat me when it was also needed."

In 1983, Ole was ready to push Arn Anderson (who was called Marty Lunde, but renamed Arn Anderson due to his resemblance to Ole,⁵⁹ who had plans to work with him in the future) and Matt Bourne (the future Doink the Clown) as his tag team champions – but his plans were scuppered when Bourne was arrested on charges of raping an underage girl (again, *the future Doink the Clown*.)

With no team to push, Ole contacted Eddie Sharkey, a Minnesota-based wrestling trainer to see what guys he had. Ole went over them, all of whom were keen to impress – with one exception, a bouncer called Mike Hegstrand, who told Ole that "you don't look too damn tough to me". Impressed with "the guy that gave me shit",



Ole took Hegstrand, who asked to bring along his pal Joe Laurinaitis (he'd already had a short run in Georgia as The Road Warrior, but had left as he found wrestling too taxing. Ole had come up with the name as he'd recently watched *Mad Max 2* at the cinema.)

As the leather-clad Road Warriors, Ole gave the two a monster push, and it would make them legitimate megastars almost from the word 'go'. In their debut match, having paid no dues, they won the NWA National tag team title and established their refusal to sell offence,

⁵⁸ When Ole's death was announced, Flair tweeted "I will be grateful forever for you giving men the opportunity to become who I am today. We didn't always agree with each other, but the honest to God truth is you and Gene [Anderson] started me. Rest in peace my friend."

⁵⁹ It was never established how Ole and Arn were fictionally related – he was billed variously as Ole's brother, cousin or nephew.

which would both make them thrilling and also slightly ruin the business in a way which you'd imagine Ole would have been against.

Here's Ole's RF shoot where he talks about the creation of the Road Warriors.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6FdHC9HS2Wc>

Ole also gave Hulk Hogan one of his earliest breaks under the name 'Sterling Golden', but claimed he'd fired him after one week as he couldn't work ("a joke and a half"). Having only booked Hogan at the recommendation of Gary Hart – who said he looked amazing, but went quiet when Ole asked if could wrestle – Ole then contacted Vince McMahon Senior and did the same thing to get rid of him.

When he moved over to the AWA, Hogan would be given more training by Verne Gagne and quickly become the industry's standard bearer - but Ole took a great deal of pride in having booted out the man who'd soon personify professional wrestling, as he'd explain in a 2004 *Wrestling Revue* interview (and like a lot of Ole's points, this makes more sense than it sounds when you first read the headline.)

He was the shits. He was a great kid...he had the look but what would you do with it? The only way you could possibly use him was if he went to a territory like New York [WWF] or like Minneapolis [AWA], because we used to run towns on a weekly basis.

If you put Hulk Hogan back at the very beginning in the towns down here in Georgia that we ran week after week after week after week, it would take the people about two days to realize he didn't know his ass from a hole in the ground.

If you took him to [the WWF in] New York, and you were careful, and you put him over somebody who knew a little bit about being in the ring, you might have the chance of making Hogan look like something. And the guy who really made Hogan Hogan wasn't New York, who was it? Verne Gagne [in the AWA]. But Verne also had the luxury of being able to put a guy in Minneapolis, and he didn't have to worry about coming back for two or three or four months. Hogan didn't overexpose himself.

By 1980, Ole had earned enough money to become the part-owner of GCW with Jim Barnett and the Brisco Brothers. Importantly, Georgia had something which most other territories lacked – for twelve years, it had national TV syndication on Ted Turner's WTBS Superstation channel. This meant a lot of smaller promoters were happy to send their big stars to Georgia, so they'd get national exposure, and ensured the biggest names in the business would come and perform in the territory. And that was something which a hungry young promoter from out East had noted.

Vince McMahon already had one national cable network to screen his WWF shows on; but he wanted more. He approached Turner directly to see if he could purchase the slot, but was rebuffed. So, McMahon realised the only way to get that cable TV slot was to buy Georgia.

As early as August 1983, Ole had attended the NWA's annual convention in Las Vegas, where he made it clear he was angered by the national expansion of Vince

McMahon, whose WWF was paying no attention to the territorial boundaries that the NWA had set. No one listened to him, but less than a year later, McMahon would destroy the Georgia territory.

I was stupid enough to think, number one, that the rest of the promoters, from Verne to Jimmy Crockett to Bill Watts to Don Owen to whoever, wouldn't allow Vince McMahon to take over wrestling. I was stupid because I miscalculated everybody, thinking that I know something about people. I really hit an all-time low, because I didn't factor in the idea that these guys had such tremendous egos that there was no way that they could agree to formulate a plan where we could all work against Vince McMahon.

In early 1984, McMahon started to approach the Georgia shareholders to sell their stock to him. Ole wanted none of it: "I told him to go fuck himself," he recalled. McMahon returned the following week to make his offer again. "I told him to go fuck himself." The next week, McMahon returned, this time with his wife Linda, who he introduced to Ole. "I said, 'she can go fuck herself, and you can go fuck yourself too'."

But while Ole held out, his partners didn't. Having discovered that Jim Barnett had been skimming money from GCW to fund trips to Hong Kong (where Barnett bought lots of custom-made suits and, as a gay man, was also accused of some sex tourism)⁶⁰, Ole made the move to dump him. But Barnett was popular, had a lot of sway in wrestling, and wanted his revenge. He aligned himself with McMahon and used his intimate inside knowledge of GCW to help McMahon to take over the company.

Seeing McMahon hovering with his WWF chequebook, Jack and Jerry Brisco spearheaded the shareholders selling 90% of the existing Georgia Championship Wrestling shares to McMahon. As a 10% minority shareholder with no power against McMahon, Ole had no option left but to resign in fury.

If I had had a fucking brain, you know what I would have done? You know what I should have done? I should have said, 'Damn it, Vince, you're the smartest son of a bitch in the whole fucking world. How much do I get?'

There are rumours that Ole was so angry with how everything panned out that he burned and destroyed much of the GCW video library.⁶¹ Jerry Brisco also claimed that Ole had put a hit out on the brothers, something they were warned about by fellow wrestler Paul Jones.

With the Briscos finishing up their Georgia dates as the deal went through, Road Warrior Animal approached to say that Ole had also put up a bounty for any wrestlers who hurt them in the ring.

⁶⁰ Ole's 2003 book refers to Barnett on occasion as "the fag." 2003. Published 2003.

⁶¹ The WWE own what's described as the 'Georgia Championship Wrestling archive from 1948 to 1984', as it was part of the WCW video archives they bought in 2001. But little of it has ever been released and no outsiders know what's there (some reports when the WWE Network was first announced in 2012 said the GCW tapes only covered "the last year or so") or what condition it's in – the WCW library was said to be full of unlabelled tapes and loads had badly degraded. On the occasions where WWE has used GCW clips in other shows, many of them seem to be from fan-recorded VHS tapes or YouTube and not from masters.

We are in the Cleveland Auditorium, and there is this big curtain. Behind the curtain, Animal and Hawk come out and say 'Come here, we want to talk to you.' We were working with them, we thought they might want to go with something different in the match.

We walk back there and they said 'Guys, I'm gonna tell you, I'll probably get fired if you let this out. But I want to tell you, Ole's put the money out on you, allegedly. He put the money out to anyone who could break your arm or break your leg, we were offered the money tonight. You guys have done too much for us, helped us out in our careers.'



McMahon now held a total monopoly on all nationally televised wrestling in the United States. And in what became known in the industry as 'Black Saturday', viewers tuning into see Georgia wrestling on the 14th July 1987 instead saw McMahon presenting WWF bouts in front of the old Georgia wrestling backdrop. Thousands contacted the network to demand GCW was put back on, while the ratings were terrible compared to what GCW had been doing. Promising that he would produce new content from the Georgia studio as part of the deal, McMahon directly violated this agreement, showing pre-recorded highlights from WWF house shows. Furious at how McMahon had forced his way onto his network and angry at the falling ratings, Ted Turner would become McMahon's rival, spending years backing the WWF's main competition WCW.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPHcM4e5kLg>

Stuck on the outside, Ole briefly formed a new promotion – Championship Wrestling From Georgia – which was given a new Saturday morning timeslot by Ted Turner, and which outperformed the new WWF show, much to McMahon's fury, as he presumed he would be the only wrestling programming on the channel.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z4ZjpG6J9pI>

With McMahon losing money, he sold the slot back to Turner after less than a year for \$1million, and NWA programming returned to WTBS in the form of Jim Crockett Promotions (later becoming WCW in 1988). You can watch the *Dark Side of the Ring* episode on it right here, rastas.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r52ylrwDmOA&pp=ygUeRoVPUkdJQSBDBSEFNUElPTINISVAgV1JFU1RMSU5H>

In April 1985, Ole sold his Championship Wrestling From Georgia promotion to the larger Jim Crockett Promotions, who he then joined as a wrestler.

When Ole's still-regular tag partner Gene decided to retire (horribly, he suffered a lasting head injury when Wahoo McDaniel hit him too hard with a baseball bat in an angle, from which he never fully recovered), Ole began teaming with Arn in a new Minnesota Wrecking Crew. The two won the NWA National tag team championship within a month of their teaming.



The Minnesota Wrecking Crew began helping out Ric Flair, and they formed a new stable which became The Four Horsemen, along with Flair and Tully Blanchard, under manager JJ Dillon. Named after a line in an Arn Anderson promo – “not since the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse have so few wreaked so much havoc on so many” - they were largely united by their hatred of Dusty Rhodes (who they’d constantly attack). At *Starrcade* ‘85, the Andersons defended their tag belts against Wahoo

McDaniel and Billy Jack Haynes in a match so inessential, it’s not on YouTube *even though the WWE don’t bother to take down old NWA matches anymore*.



But Ole was past his peak and seemed hugely out of step with the others – while the Horsemen all wore expensive suits, Ole would rarely be seen wearing anything other than his trunks and a home-printed T-shirt, and his promos were less high-roller and more grumpy old bartender. After a couple of years as the least exciting Horseman (in which time he and Arn had a long feud with the Rock ‘N’ Roll Express, including a match at *Starrcade* ‘86)⁶², he was booted out in favour of Lex Luger in February 1987.

Following a couple of short retirements and unspectacular returns, Anderson began booking in WCW in 1989. He had his final in-ring match in April 1990, when he and Arn lost a house show match to Rick Steiner and Road Warrior Animal. He’d spent the first four months of the year losing tag matches to the Steiners, so he was probably more than happy to hang up his boots, although he worked for a bit as the Horsemen’s manager.⁶³

As booker, he had a strong first year (it was glorious thanks to Ric Flair’s feuds with Ricky Steamboat and Terry Funk, which fitted very much into Ole’s idea that wrestling should be realistic and physical), but he found himself under increasing pressure to deliver more WWF-like storylines by the executive Jim Herd, something which he struggled to do and didn’t have any appreciation for.

His most famous angle was the disastrous Black Scorpion storyline, for which he delivered the disembodied voice of the Scorpion which came out over the tannoy, and occasionally donned the mask for segments (although nothing in ring). He’d come up with the idea of a masked wrestler from Sting’s past, but had nothing more than that – by the time the angle began, he’d still not worked out who the reveal would be (although it was strongly hinted throughout that it would be the Ultimate Warrior, then one of the WWF’s hottest acts). After *Starrcade* 1990 – and a piss-weak reveal that the Scorpion was Flair – Ole was fired.

He came back in 1992 as WCW’s senior referee (the company was being run at the time by Bill Watts, who’d worked with Ole a lot in the 1970s and shared his outlook

⁶² Ole takes on Ricky Morton in October 1986, where he works really well as a bully against teen heartthrob (that’s what we told) Morton. But this was also because Ole refused to sell much for Morton, as he didn’t think it would be believable due to Morton’s size (which is ‘a little bit smaller than Ole’.)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vQd8FZ45Pis>

⁶³ Oddly, his final singles match took place a whole three years previously, when he beat the Barbarian on a Great American Bash house show. He only ever did tag matches from that point on.

on wrestling), and by 1993 he was once again booking, always pushing for a more traditional style. He fell out with Ric Flair on his return from the WWF – he felt Flair had been damaged by losing a Loser Leaves WWF match to Mr Perfect on the way out, and Flair was deeply hurt to have someone he'd always considered a friend make it clear that he didn't want to push him at a high level.

In a later shoot interview, Ole was dismissive of Flair as a talent, which is patently madness. "He ended up having the same match every night," he spluttered.

He had a lot of potential to begin with, but he's never had anything different than the same damn match every night...The point is he still doesn't have any idea how to have a match work. He always does the same damn dumb things.

Shortly after he'd provided the voice of the masked Shockmaster (in a classic botch debut), creative disagreements with the newly-promoted Eric Bischoff saw him fired in September 1994 – Bischoff called Ole's ideas "dated and unsophisticated". The firing took place after Ole met with Smoky Mountain Wrestling promoter Jim Cornette in the parking lot of WCW's Power Plant to film some promos for Ole's son Bryant's upcoming SMW debut, but Bischoff both loathed Cornette and wanted Ole gone, so fired Ole for fraternising with him. It would be the end of Ole's active wrestling career.

Surprisingly for a wrestler of his generation, his bitterness didn't stem from penury. He made fortunes in wrestling - first as an active wrestler, then a promoter, and then with his later WCW runs (where he made upwards of \$250,000 a year). He lived in a massive house on a lake, where he had seven children and also owned a profitable sawmill. His surly attitude seems not to have stemmed from circumstances, so much as from something hard-wired within him.

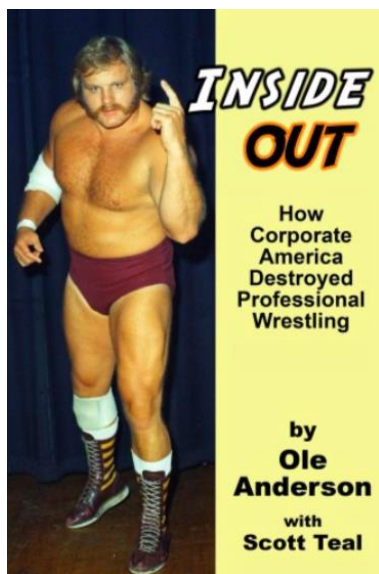
"As time goes by, you realise you'll never be young again," recalled Arn Anderson, who tried to work out why his old partner came across as being so bitter. "He was a guy who was very physical in the ring, and to have that taken from you probably would make you a little bitter. But [I'm] not giving him an excuse to be so grumpy."

Even in his 2003 autobiography (which was called *Inside Out: How Corporate America Destroyed Professional Wrestling*), Ole took a perverse pride in having always been pretty horrible.

When one of the guys wanted time off because his grandmother had died, I started to grill him. 'What are you going to do – resurrect her from the dead?' He stammered. He didn't know how to respond. 'If you wanna work, then let's get to work,' I suggested.

As I walked away, the guy pulled a gun out of his bag and aimed it at the back of my head. I didn't know about it until Stan Hansen and some of the guys told me about it later. I asked Stan, "Why didn't somebody warn me?"

He just grinned and said, 'We wanted to see if he would actually shoot you.'



But in later years, Ole also attracted negative press for his use of racist language, if not being explicitly racist. In his autobiography, he spoke of how he'd hired long-time adversary Thunderbolt Patterson (who was said to be one of Ole's few friends in wrestling) solely because he was black, and thus could attract a non-white crowd. "If he had been white," Ole wrote in his autobiography, "he never would have had a job with me again. That's the truth."

As Teddy Long recalled, "He told me to my face, he said, 'Teddy Long, you want to know why me and Thunderbolt make a lot of money? It's because the whites want to see me whoop up on his n*gger ass, and the n*ggers want to see him whoop up on my ass.' That's what he told me to my face."⁶⁴

In his own autobiography, Tony Atlas noted (somewhat genially all things considered), "when I did something stupid, Ole Anderson would say, 'You dumb, n*gger!' I never paid any attention to it."

Ken Patera recalled it was a word that Ole had also yelled in the face of 'Big Cat' Ernie Ladd - he reported Ole screaming "You dumb fucking n*gger! You think you can put matches together because you graduate from Grambling College? Anyone can graduate from Grambling College because it's a n*gger college!" Patera noted that "back in the '70s that didn't bother white people, it didn't bother black people. Now it's a big deal." Yes, Ken, but even back then, I think most people would have thought it was fucking disgusting.

Even Tito Santana, who seems like one the nicest and gentlest wrestlers in history, said that Ole was racist in an RF shoot video. If even Tito thinks you're an asshole, I think there's got to be something in it.

As you might glean from the above, Ole may have had a deep understanding of the wrestling industry, but he combined it with being almost ceaselessly abrasive and unpleasant.



In later years, he took part in shoot interviews which consisted of him calling everyone "the shits" – Ric Flair was the shits, "an asshole, the same damn shitty match. Ric Flair was the absolute shits." Hulk Hogan was the shits. Dusty Rhodes was the shits. Stu Hart was the shits. Randy Savage was the shits.

When he'd stop slagging off people he'd worked with, Ole would lament in incredible detail how McMahon had destroyed the territory system, which had provided a living for a huge number of wrestlers all over the country, with wrestling taking place in

⁶⁴ Thunderbolt Patterson would ultimately be blacklisted from the pro wrestling industry after speaking out on the racism he experienced, and – perhaps more pressing for the white promoters of the day - for trying to unionize wrestlers.

countless towns every night. He had plenty of valid points, but every time he'd sit down and talk about it, he'd end up becoming needlessly shirty and arrogant right from the off, before dismissing people if they didn't know what wrestlers got paid in 1973.

Here he is giving Dave Meltzer a hard time in 2003 for seemingly no reason (although yes, Dave chatters a fuck of a lot here). With nearly every line, Ole's continually trying (and largely failing) to trip up Meltzer, who he loathes for reasons I don't really understand, and then settles into disagreeing with everything Meltzer says whether it's right or not. "I'm trying to give you a lesson," he says to Meltzer. "You can take or don't take it, I don't care."

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

In 2004, he made it clear he believed that WWE was a failed enterprise, something which just patently wasn't true. It might not have presented the art of wrestling as he felt it should be done – but instead of saying that, he just said it was, effectively, all wrong.

Vince and those people up there that run that damn thing, they just don't have a clue. And they never will have a clue, they never will, because they've never been down there in the ditches, trenches, to know how to make it happen. I was asked, several years ago, what I would do if I got the opportunity to run Vince's show, if I got the opportunity to run Ted Turner's show. I said I wouldn't take it. They said, 'What do you mean?' I said, 'Well, nobody knows how to do what I'd want to have done! They just don't have a clue.'

The territory system was long dead, but Ole couldn't stop making the point that the modern WWE couldn't have drawn in the same city week after week like he did in Georgia. But he ignored the fact that the WWE didn't *need* to draw in the same city week after week – they were putting on sell-out shows across the world and had millions coming in from TV rights. The business had changed beyond Ole's comprehension. But on and on he went, only ever measuring success by the standards of his personal glory days of the early-1980s.

As death often does, it allowed the people that Ole spent years spitting venom at the chance to be magnanimous. WWE and AEW both did opening-credit tributes to Ole (who had suffered with MS in his later years), while Arn Anderson did the sort of tribute that makes it clear he couldn't just say "Ole was a great dude".

Each one of us starts dying the moment we are born. Some of us live long fruitful lives, some die too soon. All I have been able to figure out in my 65 years is to treat people how you want to be treated and if they teach you anything, be grateful for that. Ole Anderson was brutally honest when it came to how he felt about life and wrestling. He gave me the rub of a lifetime, taking Gene's spot in the Minnesota Wrecking Crew.

The 4 Horsemen followed, and we know how that went. He was a mentor to me without meaning to be. I studied and will teach my son some Ole-isms. To his family and people that loved him, we grieve with you. To those who thought Ole was too ornery to die, 81 is a full life. RIP Rock.

28th February – POUR OUT A JAR OF MEATSAUCE FOR A REAL ONE

Mike Jones, who wrestled as Virgil in the WWF and Vincent in WCW, died today. He was 73, which came as a surprise to most, as he'd always claimed his birthday was over a decade later than it was. Even stranger, he changed the actual day, not just the year: his date of birth was 7th April 1951, but he told everyone it was 13th June 1962.

Jones was born in Wilksburg, Pennsylvania, and was playing for Virginia Union University's football team when he met wrestler Tony Atlas at his local gym. A keen bodybuilder, Atlas encouraged Jones to get into wrestling, and he was trained by Afa of the Wild Samoans.



His earliest match on Cagematch suggests he debuted as WWF enhancement talent in September 1985, losing a match to 'Mr Wonderful' Paul Orndorff under the name 'Luscious Brown', a name he should never have dropped. He's also got hair and looks like Don Cheadle. And someone looks to have been finding out from Tony Atlas what to take to make your muscles go absolutely huge. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_KCe5-H8U

His main wrestling was done in Tennessee's CWA where he worked as Soul Train Jones (another name he should never have dropped). In his rookie year, he won the AWA International title from Big Bubba (a pre-WWF Big Boss Man) and successfully defended it against Tarzan Goto and Lord Humongous (a pre-anything Sid Vicious). He even got an AWA title shot against Nick Bockwinkel, teamed with the Rock's dad Rocky Johnson and eventually lost his belt to Chic Donovan, a man who this newsletter deeply admires for his eternal career. It was a staggering debut considering this is Virgil we're talking about, and in terms of being pushed in the ring as a star, it set a template that the rest of his career never lived up to.



Jones joined the WWE in mid-1987 as Virgil, the silent bodyguard of Million Dollar Man Ted DiBiase (the name was a dig at WCW's star and booker Dusty Rhodes, whose real name was Virgil Runnels – ha ha, look, we've called a lackey your name, a ha ha.)⁶⁵ They became an iconic pairing, the undercurrents of racism of the wealthy white man and his black man-servant never tastelessly touched upon during the run, although, yes, it probably was supposed to be a bit racist.

While he was perfectly good in the role (which wasn't hugely demanding beyond occasionally getting hit near the end of a match and having to lie down), Jones barely wrestled from this point on, and nor did he do anything on the mic. Here he is with DiBiase on the Arsenio Hall Show – one of the few 1980s TV shows that played along with the wrestlers they had on. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VoZPT33Votk>

⁶⁵ Or was it? While the legend has it that Bobby Heenan came up with the Virgil/Virgil Runnels dig, Bruce Pritchard, who was on the WWF writing team in 1987, says the name 'Virgil' wasn't anything to do with Dusty Rhodes, and the person who came up with the name, Joel Watts, confirmed it was just a coincidence. The later 'Vincent' and 'Shane' names in WCW were obviously jokes based on this rumour, but they've made it seem like the name 'Virgil' was the first in a long line of digs, which it might not have been.

“Virgil died today,” added a poster under that YouTube video. “He inspired me in a way. Whenever I have to go to some sort of meeting that I don't want to go to, I keep my mouth shut and keep a straight face and think of Virgil, hoping that my lack of words will make the meeting end faster.”

But with Virgil seldom wrestling and never speaking, it meant he never really developed in the same way that anyone else in a big promotion would, and when the WWF finally decided to give him a run, he seemed green and awkward, even though he'd been on TV for the past three years.

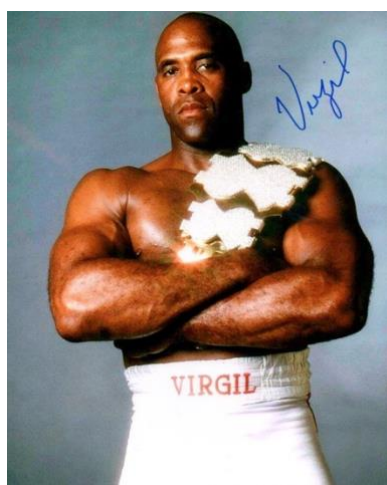
In his first full year in the WWF, he had just 17 house show matches, most of them under five minutes in length. In 1988, he had 15 matches. In 1989, only 4. It meant that, while he was on TV every time you saw the Million Dollar Man, was often part of big main events (like a male Miss Elizabeth who lacked sex appeal) and had faced Hulk Hogan (at a house show in Maryland) and Randy Savage⁶⁶ in singles matches, he'd basically only done a single year of wrestling and was thus leagues behind everyone else in the promotion.

In November 1990, he teamed with DiBiase for a series of house show matches against Dusty and Dustin Rhodes, and incredibly was given a series of victories over Rhodes (the man who inspired his nickname) in December 1990. DiBiase and Virgil beat the Rhodes's at *Royal Rumble* 1991, in what was Virgil's first-ever PPV match and saw him finally turn on DiBiase after months of being humiliated. It was still a time when turns were a big deal and the crowd go mad when it happens.

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

Here he is taking on Haku in February 1991, who (despite his genuine reputation as a kille) was a very entry-level bad guy for good guys to get past at this time. This is Virgil's first match after the turn and they've not even come up with any entrance music for Virgil, so he has to piggyback on Roddy Piper's one. Also, Virgil didn't have a finishing move, which everyone else did. They just wouldn't try to help Virgil get over, would they?

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



The two built up to a match for DiBiase's Million Dollar Belt at *Wrestlemania VII*, which Virgil won by count-out. The programme continued to *Summerslam* 1991, where Virgil managed to pin his former boss and take the title (which wasn't really viewed as an actual title, but more something DiBiase liked and didn't want people to touch). Greeted with delight by the crowd, it would be the highlight of his career, as once he'd finished with DiBiase, there was no logical storyline for him to follow.

By November, perhaps because the WWF had realised that he didn't seem to have much of an upside and the

⁶⁶ One of their matches opened the *High Fliers* video, one of the first WWF tapes to be released in the UK and must have been seen by thousands of British people, desperate for wrestling excitement. That match didn't really deliver it.

Million Dollar Belt was a key part of DiBiase's gimmick, he lost the belt back to DiBiase after interference from Repo Man. If your next angle is with Repo Man, you know things aren't going from strength to strength.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OgnwzVvoxyA&pp=ygUPdmlyZ2lsIHd3ZiAxOTkx>

The WWE superstar with the least charisma and the lowest ring ability (albeit one of the few black performers in the company), he spent the next few years doing very little of note in his candy-striped tights, bar a rare goodie vs goodie WWF championship TV match with Bret Hart in 1992.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9TJTT2wyU4>



Jones had long house show runs with Skinner, the Brooklyn Brawler and Terry Taylor (which he won) and Nailz, Shawn Michaels and Doink (which he very much didn't), which lasted for *years*. By 1994, he was little more than a jobber – wading through endless losses to an elderly Nikolai Volkoff...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ePjZ1wdQg>

...and the up-and-coming Diesel, as here on *Monday Night Raw* in April 1994.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TkAGJld2KR0>

He parted ways with the WWF in 1995 and headed to the indies, stuck in bland main events for short-lived promotions, where he was matched primarily against other former WWF names, like Jim Neidhart, Greg Valentine, the Honky Tonk Man and, surprisingly, on one occasion, Sabu.



His most infamous indie match was for NWC (National Wrestling Conference) on their *Night of Champions* card. He took on a wrestler called 'The Thug', who came out wearing a KKK hood, accompanied by another man dressed in full KKK robes. That second man was Jim Neidhart, who proceeded to roll his robe into a noose and then hang Virgil over the top rope. 1995, people. 1995.

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

In early 1997, WCW came calling. As part of the golden 1990s run of WWF, and with Ted DiBiase in a key on-screen management position, Jones was brought in as the fifth member of the nWo. He was named Vincent – this time, his nom-de-biff was to mock McMahon (and later it was shortened to just Vince, to really drive the fairly weak poont home). Charles Wright (who was working in the WWF at Kama at the time, and was later the Godfather) claimed that he was going to be offered the role, but Jones agreed to do it for a lot less. That's capitalism for you, Charles.

He had a similar role to his WWF bodyguard one, where he was mainly beaten up as a surrogate to the stars and seldom appeared in PPV matches. His biggest match was probably at *Uncensored* 1999, where he lost to Stevie Ray in a Harlem Street Fight to decide who would lead the nWo's B-team, Black and White.



As WCW began to spiral downwards, Jones joined the West Texas Redneck stable of country-loving good old boys as 'Curly Bill', before slipping back in the role of bodyguard for Vince Russo (this time called 'Shane', which was a weak attempt to reflect the younger McMahon's role in WWF under his father), before becoming Mr Jones, the manager for Ernest 'The Cat' Miller (although he was swiftly replaced by a female valet named Ms Jones).

Here's Curly Bill and fellow Redneck Kendall Windham taking on Silver King and YESSSSS La Parka on WCW *Saturday Night* in October 1999.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M9ECe2qsDqg>

By the end of 2000, he was just wrestling as 'Mike Jones', which shows a level of laziness on WCW's part that sort of makes you pleased they didn't get to keep making creative decisions for very much longer.

Jones retired in 2000 (he became a high school maths teacher in Pittsburgh, having gained a maths degree when he was at university) but started making appearances again in 2006, when former WWF talents were always a way for small independent promoters to sell some extra tickets on a scene that was growing for the first time in years. He used the names Virgil and Vincent, although there didn't seem to be anything he did differently between the two.

Virgil was brought back to WWE in 2010 to reprise his bodyguard character for a storyline with the son of the Million Dollar Man, Ted DiBiase, Jr. It only lasted a month.

But he got a new, unexpected lease of life in 2012, when a photo of Virgil sitting behind his table at the San Diego Comic Con went viral, under the hashtag 'Lonely Virgil'.



Wrestling podcaster Sam Roberts set up the 'Lonely Virgil' Twitter account and a website began collecting photos of him at conventions with no-one visiting him. People started filming him being lonely at every convention he was at, to chuck the

footage up on YouTube. Ha ha, this man's trying to make a living and people aren't interested, a ha ha!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qxmZt6BTyqk>



In 2013, someone contacted *Deadline*, the little grass, to reveal Virgil had been spotted selling his 8x10s in the New York subway – just standing on the platform with his glossy prints and charging passers-by for a photo, even if scarcely any of them would have known who he was. Someone took a video (didn't fucking pay him for a print, which makes it worse) and it started an outpouring of pity and vague distaste. But Virgil was just out there with his honest hustle, making some money and good on him. Guy's got a work ethic you cannot deny.⁶⁷

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZCS31dIEu8>

Virgil later became slightly notorious at conventions for photobombing people when they were having snaps taken with other wrestlers, and then asking to be paid for appearing in the photo. It didn't seem to be serious – at best, it seemed like he was hoping people would, which is a bit scammy – but it gave him a reputation as someone who would try and con a dollar out of everyone he came across.

One person who wasn't keen on how he operated was his old colleague Ted DiBiase, who found out Virgil was booking appearances at conventions saying that DiBiase would be with him, before turning up on his own and saying DiBiase had no-showed, the unprofessional prick. Of course, DiBiase hadn't been contacted at any point, so he was finding himself having to apologise for no-showing events he'd never even heard about.

With this new notoriety and taking on the Iron Sheik's agents (who ran the viral Twitter account on the Sheik's behalf), Jones began talking making outlandish statements about his career, how he was all about making “fuck money” and being the Meatsauce God, a nod to his favourite Olive Garden chain restaurant. In 2021, a mobile phone game called *Meatsauce Madness* was released, where you operated Soul Train Jones through some platform full of meatsauce.



“Inspired by his passion/obsession for Meatsauce and heavy metal, in this game, travel with wrestling superstar and Meatsauce God, Soul Train Jones, through different worlds to try and get him to his Main Event! As the real leader of the NWO mentoring many people in his mind, hall of famer in his mind, hardest working man in the history of the biz, greatest athlete of all time, tireless commitment to smartening fans up the right way by taking their cash, the meatsauce god, the pesto prince, the prince of parmesan, the alfredo

⁶⁷ While there, one person who stopped to see what he was doing was a writer-director called Jason Michael Brescia, who then cast Jones in a small role as a barfly in his 2014 low-budget film *Bridge and Tunnel*. It's apparently on a lot of streaming services. What a great two-fingers to anyone who mocked Jones for selling photos in the subway – he got a movie out of it. What movies have *you* ever been in, Virgil-mockers?

assassin.” I don’t imagine it did as well as the people involved had told each other it would before it came out.

At Joey Janela’s *Spring Break 3* in 2019, Virgil appeared as the masked and bodysuited Starman from the Nintendo game *Pro Wrestling*, surprising and pinning Ethan Page in three seconds, before unmasking. “I met Virgil when I was 11 at an indie wrestling show,” Janela wrote in the wake of Jones’s death.

I walked up and said hello and he tried to finagle me for \$20 a picture. I did not have any money but instead he said “Kid, hold my bag.” Fast forward two years later - I walked into the Super Mega show toy convention and my friend’s dad went “Joey, that guy over there is calling your name.” To much confusion and surprise, it was “WWF Superstar” Virgil – somehow, he remembered me. Many years later when we came up with the Spring Break show, the first name that came to mind that we needed to get for this show was Virgil himself, which permanently cemented [him] as a part of the Janelaverse forever!

I had many great times with Michael. He was one of the funniest characters I’ve ever met in the business and always meant well. From getting the promoter in England to fly him out on [two] days’ notice because we were drunk and I wanted to hang out with him, which would be his last time across the pond, to bringing him to the AEW hotel to rib and annoy the boys.⁶⁸

Virgil was always a team player and brought smiles to people’s faces. But let’s not [forget] his contributions to the business back in the day, as his act with the Million Dollar Man Ted DiBiase and massive babyface turn is something very memorable and still talked about today. If you were in the business then or if you ran into Virgil in the last 20 years, you had a story that you’d remember forever.

I looked forward to seeing him this year in Philadelphia, but that sadly that won’t happen, but I have many memories with the Meatsauce god that will last a lifetime!



His reappearance led to a short series of appearances for AEW, where, as ‘Curly Bill’, Jones allied himself with Chris Jericho and the Inner Circle.

Virgil was diagnosed with dementia in 2022 (which made more medical sense when it turned out he was in his 70s and not his 60s, as he’d long claimed) and had suffered poor health afterwards, suffering a series of strokes before his death.

⁶⁸ Last year, Janela explained how he’d “ribbed the whole AEW locker room in Pittsburgh. I told [Virgil] to come out to the hotel where everyone was chilling and just brought him around, brought him to the [Young] Bucks. I said, “Virgil, this is Matt and Nick, the Young Bucks. They said to me a couple [of] weeks ago that you’re the inspiration for their career. Your match with Nailz at *Summerslam* 1992.” And he really just talked their ear off for about ten minutes. They’re looking at me like ‘You son of a bitch.’ I did it to everyone that day.” Janela’s AEW contract was not renewed.

29th February – LET'S END AS WE BEGAN

Nick Kiniski, a former wrestler who worked for WWE in the 1980s, revealed that he had been propositioned by a backstage employee. When the harassment continued, Kiniski informed Vince McMahon, who went on to do...*nothing*.

The son of Canadian wrestling legend and former NWA champion 'Big Thunder' Gene Kiniski, Nick explained to the *Pollock & Thurston* podcast that he had debuted in 1985, against his father's wishes, who didn't want him to have a wrestling career.



Kiniski started in World Class, moved to Portland, and signed with the WWF in the summer of 1986, where he beat lower-level enhancement talent like Les Thornton, Steve Lombardi (the future Brooklyn Brawler) and Barry O (Randy Orton's uncle)⁶⁹. In turn, he became young enhancement talent, losing to the likes of Butch Reed, Ron Bass and, in a TV match, Randy Savage.

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

My career was going good, I was travelling, I was enjoying it - that's all I ever wanted to do in life. You go out there on a card with Hulk Hogan, so they were sell-outs. It's an unbelievable adrenaline rush.



But Kiniski was soon approached by Terry Garvin, who began propositioning him. A former wrestler (who looks eerily like Boris Johnson to modern eyes), Garvin worked behind the scenes at WWF, having been brought into the company in 1985 by Pat Patterson. "He would come up to me and hit on me," explained Kiniski. "I won't say what he said, but you'll understand the meaning behind it. He says 'Hey Nick, let me perform oral sex on you, you can read a

Playboy and you'll have it made for life."

And, you know, he is my boss, he controls my boss. This is my livelihood, what I want to do. I kind of joked with him, I said 'Hey Terry, you know, I'm not that way. But if I ever change, you'll be the first. I'll let you be the first.' We just kinda laughed it off.

But he was always kind of coming up and joking, and one time he came to my hotel room late at night and I told him to leave. Knocked at the door. So, it put me in a very awkward position, you know?

⁶⁹ Barry Orton also claimed he had been sexually harassed by Garvin back in 1978 and that his career was derailed when he went public with his story, which shares many similarities with Kiniski's recollection. He later recanted allegations he'd made against Pat Patterson, saying he'd never seen Patterson engaged in any of the behaviour that Garvin did.

Kiniski decided to inform Vince McMahon, in the hope that the harassment would stop.

I remember where it was, it was in Milwaukie, Oregon, we wrestled in Portland.⁷⁰ I called Vince, and I said 'Hey, Vince, I don't think this is right. Terry's hitting on me. I don't appreciate that and I would like it to stop.' And Vince said 'Oh, ok. I'll deal with it.' And that was it.

Nothing changed. [Garvin would] still say 'Hey, have you thought about your proposition?' as he walks by in the dressing room.

Having had enough, certain nothing would be done to help him and noticing he'd began to lose most of his matches, Kiniski informed McMahon that he was leaving the WWF, and wouldn't be losing any more matches on his way out.

I talked to Vince. I said 'This isn't right, Vince. I complain, and now you guys are punishing me. I'll finish my bookings, but I'm not putting any guys over. Put me in the ring, we'll see what happens.' Vince knows I could take care of myself, so he said 'No.' I said, 'I'm done.' I said, 'I'll finish my matches,' 'Nope, you're done now.' 'Thank you very much.'

Kiniski spent the next year in the AWA before retiring after a brief five-year career.

But in the subsequent years, Garvin would be fired after an underage ring boy, Tom Cole, issued a lawsuit alleging that he had been sexually harassed before being fired from his job after rejecting Garvin's advances. Known as 'the Ring Boy scandal' and the first of WWF's serious internal sexual scandals (albeit one which was largely ignored by the press), it resulted in Garvin, Patterson and ring announcer Mel Phillips (who was also in charge of sorting out the boys who would set up the ring) all resign in May 1992.⁷¹

Some new information about that scandal came from Paul Roma, who worked for WWF from 1984 until 1991 (his best run being in the Power and Glory tag team with Hercules in his final year) and spoke to *NewsNation* about the 'casting couch' mentality which existed in parts of the WWF back at the time.

You're talking about an industry where you have young, good looking, well-built men in the ring. Half-naked - three quarters naked actually. It left the door open. [McMahon] had a lot of people around him, vice-presidents and bookers that were very much into that, and they put you in a really bad situation...especially once you start making some money and you kind of get comfortable with that, and then you find out that your job's on the line. Either do it or get fired. I witnessed quite a few that walked away, the money wasn't worth it for them to go that route, so to speak.

⁷⁰ Records suggest this would have been 10 February 1987, where Kiniski lost to the Iron Sheik.

⁷¹ Patterson and Phillips were later rehired – McMahon said that he'd fired Phillips because his relationship with children appeared "peculiar" and "unnatural", but he was later rehired on the condition he "steer clear from kids." McMahon allegedly said he'd brought Phillips back because the man "really missed the wrestling" and "really missed the scene." Oh, he missed the scene? I didn't realise that. No more questions.

They were asked to do things - sexual things - with other men, that they did not want to do. My former partner being one of them.

I was actually in a cab ride in Washington, and we were coming back. The gentleman next to me kept saying it's not worth it. It's not worth the Benjamins...The next day we were filming for our second TV taping and he was gone. He jumped on a flight and went back home and never showed up again to wrestle.⁷²

Roma was asked if the harassment was coming from the executives and backstage workers in the company.

That's all it could be. If somebody is going to give you money, it has to be that. There is nothing else. It's not going to be one of the boys that you're wrestling with. They're not going to offer you money. Even my former partner. They offered him money, drugs. 'Just lay on your back you don't have to do a thing.'

Roma also revealed his tag partner had complained to "higher-ups".

And I say 'Well, why would you do that? You just killed our team. What do you think he's going to do? He's going to go to the people who propositioned you. And what do you think is gonna happen to them? *Nothing.*'

Again, Kiniski and Roma's claims were a clear display of a long-standing problem within WWE, where claims of sexual harassment by people in the company were brought to the attention of senior people – at which point the whistle-blowers were swiftly removed from the company, instead of the people accused of abuse.

Imagine if next month we could just have some fun? Won't that make a change?

WHAT HAVE WE BEEN WATCHING THIS MONTH?

Writing about the Georgia territory and how the tape library might have been destroyed sent me on a hunt through YouTube, where I came across someone who's put together nearly 500 shows in a playlist. Not going to lie, I really thought they'd be harder to track down than that.

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL67xPocgfzJWRspOS_Fa8LNfoqa9tZXoZ

An absolutely mind-bending WWF house show from the Boston Garden in 1986, featuring Joshi legends Bull Nakano, Chigusa Nagayo, Lioness Asuka and Dump Matsumoto. And if that's not enough, you also get Bret Hart vs Ricky Steamboat, Randy Savage vs Tito Santana, and the Funks taking on Hulk Hogan and Junkyard Dog. *Beyond incredible.*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BEIk_ZhTYGg

⁷² While Roma didn't identify his former tag team partner, the date would suggest it was Jim Powers, with whom Roma formed the Young Stallions, a low-level babyface team formed in 1987 who were one of the only low-level babyface tag teams. But Powers remained with the WWF until late 1994 – years longer than Roma – which would rule him out of the claim that Roma's partner "went back home and never showed up again to wrestle." Before teaming with Powers, Roma had teamed with dozens of low-level talents in WWF, so the person in question remains unidentifiable, as Roma clearly wanted them to.



Here's a WWF house show in Los Angeles from 1988 – there's overall better LA house shows on YouTube, but this has one of the Ultimate Warrior-Bobby Heenan weasel suit matches, and I will always stop everything to watch any of Heenan's few existing in-ring performances. Even at this age, the way he glides in and out of the ring just hints at how many years he's done this and made it second nature. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kldDmIC8WRY>

Here's Heenan in a nearly two-hour shoot interview, which was recorded for RF Videos. He's a wonder.

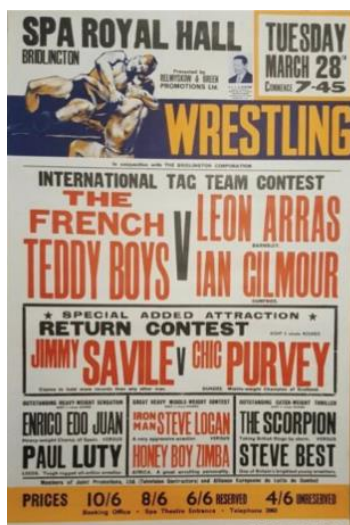
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EEkNKwyQWRw>



There's never been a more striking wrestler than 'The French Angel' Maurice Tillet, as detailed above. Here's some super rare 1940s colour film of Tillet in Indiana, with some generic jazz over the top as he meets Len Macaluso. Bruce Pritchard is said to own a plaster bust of Tillet's face, cast during life. And it's long been rumoured that Tillet was the inspiration for Shrek. What a life.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i4QIgnWTP4E>

WHAT MERCH HAS MARC BOUGHT THIS MONTH?



I bought this poster – perhaps the most notorious one in British wrestling, as not only does it have a rare billing for the Leeds-based monster Jimmy Savile (taking on Scotland's Chic Purvey, who might have been his most regular opponent), but it was the exact same one that Savile had displayed on the wall of his flat overlooking Roundhay Park. I should mention here, I like the history of wrestling, not Jimmy Savile. They demolished the flat he displayed his poster in a few years ago. Yorkshire folk don't fuck around, I tell thee that.

For £10, I also picked up ten old VHS tapes, mainly because

I'd noticed a first-generation copy of the 2001 UK show *WrestleXpress* amongst the other ones. Imports like the Sandman, Earthquake and Steve Corino, some big homegrown names of the day in Doug Williams, Robbie Brookside and Klondyke Kate, and a Jonny Storm-Jody Fleisch TLC

match. How many of these tapes are still in existence? Twenty? Ten? Five? Well, it turns out it doesn't matter, because the whole thing is up on YouTube. *Nnngh*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oonIPEhYAc0>





@michelleblogs and Mr Michelle Bloggs doing Wrestle Me! proud at the Perth Elimination Chamber, the bloody gorgeous champs



And if you want more, just click on the Dusty TV for our YouTube channel, yum yum yum