

FSM



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FSM READER AWARDS 2017

FIND OUT WHO YOU VOTED THE STAR PERFORMERS OF THE LAST 12 MONTHS

THE ALTERNATIVE YEAR IN REVIEW

FSM's unique perspective on the year that was

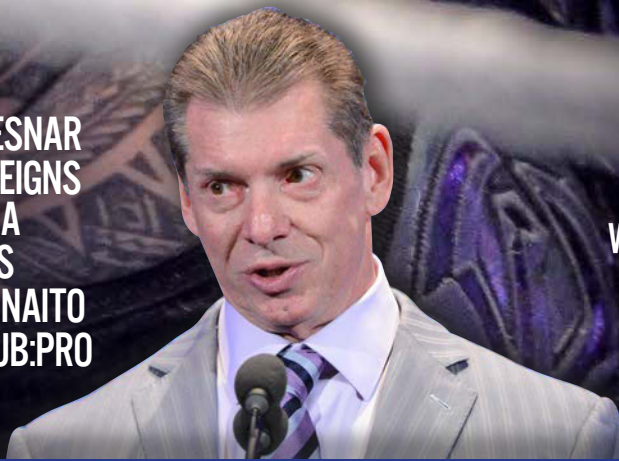
ANDRE THE GIANT

Why there will never be another "Eighth Wonder of the World"

WRESTLE KINGDOM XII

How Chris Jericho and Kenny Omega rocked the Tokyo Dome

- > BROCK LESNAR
- > ROMAN REIGNS
- > JOHN CENA
- > AJ STYLES
- > TETSUYA NAITO
- > FIGHT CLUB:PRO



VINCE MCMAHON

IS THE WWE CEO REALLY BRINGING BACK THE CALAMITOUS XFL?

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FIGHTING SPIRIT MAGAZINE #154

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FSM Welcome



BRIAN ELLIOTT
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For most people, the New Year begins at the very specific time of midnight on January 1, but for me, it really starts when **FSM** publishes the Reader Awards, as we have done in this issue. At that point, I can consider the previous year to be behind us, and I start to consciously look to the future in our articles, rather than analysing the past. That has its uses, of course, but the future is the one thing you can change, if you can see it coming early enough.

I do want to say thank you to everyone who voted in the Awards, and gave it its highest number of participants in its seven-year history. Thank you also to those who commented at how you like to support your local newsagent by picking up each issue there; while subscriptions have definite advantages for both you and **FSM**, keeping good book stores in business is vital, and it warmed my heart over Christmas to know that many of you feel the same way.

I won't give away the Reader Awards winners here – you should find that out at your leisure, and especially when you can grab a moment to sit down with the remaining festive chocolate. But if you'd like to check something out on wrestling's various streaming services, here are my top five matches of 2017 – only one per promotion, to spread the love!

- i) Kenny Omega vs. Kazuchika Okada** (New Japan Pro Wrestling, August 8 - www.tinyurl.com/NJPWEng)
- ii) Pete Dunne vs. Tyler Bate** (WWE, May 20 - www.WWE.com/WWENetwork)
- iii) WALTER vs. David Starr** (wXw, October 28 - www.wXwNow.de)
- iv) British Strong Style vs. Ringkampf** (PROGRESS Wrestling, April 23 - www.DemandPROGRESS.pivotshare.com)
- v) Daisuke Sekimoto & Yuji Okabayashi vs. KAI & Naoya Nomura** (All Japan Pro Wrestling, August 27 - <http://tinyurl.com/FSMFive>)

Right, that's enough of 2017 – unless you want to tweet me @FSM_Editor with what you thought of the above matches.)

We've got so much more to look forward to...

PS. It would be remiss of me not to mention the price increase on this issue, which is something we haven't done in several years. I hope you'll find £4.25 still a comparatively low price point for all the effort that goes into these pages. Thank you!

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“JERICHO WAS ABSOLUTELY INCREDIBLE FROM THE MOMENT HE WALKED OUT UNTIL THE MOMENT HE WALKED BACK TO THE LOCKER ROOM”

“DESPITE MCMAHON WANTING TO CONTINUE, NBC PULLED THE PLUG AT THE END OF THE FIRST SEASON, AND COMBINED THE XFL LOST \$140M”



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FSM READER AWARDS 2017

As with every year, **FSM** was thrilled and fascinated to turn over the decision-making to you, our readers, who have elected your choices for the very best of 2017. Our panel weighed in on outcomes both predictable and surprising.



WRESTLER OF THE YEAR:

AJ STYLES

AJ Styles' victory in this category is notable for several reasons. Firstly, by his own lofty standards, Styles hardly enjoyed a stellar year. He was, of course, still a superlative talent who outshone everyone else in WWE, and noted as such by bookending his year with scintillating scraps opposite John Cena and Brock Lesnar at the *Royal Rumble* and *Survivor Series* respectively. However, his output was unquestionably limited by working with Shane McMahon

and Jinder Mahal for lengthy periods, while a feud with Kevin Owens lacked spark.

Styles topping this poll also demonstrates some acknowledgement from viewers that he deserves to be featured in the very best scenarios possible, and should be the guy that *Smackdown* is built around right now.

As noted in last month's **FSM 50**, Kenny Omega and Kazuchika Okada both enjoyed better years in the squared circle. Free from the shackles of WWE's conventions and McMahon-centric plot lines, they each conspired to produce an incredible body of work, enviable by anyone else in the industry. It's a great positive to see their

improved positioning on this poll given the disappointing placements last year that didn't come close to reflecting their incredible talent.

Maybe 2018 will be the year in which more casual viewers accept the cream of the crop outside of WWE as equal to those within the company.

MICHAEL CAMPBELL

TOTALS: 1. AJ Styles: 25%; 2. Kenny Omega: 18%; 3. Kazuchika Okada: 13%

OTHERS (inc. Cody Rhodes, Will Ospreay, Braun Strowman, WALTER & Tetsuya Naito): 44%

FIGHTER OF THE YEAR:

ANTHONY JOSHUA

For the first time, **FSM** readers have made a boxer their Fighter of the Year, taking a crushing 60% of the fan vote.

This year, nobody came close to matching what Anthony Joshua achieved. A former Olympic gold medallist, he has been a sensation since turning pro, entering 2017 with a perfect record of 18 victories with 18 knockouts. He would add another two to both tallies, with his performance against Wladimir Klitschko being a stunning rebuke to those who had claimed his success had been due to facing inferior competition.

Much like the man he bested, Joshua has it all to dominate the heavyweight ranks. He has the height and weight to avoid being out-muscled, but still manages to smoothly move around the ring. And of course, he has fearsome knockout power. He has also confirmed himself as a genuine stadium attraction, drawing

massive crowds to both the Wembley and Principality stadiums. Likewise, no previous British fighter can boast such a lengthy run of successful pay-per-view events.

Boxing's success does, however, speak to the UFC's failure. It has been a frustrating year for the world's leading mixed martial arts promotion, which suffered from a serious lack of activity amongst its leading fighters. Those that did compete more than once either traded wins and losses, or failed to breakthrough due to the promotion's continued problems in making new stars.

WILL COOLING

TOTALS: 1. Anthony Joshua: 60%; 2. Demetrious Johnson: 12%; 3. Max Holloway: 8%

OTHERS (inc. TJ Dillashaw, Rose Namajunas, Tyron Woodley, Robert Whittaker & Francis Ngannou): 20%



© ANDREA KELLAWAY



KRIS TRAVIS MEMORIAL AWARD (UK & IRELAND WRESTLER OF THE YEAR):

PETE DUNNE

Pete has been my favourite wrestler for years now. Long before "The Bruiserweight" or WWE, when people would ask me who I thought was the most underrated guy in the UK, Pete was my go-to answer. Now he's finally getting the recognition he deserves, he's killing it! When you consider that the WWE UK championship tournament was in January, it's hard to argue with him as the UK Wrestler of the Year.

This year, his love for wrestling couldn't be more apparent. With his rise in WWE, he'd have had every right to take it easy on the independents, but he's done the opposite. From continuing to put out incredible merchandise, to various international tours, and killing it in UK venues from the Frog and Fiddle in Cheltenham for ATTACK! to Alexandra Palace for PROGRESS, he always goes all-out, and normally steals the show.

EDDIE DENNIS

TOTALS: 1. Pete Dunne: 62%; 2. Jordan Devlin: 14 %; 3. Zack Gibson: 5%

OTHERS (inc. Chris Brookes, Tyler Bate, Joe Coffey & Viper): 19%

© ANTHONY JOSHUA

MOST UNDER-UTILISED WRESTLER OF THE YEAR:

RUSEV



Rusev closes out 2017 as one of the most popular stars on the *Smackdown* brand, an amazing feat given his 2017 résumé.

He lost to part-timer The Big Show at *Fastlane*, and after recovering from an injury was drafted to *Smackdown*, where he said if he was not granted a title shot at *Money In The Bank* he would return to Bulgaria (he wasn't and he didn't). He dropped a forgettable flag match to John Cena at *Battleground*, and he lost in 10 seconds to Randy Orton at *SummerSlam*, followed by another defeat to "The Viper" at *Hell In A Cell*. Plus, his act with Lana was dissolved in favour of making her a wrestler. He held no titles and won zero pay-per-view matches.

This should all have been the death knell for Rusev's career, but he started gaining momentum in the autumn with the "Rusev Day" gimmick and the addition of Aiden English. Rusev's work as both a character and in the ring has always been very good, and with the crowd getting behind him, hopefully he starts getting some big wins in 2018. This is one category where he would not want to repeat as a winner.

JOE GAGNE

TOTALS: 1. Rusev: 29%; 2. Becky Lynch: 14%; 3. David Starr: 12%

OTHERS (inc. Johnny Gargano, Jack Gallagher, Bayley, Sami Callihan & Timothy Thatcher): 45%

UK & IRELAND MOST UNDER-UTILISED OF THE YEAR:

JORDAN DEVLIN

With a list of accomplishments as long as your arm and a schedule any wrestler would be envious of, Devlin and “under-utilised” seem a strange pairing. Yet, **FSM** readers have voted, and the Bray, Co. Wicklow wrestler has topped the list, which can

mean only one thing: you want *more!* More independents, more WWE, more OTT “Import Killer”, and it’s easy to see why.

In 2017, Devlin has been untouchable. From his performance in the WWE UK tournament to his monumental OTT championship win

over Mark Haskins, Jordan has been on fire. His matches with Mike Bailey, Matt Riddle, and David Starr at OTT alone were nothing short of phenomenal, and his work at Fight Club:PRO, ICW, and the rest of the UK has followed suit. If all of that wasn’t enough, Jordan has also worked tirelessly with the future of Irish wrestling at *Contenders* and *Uprising* shows, helping to make the stars of Scotty Davis and Curtis Murray shine even brighter with National Stadium-quality matches. If 2017 is anything to go by, 2018 will be an even bigger year for Devlin, and if fans get their way, it’ll be at NXT as well as the independent scene.

A friend and colleague, I’m proud as hell of Jordan, and fully expect his **FSM** award in 2018 to be for Wrestler of the Year.

DAMIEN CORVIN

TOTALS: 1. Jordan Devlin: 36%; 2. Cara Noir: 12%; 3. Chuck Mambo: 11%

OTHERS (inc. Justin Shape, Stevie Boy, “Lord” Gideon Grey, Chris Ridgeway & Jack Sexsmith): 41%



TAG TEAM OF THE YEAR:

THE USOS

Talk about a team that was completely reinvigorated this year! The Usos were highly motivated in 2017. The twins did away with their face paint, their theme song, and the rest of their somewhat dated act, and traded all of it in for black cargo pants, high tops, flat bills, grillz, a sick new theme that gets you pumped up every time you hear it, and a new catchphrase: “Day One ISH!”

The Usos were motivated in the ring as well, starting out the year in the middle of a heated rivalry with American Alpha. This feud, while not only great in-ring, pushed them to new heights they’d never touched before. Once they got their hands on the *Smackdown* Tag Team titles, their sights were set on The New Day, who’d just been traded to the brand. These teams produced some of the best matches of the year for main roster WWE; the entire summer and autumn of 2017 was littered with great matches between them, especially at *SummerSlam*.

The Usos got a much needed fresh new coat of paint this year, and continued to be an incredible tag partnership.

What more could you ask for?

JOEY BAY

TOTALS: 1. The Usos: 26%; 2. The Young Bucks: 18%; 3. Ringkampf: 13%

OTHERS (inc. War Machine, The Bar, The Hardys, The New Day & The Authors of Pain): 43%





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UK & IRELAND TAG TEAM OF THE YEAR:
#CCK

#CCK was the phenomenon of the British Wrestling scene in 2017. Coming into the year, Chris Brookes and Kid Lykos had a small but passionate fanbase mainly based in the Midlands, thanks to their work in places like ATTACK! Pro Wrestling. On a broad scale, they were frankly unknowns, but through clever marketing and an ability to connect with fans on social media, #CCK started to really become popular in the spring.

Winning Fight Club:PRO's highly publicised Dream Tag Team Invitational in April gave them the extra boost they needed, and they were off to the races. PROGRESS debuts followed, as did a Tag Team title win in their first match. They tore the house down against Tyler Bate and Trent Seven, not just in that bout, but also in their Ladder match at the Ally Pally supershow in September.

The creativity and charisma that both Brookes and Lykos possess make them one of the must-see teams on the scene. Unfortunately, a recent string of injuries to Lykos have curtailed their momentum and made their appearances as a duo rarer. Brookes turned to his original CCK partner Jonathan Gresham to replace Lykos on the recent Fight Club:PRO shows, and it's possible we'll see more of them together in 2018. Not to be forgotten is The Commonwealth (as opposed to Calamari) version of The Catch Kings, featuring Travis Banks as Brookes' partner. Most commonly teaming in RevPro, they've been a real hit at the Cockpit shows all year.

ALAN COUNIHAN

TOTALS: 1. #CCK: 33%; 2. British Strong Style: 32%; 3. Kings of the North: 14%

OTHERS (inc. The UK Hooligans, Polo Promotions, The Angel Cruzers, Bird and Boar & Jetta and Erin Angel): 21%

PROMOTION OF THE YEAR:
NEW JAPAN PRO WRESTLING

On domestic soil, it was a familiar story for New Japan Pro Wrestling. The group continued its remarkable five-year run of topping the seemingly untoppable, with the G1 Climax hitting new heights, and the Tokyo Dome show arguably the best event in the history of the building. New Japan created new stars, successfully elevated wrestlers up its roster, and cultivated its most impressive and exciting crop of young lions since the early-1990s. There was so much to enjoy all year long, from the Okada versus Omega series to the junior-heavyweight classics produced by Hiromu Takahashi, Will Ospreay, and KUSHIDA.

However, it was outside of Japan that the company offered its most unexpected triumphs. The two shows in Long Beach, California were a huge success, selling out quicker than anyone could have expected, also producing shows that were critical and commercial hits. The relationship with AXS TV in the U.S. is stronger than ever before, and there is serious talk from the channel about expanding its coverage. It's not just the U.S. however, as New Japan's top stars were treated like gods in Australia, the UK, and Ireland at different points in 2017.

This is a company that is doing all the right things. It has a lot on its plate, but has not shown any signs of being unable to manage the feast. From owner Takaaki Kidani to booker Gedo, those that are running New Japan have shown they know exactly what they're doing, and they did a top class job in 2017.

ALAN COUNIHAN

TOTALS: 1. New Japan Pro Wrestling: 46%; 2. WWE: 27%; 3. Ring of Honor: 7%

OTHERS (inc. wXw, PWG, Impact Wrestling, UFC & Dragon Gate): 20%



© ANDREA KELLAWAY

UK & IRELAND PROMOTION OF THE YEAR: PROGRESS WRESTLING

Well, isn't this wonderful? I'd like to thank everyone who has wrestled for us, helped behind the scenes, or attended a show in 2017. We're very lucky to have such an amazing pool of talent in the UK to choose from, and every single person who has performed for us over this past year has knocked it out of the park and helped us have our biggest year yet. It's genuinely awesome to win this, especially after the year that British and Irish wrestling as a whole has had; there's loads of tremendous competition, so we're super grateful to everyone who voted for us.

High points of the year for me include our trips to the USA; the whole of the *Super Strong Style* three-day weekend; the pop for TK Cooper and Dahlia Black's return; Toni Storm becoming our first women's champion; the success of our Atlas division; and of course the journey of Travis Banks from tag team wrestler to World champion.

Now for 2018: more travel, more shows than ever before, and somehow, we're doing Wembley Arena. It's all a bit mad, really.

Thank you again to everyone who supports British and Irish wrestling, whether it's PROGRESS or any of the other fine companies doing great things.

JIM SMALLMAN

TOTALS: 1. PROGRESS: 35%; 2. OTT: 17%; 3. Fight Club Pro: 11%
OTHERS (inc. ICW, Revolution Pro Wrestling, Pro Wrestling: EVE, ATTACK! Wrestling & WCPW/Defiant Wrestling): 37%



© TONY KNOX

SHOW OF THE YEAR:

NEW JAPAN - WRESTLE KINGDOM XI (JANUARY 4)

It speaks to the greatness of *Wrestle Kingdom XI* that in a year featuring so much great wrestling, a card that was held four days into 2017 was still voted the best overall show.

This event will forever be remembered for the headliner of Kazuchika Okada versus Kenny Omega, a match that was the talk of the wrestling world after it happened. But this was no one-match

card, as any of the three bouts preceding it would have won Match of the Night on a normal show. Tetsuya Naito overcame his *Wrestle Kingdom* losing streak and unseated Hiroshi Tanahashi to win the Intercontinental title in a match some argued was superior to the main event; longtime friends Hirooki Goto and Katsuyori Shibata had a brutal war for the NEVER openweight title; and Hiromu Takahashi made his name in unseating KUSHIDA for the junior-heavyweight title.

The rest of the card ranged from decent to good, with the IWGP junior-heavyweight Tag Team title match in which Roppongi Vice beat The Young Bucks being the only other standout.

Still, those final four matches made *Wrestle Kingdom* as exciting and emotionally satisfying a wrestling show a fan could hope to witness.

JOE GAGNE

TOTALS: 1. NJPW *Wrestle Kingdom XI* (January 4): 25%; 2. NXT TakeOver: Chicago (May 20): 21%; 3. NXT TakeOver: Brooklyn III (August 19): 16%

OTHERS (inc. WWE *WrestleMania XXXIII* (April 2), WWE *Royal Rumble* (January 29), NJPW *Dominion* (June 11), PWG *BOLA Night 3* (September 3) & ROH 15th Anniversary Show (March 10): 38%



© ROD LORING



UK & IRELAND SHOW OF THE YEAR:
PROGRESS WRESTLING
SUPER STRONG STYLE
16 - DAY 3 (MAY 29)

It's great to see this one win Show of the Year. From both a backstage and fans' point of view, the atmosphere at day three of *Super Strong Style 16* was incredible. It's a testament to how good the matches were that the last day of action was the best; the stories being told and the in-ring work were so good that there was no crowd fatigue.

Travis Banks winning the tournament was also the perfect ending. He is someone who has worked so hard to get where he is, and is so talented that you couldn't help but root for him.

It was also special to me as I wrestled against Kay Lee Ray in the first number one contenders match for the Women's title. To be on a card of that calibre was really something.

A week later, we had the runner-up in this category, OTT's *Outer Space Odyssey III*, which I was also lucky enough to be part of. Again, the atmosphere was amazing. OTT's strength is the variety it puts into shows, and this one was packed with everything from comedy matches to straight wrestling. A personal highlight was British Strong Style versus B.Cool, Angel Cruz, and Tyler Bate... which is not a typo. One of the best live matches I have ever seen, it can't be explained - it just has to be viewed. This show also stood out for the Devlin versus Moose match, where "The Import Killer" really started to gain momentum to close out 2017.

KATEY HARVEY

TOTALS: 1. PROGRESS Wrestling SSS16 - Day 3 (May 29): 31%; 2. OTT Outer Space Odyssey III (June 4): 16%; 3. ICW Fear and Loathing X (November 19): 14%

OTHERS (inc. Fight Club:PRO Project Mayhem VI (September 22), RevPro Global Wars Night 1 (November 9), PCW Tribute To The Troops Night 2 (July 24), Pro Wrestling EVE #SHE1 Show 2 (November 1) & HOPE 55 (December 22): 39%

PRO WRESTLING MATCH OF THE YEAR:
PETE DUNNE VS. TYLER BATE (NXT TAKEOVER: CHICAGO, MAY 20)

Of the many things that Tyler Bate and Pete Dunne do well, finding a compromise is among them. There's such an abundance of wrestlers today who can string together elaborate-looking wrestling moves and sequences to the point where erstwhile standout qualities feature even less. But Dunne and Bate, as demonstrated in their UK championship match at *NXT TakeOver: Chicago*, imbue such vivid physicality with well-executed pathos. The two not only perform manoeuvres that would earn "Match of the Year!" chants from your typically discriminating indie crowd, but they enhance the drama of the struggle by selling it as a struggle. Few wrestlers in 2017 blend latter-day complex grappling with the lost art of subtly selling pain and frustration.

They don't just play the notes; they know why you play those notes.

Bate's sporting, confident demeanour is the perfect contrast to Dunne's bitter malevolence, and the two did more to tell a story in the ring than any broadly-written backstage segment could have. Something as simple as Dunne sadistically bending Bate's fingers back went a long way in establishing who he is to new sets of eyes. The match delivered a big fight feel, even for the fans who may have been seeing them for the first time that night.

This was more than a great match - it was a standard-setter.

JUSTIN HENRY

TOTALS: 1. Pete Dunne vs. Tyler Bate (NXT, May 20): 43%; 2. Kenny Omega vs. Kazuchika Okada (NJPW, January 4): 17%; 3. Kenny Omega vs. Kazuchika Okada (NJPW, June 11): 8%

OTHERS (inc. John Cena vs. AJ Styles (WWE, January 29), AJ Styles vs. Brock Lesnar (WWE, November 19), Sanity & Roderick Strong vs. The Authors of Pain vs. Undisputed Era (NXT, November 18), Tetsuya Naito vs. Kenny Omega (NJPW, August 13) & Kazuchika Okada vs. Katsuyori Shibata (NJPW, April 9): 32%



UK & IRELAND PRO WRESTLING MATCH OF THE YEAR:

TRAVIS BANKS VS. TYLER BATE (PROGRESS WRESTLING SUPER STRONG STYLE 16, MAY 29)

PROGRESS Wrestling's *Super Strong Style 16 2017* spanned three days and featured 16 of the world's greatest independent talents. On the final day, the tournament came down to one half of Moustache Mountain, Tyler Bate, versus "The Kiwi Buzzsaw" Travis Banks. Bate was in the middle of a huge year as one half of the PROGRESS Tag Team champions, and riding high off the back of his WWE UK title win. Banks was fast becoming the man to beat in PROGRESS - a wrestler on the cusp of greatness who would go on to be the group's World champion by year's end.

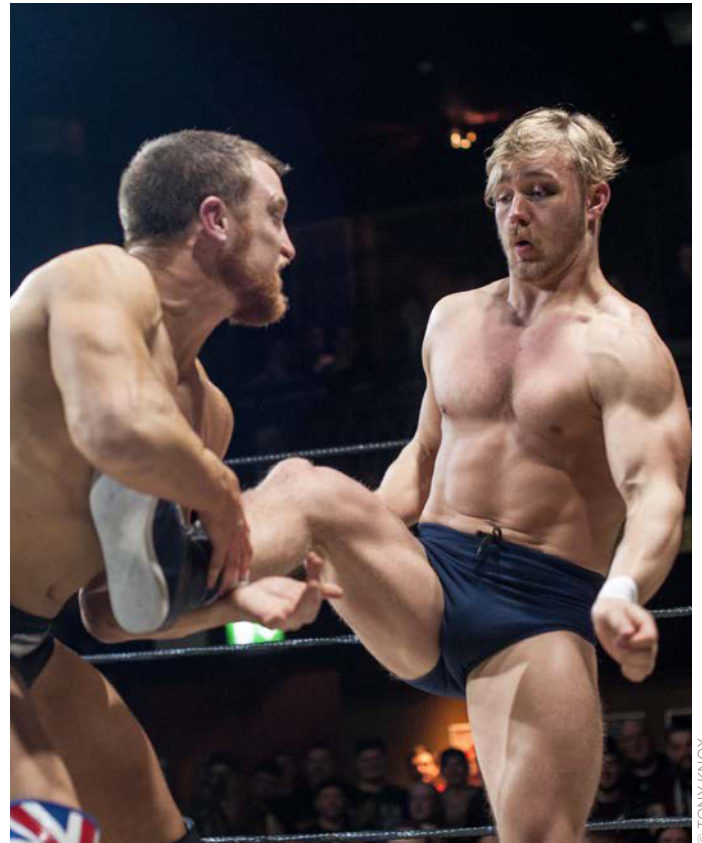
The crowd was electrified throughout the hard-hitting contest, as both men left everything in the ring. In the midst of the action, the referee was knocked out, allowing Bate's partner, Trent Seven and PROGRESS champion Pete Dunne to interfere. When all hope seemed lost, the wildly popular #CCK ran off Seven and Dunne to leave the ring as it was intended, with Bate and Banks going head to head. Both men continued to batter the other as fans came unglued.

Finally, in a moment that I will never forget, Banks forced Bate to submit, causing a jubilant show of emotion from all in attendance. On this night, a star was made, as Banks took his place among the world's elite wrestlers.

CHRIS ROBERTS

TOTALS: 1. Tyler Bate vs. Travis Banks (PROGRESS, May 29): 28%; 2. Zack Sabre Jr vs. Will Ospreay (RevPro, November 10): 22%; 3. The Lads from the Flats vs. The Kings of the North (OTT, April 15): 15%

OTHERS (inc. Moustache Mountain vs. Aussie Open (Fight Club Pro, October 27), Pete Dunne vs. Mark Coffey (PWE, July 21), Dean Allmark vs. Ashton Smith (PCW, June 24), Rhia O'Reilly vs. Sammii Jayne (XWA, March 12) & Will Ospreay vs. Mike Bailey (WCPW, August 24): 35%



© TONY KNOX

FIGHT OF THE YEAR:

ANTHONY JOSHUA VS. WLADIMIR KLITSCHKO (APRIL 29)

Two thousand and seventeen not only saw the release of the second film in a *Star Wars* trilogy, but also an empire striking back, with boxing besting UFC in both **FSM** shoot-fighting categories. Anthony Joshua's thrilling 11th round stoppage of one of the greatest heavyweight champions is a worthy Fight of the Year.

Wladimir Klitschko had not fought since 2015, but was back to his best here, with the veteran pushing someone 13 years younger to the very limit. It was a match that ebbed and flowed in a way that rarely happens when heavyweights step into the ring, with the fifth and sixth rounds being particularly dramatic.

Incredibly, another boxing match took the runner-up slot in our Fight of the Year. This, however, was anything but intense or important, albeit insanely lucrative. Floyd Mayweather Jr. versus Conor McGregor on August 26 was not quite the farce some predicted, at least, but it was not a competitive bout, and McGregor would be foolish to don boxing gloves again. Other opponents would be less kind to him than a faded Mayweather who clearly carried him to give the fans a show.

Together, Joshua versus Klitschko and Mayweather versus McGregor dominated this fan voting, taking nearly 70% of those cast. They may have been very different matches, but what they shared was a big fight feel that has been sorely lacking in the UFC. It underlines that even in boxing or MMA, effective promotion and storytelling are essential to a Fight of the Year.

WILL COOLING

TOTALS: 1. Anthony Joshua vs. Wladimir Klitschko (April 29): 39%; 2. Floyd Mayweather Jr. vs. Conor McGregor (August 26): 30%; 3. Max Holloway vs. Jose Aldo (UFC, June 3): 7%

OTHERS (inc. Max Holloway vs. Jose Aldo (UFC, December 2), Justin Gaethje vs. Eddie Alvarez (UFC, December 2) & Justin Gaethje vs. Michael Johnson (UFC, July 7): 24%



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THE NEWS

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UK NEWS

Eddie Dennis' new heel character is on track for a big 2018



DEFEATED DENNIS SETS SIGHTS ON ABSENT ANDREWS

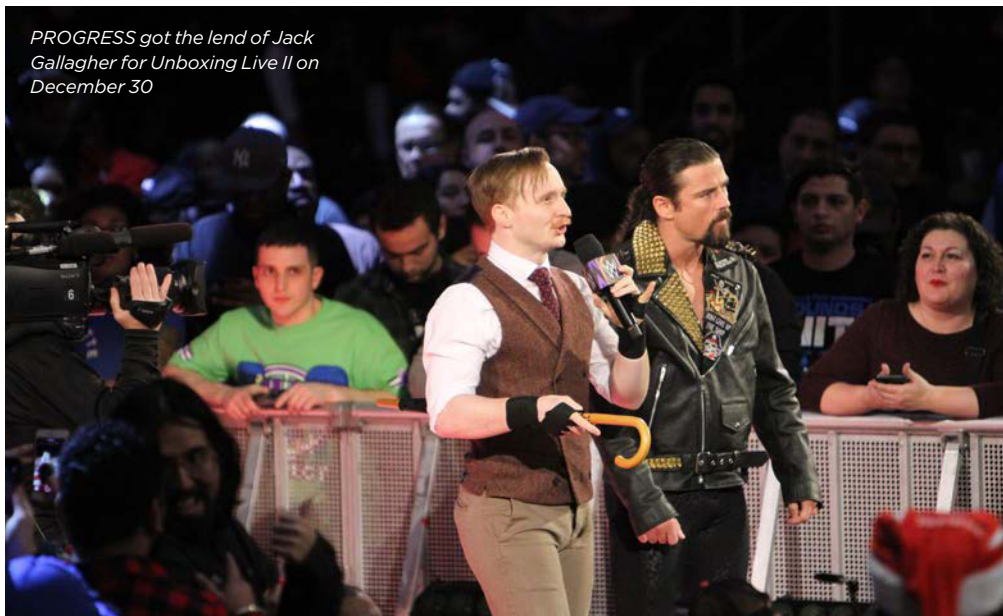
Eddie Dennis continues his hot heel turn despite losing to Travis Banks

DECEMBER WAS A month of mystery for PROGRESS Wrestling, both by design and because of Mother Nature, as the group's annual *Unboxing Live* show was joined by a return to Sheffield that was heavily affected by snow.

Chapter 59: Whatever People Say We Are, That's What We're Not on December 10 at Sheffield's O2 Academy saw all three members of British Strong Style, as well as Mark Andrews and Morgan Webster, pull out due to adverse weather conditions, creating opportunities for several newcomers. The main event wasn't affected, as Travis Banks retained the PROGRESS World title in a great contest against Eddie Dennis, who produced the performance of his career in coming close to claiming the belt. After an attack on the ring crew, Dennis blamed his loss on Andrews' absence, and the battle of the former FSU members ought to be a major highlight of 2018 for PROGRESS.

Banks produced another incredible defence at *Chapter 60: Unboxing Live! 2 - Unbox Harder* on December 30 at

PROGRESS got the lend of Jack Gallagher for Unboxing Live II on December 30



Camden's Electric Ballroom, going head-to-head with the returning Will Ospreay, as the former PROGRESS and current IWGP junior-heavyweight champion wrestled despite losing a Loser Leaves PROGRESS match to Jimmy Havoc at *Chapter 46* in March. The international travels of "The Aerial Assassin" have rounded him into a far better performer, as he had arguably his best PROGRESS match with Banks, who bested him with his Lion's Clutch submission hold. Afterwards, Banks' partner in The South Pacific Power Trip, TK Cooper, returned and challenged "The Kiwi Buzzsaw" to a title match in 2018, once Cooper is cleared from his leg injury.

One of the Sheffield card changes saw Aussie Open step up to challenge The Grizzled Young Veterans for the PROGRESS Tag Team titles. Kyle Fletcher and Mark Davis enhanced their status as the team to watch out for in 2018, putting on a great performance against James Drake and Zack Gibson, albeit in a losing effort. The bizarre nature of *Unboxing Live* made itself clear with these teams in Camden, as alongside Moustache Mountain and Chris Brookes with an inflatable doll dressed up as the injured Kid Lykos, they took part in a captain's pick eight-man Elimination match. Brookes was the sole survivor, as he, Drake, Davis and Tyler Bate defeated Trent Seven, Gibson, Fletcher and "Lykos" in a hilarious encounter.

In Sheffield, Jack Sexsmith capped his breakthrough year by claiming a future championship match, winning an eight-way Scramble over "Chief Deputy" Dunne, "Pastor" William Eaver, Primate, Spike Trivet, and newcomers Amir Jordan, Gabriel Kidd, and Saxon Huxley. "The Pansexual Phenomenon" then hinted towards the title at which he would take a shot by scoring the biggest singles win of his career against former ICW World champion Joe Coffey in Camden, suggesting that Travis Banks is in his sights for 2018.

Joseph Conners was angry at being denied a shot at the WWE United Kingdom championship due to Pete Dunne's travel woes, and took out his frustrations on Chuck Mambo in Sheffield, with Mambo's efforts keeping the match lively enough. Conners himself was absent from Camden, where "The Bruiserweight" did indeed defend the title, making up a lost date in New York City by facing off with former PROGRESS favourite and current WWE 205 Live star "Gentleman" Jack Gallagher. The bout's position as the main event of *Unboxing Live* suggested that Gallagher could emerge with the title, and it even looked likely when Gallagher kicked out of The Bitter End, but Dunne retained with a snap Tombstone piledriver.

Rampage Brown returned to PROGRESS, having suspiciously been absent since losing the Atlas championship in January, and reeled off two wins, emerging as the mystery opponent for Doug Williams in Sheffield, following that up with a win over Morgan Webster in Camden. While Brown could be primed for a shot at WALTER and the Atlas title, Webster announced that he will be stepping away from PROGRESS for the time being, as he doesn't believe that he fits in following several losses in a row.

In other action, Sheffield saw Chris Brookes gain a singles victory over "M-Dogg" Matt Cross, while Chris Ridgeway scored his first main card PROGRESS win over the impressive Spaniard Adam Chase. In Camden, Clint Margera and Drew Parker debuted in a typically violent "12 Days of Christmas" match, losing a big plunder brawl to Jimmy Havoc and Mark Haskins.

Millie McKenzie also made her main card debut, winning a fun six-way against Candyfloss, Chakara, Charlie Morgan, Charli Evans, and Sierra Loxton to mark herself as the name to watch out for in PROGRESS' Women's division in 2018.

THIS MONTH'S...



MEN OF THE MONTH

This month's Men of the Month goes to **Rusev** and **Aiden English**. Initially just thrown together, the pairing has developed into a very entertaining and popular heel tag team. Rusev's hugely enthusiastic declarations of "It's Rusev Day!" at opportune and inopportune moments alike, coupled with English's tremendous operatic melodies and vocal tributes to his good friend, have made this duo a weekly *Smackdown* delight.



MATCH OF THE MONTH

This month's Match of the Month award goes to **Pete Dunne's** successful WWE United Kingdom championship defence against **Tyler Bate** on the December 20 *NXT* broadcast. A tremendous 20-minute-plus affair that was arguably just as good as their classic bout at *TakeOver: Chicago* back in May, this was in fact one of the best matches of the year on WWE TV.

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NEWS IN BRIEF

WWE has agreed a deal with Facebook for the latter to air a new show, *Mixed Match Challenge*, as of January 16. The programme will contain mixed tag team matches in a tournament format. You can expect WWE to try out various interactive concepts, as well as produce a style of wrestling based on getting likes and shares. No doubt this is both sides dipping their toe in the water to see if a greater partnership can be mutually beneficial. A deal to broadcast *Raw* and *Smackdown* on Facebook, for example, would have to be for more than the sum of all WWE's TV deals, since Facebook streams worldwide... Rich Swann was indefinitely suspended by WWE on December 10 after he was arrested the previous day on charges of kidnapping and battery. According to a police report filed by Swann's wife, Vannarah Riggs (who wrestles on the indies as Su Yung), he was driving her home from a booking and became increasingly angry as he critiqued her match. When she exited the car, Swann dragged her back by the arm and head. Swann was released from jail the following day, returning to the home he shares with Riggs, but it seems certain that the case will go to court... The lawsuit filed by Marcus ("Buff") Bagwell and Scott Levy (Raven) that claimed that they were entitled to royalties from appearances on the WWE Network has been settled. This was largely because WWE counter-sued Levy for remarking on *Talk Is Jericho* that Vince McMahon had bought off a judge to get a previous lawsuit thrown out. Bagwell subsequently claimed that a lawyer had encouraged him to take on the suit at no financial risk. That practice is illegal in the state of Connecticut... After cancelling the planned December 8 show in India, leaving only the following day's date, as well as bringing in Triple-H to main-event against Jinder Mahal, "The Game" went over the supposed hometown hero by pinfall. Unless the Mahal experiment is over, this result says just about everything... WWE is running a limited number of *205 Live*-based shows in January and February in an attempt to discern whether it can work as another touring brand. As an incentive, a number of those shows will also feature Matt Hardy versus Bray Wyatt in a prominent position on the card... Jonathan Good (Dean Ambrose) underwent surgery for a partially torn triceps on December 19. He will likely be out for four months... Brian Kendrick broke a bone in his eye socket in taking a GTS from Hideo Itami on *Raw* on December 25. Merry

continued...

BT Gunn successfully defended his new Undisputed title against Lionheart on December 12



ICW star returns to the ring to challenge BT Gunn

BT GUNN MANAGED to hold on to his newly acquired Undisputed championship amidst chaos at the end of ICW's final show of the year. His title defence was against Lionheart on December 12, but you'd struggle to find a member of the ICW roster who hadn't entered the ring by the time it was all said and done, as a very entertaining match was called a no contest when The Fite Network began a seemingly endless procession of run-ins. The whole saga ended with Red Lightning revealing himself to be Gunn's next challenger for the title, as he makes a return to in-ring action after a two-year absence.

Stevie Boy rounded off an impressive 2017 by building on his career-defining night at The Hydro, where he became the first holder of the King of Insanity crown. This time he knocked off the often erratic hardcore legend Sabu in a bad-tempered affair that ended with a scintillating promo from Stevie that caused an enraged Sabu to chase him to the back. Still, Stevie soon returned and continued talking anyway.

Stevie's stablemates, The Kings Of Catch, also had a successful night, overcoming the best pal team of Kenny Williams and Aaron Echo in a lively contest. The Kings - who are this month's **FSM** One To Watch - look increasingly impressive since aligning with Stevie and Kay Lee Ray.

Polo Promotions had their first Tag Team Title defence as they embark on an unprecedented third reign as champions, taking on Sha Samuels and Jack Jester's "Kinky Party" in a match that was undoubtedly the strongest on the show. A fine display of

strong characters and excellent tag team wrestling, it featured more storytelling than sick moves, but was a wonderfully engaging battle that saw Polo Promotions just edge it thanks to their Old Man of Hoy finisher. Their next challengers will be The Purge, who took the victory in a wild four corners tag team affair for the top contenders spot, as they toppled their usual rivals The Fite Network (Krieger and Lou King Sharp), as well as The Govan Team (Ravie Davie and Zander) and Coach Trip and DCT.

Kasey made her first Women's title defence in what was another very impressive contest. Making her first appearance in ICW for over six months, Sammii Jayne proved why she's built a reputation and quietly become one of the most decorated female champions in the UK, but Kasey, who herself is enjoying the best spell of her career, went over in the end.

Wolfgang had been braced for a contest with Bram, but the former TNA star and challenger for the ICW championship at the *Square Go* couldn't make it to the show due to bad weather, meaning that Wolfgang could issue an open challenge that was met by a strong, lean-looking Andy Wild. It was the revival of a years-old rivalry that once saw Wolfgang take Wild's Zero-G belt. It was Wolfgang who came out on top again thanks to The Howling.

Swedish brute Tor Atterhagen may be raw, but he continued to be a commanding presence, and once again made short work of Dickie Divers, as he warmed himself to the Glasgow crowd by being as frightening as humanly possible.

SUZUKI-GUN SHOOT'S FOR STRONG STYLE DREAM MATCH

Sabre and Suzuki to meet Seven and Bate on January 20

ON A NIGHT on which Bullet Club got to strut its stuff all over York Hall, Revolution Pro Wrestling's titles still received plenty of attention in the form of storyline progression.

Zack Sabre Jr. was able to hold on to the British heavyweight championship at *Uprising 2017* on December 8 in a physical bout with Matt Riddle, surviving the strikes and submission holds of "The King of Bros" to retain the title. Afterwards, Sabre claimed that he had defeated everyone of note, and was about to throw the belt down when Trent Seven emerged. Sabre did not consider the WWE UK star worthy of challenging him, though, and instead counter-challenged him and Moustache Mountain partner Tyler Bate to a British Tag Team championship match at *High Stakes 2018* on January 20, with Sabre to be joined by Minoru Suzuki. Seven, who along with Bate had retained the titles earlier in the night in a fun bout against Josh Bodom and Zack Gibson, accepted by giving the champion a big piledriver, leaving Sabre injured the ring.

The British cruiserweight championship continued to live a charmed existence, unexpectedly finding another new home around the waist of Kurtis Chapman. The then-19-year-old (he was 20 on December 19) has been an impressive fixture on Revolution Pro's Cockpit Theatre shows, and he made the most of a big opportunity at York Hall by defeating incumbent champion "Flash" Morgan Webster in a five-way also involving former champion Ryan Smile, David Starr, and El Phantasma. The athletic showcase was many fans' Match of the Night, with several stunning big moves, ending in Chapman pinning Starr to win the title.

A lot of fans were there to see Bullet Club in action, and while Cody Rhodes, The Young Bucks, and Marty Scurll are very much the *Mrs. Brown's Boys* of wrestling, earning as many

detractors as they do worshippers, there was no doubt that most in attendance lapped up everything they did. Rhodes retained his Ring of Honor World title in a good bout against Jay Lethal, which built to an exciting conclusion in which Scurll chose to assist Rhodes instead of giving his rival Lethal the title, which would have led to him getting a shot at it at *Final Battle*.

Scurll returned for the main event, teaming with Matt and Nick Jackson to face #CCK (Chris Brookes and Travis Banks) and *Being The Elite's* Flip Gordon. While a lot of fans enjoyed the antics Scurll and the Jacksons get up to on their hit YouTube show, at times it came as a detriment to this match, with #CCK made to look average at times after having been Revolution Pro's main tag team for most of 2017. Scurll and the Bucks took the win, but their appearances coming at the expense of Revolution Pro's storylines is concerning to fans who follow the product beyond the big York Hall shows.

RevPro held its first women's match at York Hall, after Jinny had issued an open challenge following a lengthy undefeated run at The Cockpit Theatre. The challenge was answered by "Session Moth" Martina, who has faced Jinny all over Europe in the past year. Martina had a very good showing, adding great match pacing and technical know-how to her comedic chops, but Jinny submitted her with a Rocking Horse, marking herself as the clear favourite for the British Women's championship tournament at the Cockpit on January 6 and 7.

Other action saw the return of Pete Dunne to RevPro, as the WWE United Kingdom champion bested Eddie Dennis with The Bitter End, leaving Dennis prey to an attack by Rob Lias. Also, Martin Stone secured a shot at Zack Sabre Jr's British heavyweight championship on January 7 by defeating Dave Mastiff.



Despite smashing him with a forearm here, Dave Mastiff lost out to Martin Stone on December 8

© ROBYN GODLING

NEWS IN BRIEF

...continued

Christmas, Brian... Saraya-Jade Bevis (Paige) had to miss several dates, after her tag team match on December 27 was stopped due to injury. Bevis was teaming with Mandy Rose and Sonya Deville against Sasha Banks, Mickie James, and Bayley in Uniondale, New York when she took a hard but not obviously unsafe kick to the back from Banks. When she failed to get to her feet as planned, the referee gave the X sign, and Bevis was helped backstage... Noam Dar has torn his meniscus and, following December 14 surgery, will be out for around five months... Ron Killings (R-Truth) underwent shoulder surgery on December 4... Emanuel Rodriguez (Kalisto) was injured on December 19 when a water bottle was launched from the crowd in his direction. He had facial injuries but was not concussed... On an episode of E&C's Pod Of Awesomeness, Marie Gabert (Alpha Female) told Edge and Christian that a WWE contract offer to her had been withdrawn because she has three herniated discs in her neck. She suggested that she'd be getting surgery... Todd Smith and Raymond Rowe (War Machine) and Trevor Mann (Ricochet) are expected to land in NXT shortly... Matt Cappotelli, the *Tough Enough 3* winner whose career was ended by a brain cancer diagnosis in 2005, has now been given less than five years to live after the cancer returned and was operated on in June 2017... Nick Aldis won the NWA World heavyweight title from Tim Storm on December 9, in the unlikely venue of a CZW show in Sewell, New Jersey. While the story of the 52-year-old journeyman champion (and full-time schoolteacher) was an intriguing one, it became clear that the promotion had to get the title from him as soon as possible... Katsuya Kitamura won New Japan's Young Lions tournament on December 12, beating Tomoyuki Oka at Shinjuku Face in Tokyo... Kenou won Pro Wrestling NOAH's Global League tournament on November 19, defeating Go Shiozaki at Korakuen Hall. He then went on to win the GHC heavyweight title from Eddie Edwards on December 22 at the same venue... Shuji Ishikawa & Suwama won the All Japan World Strongest Tag Determination League on December 12, beating Daichi Hashimoto & Hideyoshi Kamitani in the final. Hashimoto also won Big Japan's World Strongest heavyweight title on December 17's Big Japan Death Vegas event in Yokohama, beating Hideki Suzuki. On that show, Daisuke Sekimoto, Kohei Sato & Hideyoshi

NEWS IN BRIEF

Kamitani also went over Ryota Hama, Yasufumi Nakanoue & Shogun Okamoto for the group's six-man titles... Team DDT (Konosuke Takeshita & Yuki Ueno) won Pro Wrestling NOAH's Differ Cup on November 28, beating Team NOAH (Katsuhiko Nakajima & Hitoshi Kumano)... Io Shirai won the Wonder of Stardom title from Yoko Bitō on November 19 at Korakuen Hall... Akihisa Mera, who wrestled as The Great Kabuki, has retired at the age of 69. Mera debuted in 1964... Lucha Underground has been renewed for a fourth season... On November 3, Averno, Chessman and Super Fly won the AAA Trios championship from Mocho Cota Jr, Carta Brava Jr, and (the Mexican) Tito Santana... Konnan is no longer working as the booker of the CRASH promotion... Richard Taylor, who wrestled most notably as Tug Taylor in the Global Wrestling Federation, passed away on November 8. He was 71... James McTiffin, who wrestled in the 1960s and '70s in the UK as Gwyn Davies, has passed away at the age of 82... Eddy Steinblock, an actor and wrestler who was famous in Germany, died on November 9. He was 61... UFC held a *Fight Night* card on December 9 in Fresno, California, with Brian Ortega beating Cub Swanson in 3:22 of the second round with a guillotine choke. The following week in Winnipeg, Canada, Rafael dos Anjos beat Robbie Lawler via unanimous decision.

UK NEWS

STAR SIGNS POINT TO ARIES AFTER DEFIANT REBRANDING

Recent WWE star leads invasion from IPW:UK

THE RELAUNCH OF WhatCulture Pro Wrestling as Defiant Wrestling got underway with the live *We Are Defiant* iPPV in Newcastle on December 4, as a major invasion angle took the company in a rapid new direction heading into 2018.

Before the iPPV, general manager Stu Bennett announced Austin Aries as the newest signing for the company, and presented the former *205 Live* star with a six-month contract. Little did Bennett know that this would spark an infiltration of talent, as Aries brought Chris Ridgeway and Mark Haskins with him to ruin the Defiant World title match, as while Marty Scurll retained against Joe Hendry and Martin Kirby, Aries, Ridgeway, and Haskins ran riot afterwards, with Kirby bearing the brunt of the attack.

Defiant's new YouTube show kicked off with tapings in Birmingham on December 5. Kirby was scheduled to challenge Scurll for the title, but Aries ambushed him during his entrance. Scurll overruled Bennett and offered Aries the title match, and after various shenanigans, Aries defeated "The Villain" to win the belt. Aries then revealed that he had not signed the six-month contract, and was holding the title hostage.

In Newcastle, Primate retained the Hardcore title against his Tag Team championship partner Jimmy Havoc in a typically violent contest. The duo reunited



Recent WWE star Austin Aries immediately took Defiant Wrestling in an unexpected direction

in Birmingham to defend their belts against BT Gunn and Joe Coffey, but were attacked after the match by Haskins and Ridgeway. Havoc and Primate decided to unite with Coffey and Gunn to outnumber Aries, Haskins, and Ridgeway, but the invading trio brought backup in Kyle Fletcher, Mark Davis, Damian Dunne, and Robert Sharpe, and the new group destroyed everything in sight, including tearing up the ring. It was revealed that they were working for Billy Wood, the new owner of IPW:UK, with the intention of taking over Defiant Wrestling by force.

Kay Lee Ray successfully defended the Women's championship in a fun bout against Veda Scott in Newcastle, and in Birmingham, she was challenged by Little Miss Roxxy, who insisted on a title shot despite the fact she was defeated on the previous week's show by the debuting Millie McKenzie. Ray, ever the fighting champion, agreed and defeated Roxxy in quick fashion.

"Speedball" Mike Bailey earned a clean sweep of his best-of-three series with David Starr in Newcastle, but did damage to one of his knees in doing so, an injury that Drake took advantage of in Birmingham, getting disqualified in the process, thus hampering Bailey's chances in his Internet championship match against title-holder Zack Sabre Jr, which was taped in London on December 12.

Starr went off the deep end following his loss to Bailey, falling to another defeat in Birmingham against Travis Banks, who had beaten El Ligero in Newcastle. Joe Hendry offered Starr the chance to join The Prestige, which "The Product" took up by attacking Banks. This led to the Defiant debut of #CCK, as Chris Brookes and Kid Lykos made the save, but The Prestige then attacked Lykos backstage, leaving Brookes prey to a Handicap match defeat by Hendry and Ligero. Banks returned the favour after the match to even the sides and officially join #CCK in Defiant to take on his former stable.

THE TROPHY CASE

WWE CHAMPIONS...

IMPACT CHAMPIONS...

UFC CHAMPIONS...

ACCURATE AS OF 07/01/2018

UNIVERSAL CHAMPION

Brock Lesnar

WWE CHAMPION

AJ Styles

RAW WOMEN'S CHAMPION

Alexa Bliss

SMACKDOWN WOMEN'S CHAMPION

Charlotte

U.S. CHAMPION

vacant

INTERCONTINENTAL CHAMPION

Roman Reigns

WWE CRUISERWEIGHT CHAMPION

Enzo Amore

RAW TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS

Seth Rollins & Jason Jordan

SMACKDOWN TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS

The Usos

IMPACT GLOBAL CHAMPION

Eli Drake

KNOCKOUTS CHAMPION

Laurel Van Ness

IMPACT GRAND CHAMPION

Matt Sydal

X-DIVISION CHAMPION

Taiji Ishimori

IMPACT TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS

LAX

UFC HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION

Stipe Miocic

UFC LIGHT-HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION

Daniel Cormier

UFC MIDDLEWEIGHT CHAMPION

vacant

UFC WELTERWEIGHT CHAMPION

Tyron Woodley

UFC LIGHTWEIGHT CHAMPION

Conor McGregor

UFC FEATHERWEIGHT CHAMPION

Max Holloway

UFC BANTAMWEIGHT CHAMPION

TJ Dillashaw

UFC FLYWEIGHT CHAMPION

Demetrious Johnson

UFC WOMEN'S FEATHERWEIGHT CHAMPION

Cris Cyborg

UFC WOMEN'S BANTAMWEIGHT CHAMPION

Amanda Nunes

UFC WOMEN'S FLYWEIGHT CHAMPION

Nicco Montaño

UFC WOMEN'S STRAWWEIGHT CHAMPION

Rose Namajunas

ELITE ANTICS PUT OTT BACK IN NATIONAL SPOTLIGHT

Bucks, Rhodes, and Scurll claim to ponder Dublin for Bullet Club supershow

AS THE TITLE of the show might suggest, OTT's *Being The Elite, Live In Dublin* saw the international superstars from Bullet Club take centre stage, for better or worse.

With 2,000 fans packed into Dublin's National Stadium on December 9, the New Japan stars certainly brought in an impressive crowd that lapped up their various gags and allusions to their popular YouTube show. Unfortunately, audience members expecting a high-level Young Bucks or Marty Scurll match were left wanting. That popular trio took on Dalton Castle and The Boys, although the charismatic opponents felt like mere place-holders, simply existing to play foil to Bullet Club antics. The Elite won with a dual Indytaker piledriver in a forgettable match that came off like an improv session at a comedy club.

What followed was another Elite stablemate, Cody Rhodes, taking on Rey Fenix and Flip Gordon in an unusual three-way dance. While the athleticism of Fenix is always awe-inspiring, this was another potentially exhilarating contest bogged down in shtick. Pre-match stalling saw Rhodes tour the building, asking fans to kiss his ring, which they did eagerly, before the action could commence. Just as the bout started to flow, the referee took a bump and it descended into low-blows and belt shots, before resuming as normal for several minutes thereafter. Rhodes won clean, pinning Gordon in a messy match with exciting flashes.

Compounding the Elite fatigue was a seemingly never-ending segment in which Rhodes and friends teased the Dublin crowd with the idea that their looming, self-financed arena show might come to Ireland's capital. All of this meant that the main event, the long-built title challenge for Jordan Devlin against Mark Haskins, had to deal with a drained crowd. Thankfully, the effort of both men brought fans back into the action with a hot closing stretch. Indeed, the crowd came to its feet as the champion wrenched back on a brutal Sharpshooter, begging the local star to reach the ropes. Devlin eventually bested Haskins with a package piledriver, celebrating amidst confetti to close the show. Though Devlin will rightly take the plaudits, Haskins was exceptional in his role as the determined champion.

In an unlikely show-stealer, Pete Dunne and Trent Seven defeated local rookies

Michael May, Curtis Murray, and Scotty Davis. A previous day injury to Tyler Bate was the cause of the unusual match type, as Seven and Dunne played heel, despite being outnumbered. The numbers game made the Irish team seem like viable winners against the WWE-affiliated stars, and the match was extremely heated. May's incredible babyface fire, and a shocking Bitter End kickout by Murray elated the crowd, before Dunne eventually secured the win after a second-rope piledriver and one more Bitter End.

The Kings of the North retained the OTT Tag Team titles against The Rapture (Sha Samuels, Charlie Sterling, and Zack Gibson) in another strong showing for the champions. The hated English heels were in fine form as always, goading the crowd into an angry furore. The Kings have taken to the babyface role well, with exciting dives and their trademark sense of chaos and intensity.

Martina and Kay Lee Ray, originally scheduled to face each other, teamed up to beat The Angel Cruzers in a No Holds Barred Intergender tag team match. The Christmas-themed brawl garnered plenty of laughs, and even gasps as the foursome took some brutal bumps, including into

thumbtacks, but the booking for the match offered little in which to be invested. In a pre-match skit, B Cool introduced a "gender neutral" championship, which was immediately lost to Martina in the match. The women's championship has had an underwhelming tenure so far, so adding another belt seems like an odd choice.

In the opening contest, Tivoli favourite Bobby George Jr. made his National Stadium debut, successfully defending his OTT career against the veteran Paul Tracey. George's announcer, Tony Idol, was unfortunately missing in action, which hurt the sing-along nature of the act significantly. The "darts star" won an average match with a roll-up.

As an incredible 2017 closes for OTT, and 2018 offers fresh challenges such as new venues and new titles, it will be interesting to see how promoter Joe "Luther Ward" Cabray adapts. The Irish talent has irrefutably shown that it can hang with the imports, and is easily the most exciting thing about the promotion going forward.

Still, over-indulging some international stars may be a stumbling block in the future, if *Being The Elite, Live In Dublin* is anything to go by.



Bullet Club antics were all the rage at OTT's National Stadium event

Lewis Girvan and Aspen Faith are highly-regarded as *The Kings of Catch*



ALL IMAGES © TONY KNOX

HEIGHT: 6ft 2in (Girvan) / 5ft 11in (Faith)
WEIGHT: 215lbs (Girvan) / 205lbs (Faith)
DEBUT (as a team): 2016
SIGNATURE MOVES: Apter Burner (Package Tombstone with top-rope double stomp); Glowing Sea Driver (Tornado DDT/ Death Valley Driver combination); NukaSault (rope-hung springboard moonsault)
HAVE WORKED FOR: ICW; BCW; Futureshock Wrestling; Discovery Wrestling; Absolute Wrestling and others

As separate entities, The Kings of Catch have racked up a fair few accolades. In 2016, Lewis Girvan had what many regarded to be Match of the Night at ICW's first shot at running The Hydro, as he edged a thriller with Ricochet, which was a match that came at the end of his most fruitful year in wrestling so far. His partner, Aspen Faith, has been the standout talent to emerge from *Wrestlezone*, an Aberdeen-based promotion that regularly draws 1,000 or more fans to *Aberdeen Anarchy*, its biggest event of the year, and has built upon a reputation earned up north to become a mainstay all over Scotland.

If Girvan and Faith had never joined forces, they would have undoubtedly still gone on to do well, but something just clicks with them as a duo. Their styles seem so similar, yet are different enough to make it clear you aren't watching a duplicate of the other. Their personalities are alike, but again, each carries his own identity and sense of uniqueness. Their recent success would suggest they've been a team for much longer than just over a year, but they may never have

got on the same path if it wasn't for a gentle nudge from a man who spent time helping to train them, particularly Girvan, before jetting off to greener pastures himself. Damian Mackle, formerly Big Damo and now Killian Dain in WWE, was an integral part of them coming together in the first place.

"It blew my mind that the pair of them took so long to be a tag team - both similar looks, similar heights, both love similar styles of wrestling," he told **FSM**. "They trained together a bunch of times and definitely enjoyed wrestling each other, yet it still took about a year after I pointed all this out for them to realise it."

While that little bit of stubbornness could be frustrating for a coach who has the ability to step back and see the bigger picture, the fact that they didn't come together as a team until they were ready to do so as individuals is perhaps a compliment to their determination to make it on their own merits. However, in today's British wrestling landscape where spots are scarce and talent levels are at an all-time high, perhaps trying something else is the only viable way to stand out from the crowd.

"I am definitely glad they did [start as a team]," added Mackle. "As singles, they are very good at what they do, but arguably a little lost in the shuffle. As a duo, however, they have all the potential in the world. Their futures will only be limited by their own minds."

"I expect to see and hear a lot more about them in 2018 and beyond."

THE NEXT GENERATION

While they had made an impact in other promotions in Scotland in late-2016 and early-2017, it was The Kings of Catch's emergence in ICW that saw the

“As a duo, however, they have all the potential in the world. Their futures will only be limited by their own minds”

duo really gather steam. A series of excellent bouts with Polo Promotions thrust them into the spotlight before they aligned themselves with Stevie Boy and Kay Lee Ray to form The Filthy Generation. Based on their look, they seemed tailor made for the stable, but with none of the parties really knowing each other beforehand, it was a bit of a gamble.

“I’d worked with Lewis and Aspen before – we knew each other, but had never really interacted much,” said Stevie Boy. “Now when me and Kay Lee go backstage, they’re two of the first people we speak to, and it seems to be gelling well. Me and Kay Lee had been on the lookout for people who’d suit joining the stable, and Lewis and Aspen’s names kept coming up, so we decided to go for it, and we’re glad we did. It just works, and the looks are so similar sometimes Kay Lee can’t even tell us apart.”

It’s a gamble that has well and truly paid off, as The Filthy Generation was involved in two of the biggest matches at 2017’s *Fear And Loathing*. While Girvan and Faith lost to The Kinky Party that night, having their own match given that the Tag Team titles were being defended separately proved the value of their stock. According to former ICW champion and current writer Chris Renfrew, their achievements last year are merely the tip of the iceberg.

“The Filthy Generation spot was an immediate fit for them. Individually, both are very talented, technically gifted athletes, but something seemed to be missing as a unit. Since joining up with Stevie and Kay Lee, they have stepped forward as one of the premier tag teams to come out of ICW.”

ANOTHER LEVEL

Looking the part is one thing, but Girvan and Faith have also found a new gear with their ring work since joining the stable, improvements that Renfrew thinks could see them spoken about in the same breath as some of the top teams in the country.

“The Kings of Catch are innovative, hungry, and inventive, and I see them being the next #CCK in regards of status by the end of 2018,” Renfrew boldly but faithfully stated.

Away from ICW, the team recently went toe-to-toe with The Young Bucks as part of a four-way Elimination match for Discovery Wrestling, and while it was a losing effort, their performance against one of the most highly-regarded and popular tag teams in the world proved a fine measuring stick to show where they are at the moment.

Managing to bring their very best against the top teams when the pressure is on is a feat Lewis Girvan and Aspen Faith have made to look very easy in their short time as a duo, and with that, there is now nothing stopping them from being a top twosome in the UK.

If the expert opinion is anything to go by, 2018 ought to be a massive year for this dynamic young team, with many more accolades to come.



UKEVENTS

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A 19/01/18 DISCOVERY WRESTLING "THE DISCO DERBY"

The Jam House, Edinburgh

B 21/01/18 ICW "IT'S ALWAYS RAINING IN GLASGOW"

The Garage, Glasgow

C 27/01/18 4FW "PRICE OF GLORY 2018"

Oxford Academy, Oxford

D 04/02/18 OTT "HOMECOMING"

Mandela Hall, Belfast

E 08/02/18 5 STAR WRESTLING

Metro Arena, Newcastle

F 10/02/18 IRONFIST WRESTLING

Richmond Place Club, Hereford

Rob Van Dam is scheduled to compete for 5 Star Wrestling in Newcastle on February 8



© TONY KNOX

19/01/18 EPW American Wrestling: Civic Hall, Stanley

19/01/18 Welsh Wrestling: Palace Theatre, Redditch

20/01/18 HOPE "FUTR 01": Shirebrook Welfare, Shirebrook

20/01/18 Welsh Wrestling: Miners Institute, Blackwood

20/01/18 EPW American Wrestling: Rainbow LC, Middlesbrough

20/01/18 LDN Wrestling: Selsdon Hall, South Croydon

20/01/18 Wrestlezone "Summerhill Showdown 2018": Summerhill Hotel, Aberdeen

20/01/18 4FW "New Years Wrestolution 2018": M.E.C.A., Swindon

20/01/18 EWA "10th Anniversary Show": Judo Centre, High Wycombe

20/01/18 True Grit Wrestling: Fibbers, York

20/01/18 GOOD Wrestling "Danger! Danger! High Voltage!": Craufurd Arms, Milton Keynes

21/01/18 ATTACK! Pro Wrestling "Failure's Not Flattering (Where's The Passion?)": Trinity Centre, Bristol

21/01/18 Reckless Intent Wrestling: Knightsbridge Industrial Estate, Livingstone

26/01/18 Target Wrestling: Solway Hall, Whitehaven

26/01/18 LDN Wrestling: Town Hall, Lewes

26/01/18 GPW "Back With A Bang 2018": Rose Club, Wigan

26/01/18 All Star Wrestling: Floral Pavilion, New Brighton

26/01/18 EPW American Wrestling: Genesis Entertainment Centre, Alfreton

26/01/18 MEW "Purely Belta": Innisfree SSC, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne

27/01/18 BWP "Royally Rumbled": Ffrith Beach Arena Park, Prestatyn

27/01/18 3CW "Hysteria": MEC, Middlesbrough

27/01/18 RPW:UK "Revolution Rumble 2018": Mountbatten Centre, Portsmouth

27/01/18 UPW "3rd Anniversary Show": The Forum, Yeovil

28/01/18 All Star Wrestling: Pavilion Ballroom, Bournemouth

28/01/18 FFW "Anarchy": Engine Shed, Lincoln

28/01/18 Extreme American Wrestling: Parsons Hall, Wellingborough

28/01/18 Welsh Wrestling: Lyceum Theatre, Crewe

28/01/18 EPW American Wrestling: Guild Hall, Formby

01/02/18 5 Star Wrestling: Echo Arena, Liverpool

01/02/18 Empire Wrestling "The Difficult Second Show": The Point, Sunderland

01/02/18 EPW American Wrestling: Civic Hall, Ormskirk

02/02/18 LDN Wrestling: Assembly Rooms, Alton

02/02/18 NGW "Proving Ground 37": The Ouseburn, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne

02/02/18 Kamikaze Pro "Underground IV": The Empire, Coventry

02/02/18 EPW American Wrestling: Civic Hall, Brighouse

03/02/18 OTT "Homecoming": The Arena on Suir Road, Dublin

03/02/18 Welsh Wrestling: Olympiad LC, Chippenham

03/02/18 AWW "Back To The Future": Cornbow Hall, Halesowen

03/02/18 SWE "Raw Deal 7": Gordon Craig Theatre, Stevenage

04/02/18 EPW American Wrestling: Lord Hill Hotel, Shrewsbury

08/02/18 5 Star Wrestling: Metro Arena, Newcastle

09/02/18 Welsh Wrestling: Pencoed RFC, Pencoed

09/02/18 EPW American Wrestling: Civic Hall, Ellesmere Port

10/02/18 All Star Wrestling: Wyvern Theatre, Swindon

10/02/18 CPW "Extremely Unruly": Bodmin Jail, Bodmin

10/02/18 Wrestlezone: Town Hall, Montrose

10/02/18 4GW "Seize The Moment": Civic Centre, Castleford

10/02/18 PCW "Road To Glory 2018": Evoque, Preston

10/02/18 Elite British Wrestling: Works Department SSC, Sheffield

10/02/18 Target Wrestling: The Venue, Carlisle

10/02/18 Welsh Wrestling: Trecco Bay Holiday Park, Porthcawl

11/02/18 PROGRESS "Chapter 63: Take Me Underground": O2 Ritz, Manchester

11/02/18 ICW "Square Go 2018": O2 ABC, Glasgow

11/02/18 All Star Wrestling: The Hexagon, Reading

12/02/18 ICW "Fight Club": The Garage, Glasgow

12/02/18 All Star Wrestling: Baths Hall, Scunthorpe

13/02/18 Welsh Wrestling: Pavilion Theatre, Rhyl

13/02/18 All Star Wrestling: Woodville Hall, Gravesend

14/02/18 All Star Wrestling: Beck Theatre, Hayes

15/02/18 5 Star Wrestling: Fly DSA Arena, Sheffield

15/02/18 TNT Extreme Wrestling "Merseyside Massacre 2018": Fusion, Liverpool

15/02/18 Welsh Wrestling: Theatr Stiwt, Wrexham

16/02/18 Ultimate Wrestling "Games of War": Kingsway LC, Widnes

16/02/18 All Star Wrestling: Epsom Playhouse, Epsom

16/02/18 Welsh Wrestling: Neuadd Ogwen, Bangor

17/02/18 4FW: Village Hall, Emersons Green

17/02/18 Welsh Wrestling: Y Ganolfan CC, Porthmadog

17/02/18 All Star Wrestling: Alban Arena, St Albans

17/02/18 PWC "Control, Alt, Delete": Thornbury LC, Alveston Hill

17/02/18 Welsh Wrestling: Trecco Bay Holiday Park, Porthcawl

18/02/18 BEW "Rising Empire 3": Tooting & Mitcham CSC, Morden

18/02/18 All Star Wrestling: Towngate Theatre, Basildon

18/02/18 Defiant Wrestling "Chain Reaction": Bowlers Exhibition Centre, Manchester

18/02/18 Strike Wrestling: Halo, Bournemouth

19/02/18 Welsh Wrestling: Muni Arts Centre, Pontypridd

19/02/18 Welsh Wrestling: Muni Arts Centre, Pontypridd

19/02/18 Welsh Wrestling: Muni Arts Centre, Pontypridd

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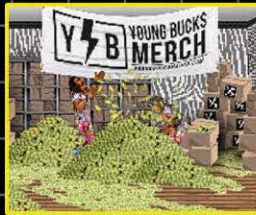


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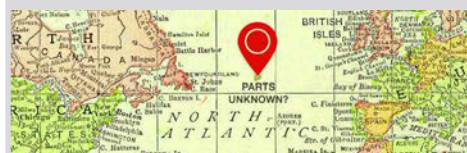
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THE TV LOUNGE

WRESTLING ROUND-UP

Somehow, Finn Balor's proposed WWE title challenge was dropped to include Kane at the Royal Rumble



MISSED WWE, TNA, ROH AND RING OF HONOR THIS MONTH? DON'T WORRY, WE'VE GOT YOU COVERED WITH OUR ROUNDUP OF RAW, SMACKDOWN, 205 LIVE, NXT, IMPACT WRESTLING AND ROH ON SINCLAIR.

A busy month on **Raw** saw the build to January 28's *Royal Rumble* commence. On the December 11 programme, a match was made in an attempt to determine the next challenger to Brock Lesnar's Universal championship, though Braun Strowman fought Kane to a no-contest. The following week, *Raw* GM Kurt Angle declared that he was making a Triple Threat match for the belt at the pay-per-view. During an in-ring scuffle between champion and challengers, Lesnar then clotheslined Strowman out of the ring and struck Kane with an F5.

The Shield reunion, already disrupted by Roman Reigns' absence due to illness in late-October, came to a shuddering halt on December 18 when Dean Ambrose's real-life triceps injury necessitated him being written out of storylines. Following a six-man in which Samoa Joe, Sheamus, and Cesaro defeated Ambrose, Seth Rollins, and Jason

Jordan, Joe attacked Ambrose backstage and dumped a heavy crate on his arm, leading to Ambrose's departure from TV. The following week, Rollins confronted Kurt Angle and demanded a match with Joe to gain revenge. Jason Jordan also wanted a bout with Joe, as had been his desire for several weeks, though he made his demand in a whiny, heel-like fashion. Angle said that both would get a match with Joe at some point, but first, they had to team to face the *Raw* Tag Team champions. Later that show, the improbable pairing of Rollins and Jordan beat Sheamus and Cesaro to win the belts.

Meanwhile, Reigns remains Intercontinental champion, defeating Jason Jordan and Cesaro in singles matches on December 4 and December 11 respectively. Samoa Joe beat Reigns via disqualification on the Christmas Day *Raw*, when Reigns shoved down a referee and continued

beating on Joe, getting retribution for the attack on Dean Ambrose the previous week.

Matt Hardy's persona has undergone a major change, becoming "Woken" Matt Hardy, essentially doing the same "Broken" gimmick that got over so well in TNA. Hardy is feuding with Bray Wyatt, in a programme that will kill the gimmick off if WWE is not careful. Several promo segments have aired, in which the two have separately exchanged their points of view, while Hardy has also been seen playing chess with a goldfish.

Absolution (Paige, Mandy Rose, and Sonya Deville) have continued to make an impact. Paige defeated Sasha Banks on December 4, and followed this up by teaming with Rose to beat Bayley and Mickie James. All three members of Absolution went to a no contest with Banks, Bayley, and James on December 18, the match ending in a wild brawl involving every member of the *Raw* women's roster. The brawl itself ended abruptly when *Raw* commissioner Stephanie McMahon arrived to announce that there would be a women's Royal Rumble match at the upcoming pay-per-view, taking all the credit as she did so. On Christmas Day, Absolution defeated Banks, Bayley, and James clean when Paige pinned Bayley.

Cedric Alexander defeated Drew Gulak in a top contenders match on the December 18 show, earning him a cruiserweight title shot. Enzo Amore remains the division's champion, but his focus has been elsewhere this past month. The leader of the Zo-Train has become smitten with Nia Jax, who herself only has eyes for Amore. The pair of wannabe love birds have flirted backstage, leading to the December 25 *Raw* on which they were about to kiss under the mistletoe, only for Alexa Bliss to interrupt them just as they were about to lock lips.

Hideo Itami made his *Raw* debut on December 18, teaming with Finn Balor to defeat Curtis Axel and Bo Dallas. It was then established that Itami was a full-time member of the *205 Live* roster. Thus far, Itami has beaten Brian Kendrick on the December 25 *Raw*, although unfortunately Kendrick suffered a broken orbital bone and a broken nose after taking Itami's GTS finisher. That's probably the last time you're going to see it.

On December 18, The Revival made their first appearance on *Raw* since July, with Scott Dawson now fully healed from biceps surgery. They beat Heath Slater and Rhyno.

John Cena returned to the show on December 25, defeating Elias.

Over on **Smackdown**, general manager Daniel Bryan and commissioner Shane McMahon continue to have an uneasy relationship. McMahon does not like Kevin

Charlotte remained Women's champion on Smackdown, but was under pressure from the Riott Squad



Owens and Sami Zayn, and wants to fire them, mainly because Owens attacked his father and beat Shane at *Hell In A Cell*. The Canadian duo also disrupted *Smackdown's* chances of winning the Elimination match against *Raw* at *Survivor Series*. The feeling is mutual, as Owens and Zayn do not like McMahon, believing him to have cost them matches and deprived them of opportunities. Bryan doesn't particularly care for Owens and Zayn, either, but refuses to fire the pair, as he believes that McMahon doesn't have a valid reason for doing so, and does not want him to turn into his father and become vindictive. This has led to tension, thus far resulting in McMahon and Bryan putting across their points of view, but ultimately McMahon allowing Bryan to continue to run *Smackdown*. Owens scored a non-title win over World champion AJ Styles on December 26, when McMahon ordered the referee to throw Zayn out of the ringside area. While the referee was preoccupied by this, Owens escaped from a Styles small package and rolled up the champ for the win.

The tag team scene has really heated up on *Smackdown*. The Usos remain Tag Team champions, but Chad Gable and Shelton Benjamin are the top contenders after defeating The New Day and Rusev and Aiden English in a Triple Threat match on December 26. The latter team have gained in popularity of late, due to Rusev's penchant for declaring any time to be "Rusev Day", and English's knack for literally singing Rusev's praises. Another tag team

Not even getting the better of Killian Dain could win Aleister Black an NXT title shot



"Stephanie McMahon arrived to announce that there would be a women's Royal Rumble match, taking all the credit as she did so"

getting a push are The Bludgeon Brothers, the sort-of repackaged Luke Harper and Erick Rowan. The duo have won squash matches and also went over Breezango via disqualification on Boxing Day, when The Ascension saved their "good friends" Breezango by pulling them to safety.

In a strange storyline, following his U.S. title victory at *Clash Of Champions* on December 17, Dolph Ziggler vacated the title and apparently left WWE after the December 19 *Smackdown*. This has led to an eight-man U.S. title tournament, and in first round matches on the December 26 show, Bobby Roode defeated Baron Corbin, and Jinder Mahal beat Tye Dillinger.

Smackdown Women's champion Charlotte defeated Ruby Riott via disqualification on December 12, when Riott Squad members Sarah Logan and Liv Morgan interfered. Naomi made the save for Charlotte, which led to the following week's show when Charlotte and Naomi beat Riott and Logan.

On *NXT*, Sonya Deville defeated Riott in a No Holds Barred match on December 6, but lost to *NXT* Women's champion Ember Moon three weeks later.

Also on *NXT*, qualifying matches took place for a spot in a four-way top contenders match, with the winner earning a title shot against *NXT* champion, Andrade "Cien" Almas. In qualifying matches, Killian Dain defeated Trent Seven, and Johnny Gargano beat Kassius Ohno in a fantastic match on December 6, while Aleister Black triumphed over Adam Cole on December 13 and

Lars Sullivan defeated Roderick Strong on December 20. In that winners' four-way on December 27, Johnny Gargano beat Black, Dain, and Sullivan, so Gargano is the top contender to Almas and will face him for the *NXT* title at *TakeOver: Philadelphia* on January 27.

The *NXT* Tag Team titles changed hands on December 20, as Kyle O'Reilly and Bobby Fish defeated Sanity, while WWE UK champion Pete Dunne retained his title in a wonderful match against Tyler Bate on the same broadcast.

Only two first-run episodes of **Impact Wrestling** aired this month, with the final two programmes of December being best of 2017 shows. Of the first-run content, Laurel Van Ness won the vacant Knockouts title, defeating Rosemary on December 14. Rosemary had earned her place in the title match by going over Allie and Sienna the previous week in a three-way. Van Ness' first challenger will be Allie herself, as she defeated Sienna, KC Spinelli, and Madison Rayne on December 14 to earn a title match.

The December 7 show saw Dan Lambert and Bobby Lashley victorious over James Storm and Moose, when Lashley speared Storm, and Lambert pinned "The Cowboy". The following week, Lambert and Storm had an in-ring verbal confrontation in which a challenge was accepted for a singles match between them on January 4, putting Storm's career up against the continued presence of American Top Team in the promotion.

WRESTLING ROUND-UP

The feud between Alberto El Patron and Johnny Impact built to a big match on January 4



© ANDREA KELLAWAY

Ethan Carter III remains Grand champion, after going to a draw with Matt Sydal on December 7. EC3 won the first round via pinfall, with Sydal taking the second, and the third round being a draw.

Taiji Ishimori remains at odds with X-Division champion Trevor Lee. Ishimori defeated Caleb Konley on December 7, only to be jumped by Lee and Konley afterwards, with Dezmond Xavier making the save. The following week, Ishimori and Xavier defeated Lee and Konley.

Johnny Impact teamed with Petey Williams to defeat Global champion Eli Drake and Chris Adonis on December 7. The following week, Impact and Williams teamed with Alberto El Patron to beat Drake, Adonis, and Kongo Kong (managed by Jimmy Jacobs). El Patron was set to face Drake in a title match on January 4, after El Patron DDT'd Drake on his title belt at the end of the December 4 broadcast.

Reigning Tag Team champions Dave and Jake Crist, accompanied by Sami Callihan, are still locked in a heated rivalry with LAX. During an out of the ring confrontation between Callihan and Konnan, Callihan threw a fireball in Konnan's face.

On **ROH On Sinclair**, the build towards *Final Battle* concluded with a great sit-down interview with title challenger Dalton Castle on December 6, and a contract signing between Castle and ROH World champion Cody Rhodes the following week.

The Briscoes' heated rivalry with Bully Ray and Tommy Dreamer reached a new level of intensity. The December 6 show saw the Briscoes invade Team 3D's wrestling school in Florida, looking for Ray. They beat up some of the students, and vandalised the facility. The following week, during a confrontation between the Briscoes and

Ray and Dreamer, ROH president Joe Koff made a rare on-camera appearance, booking a match between them for *Final Battle*.

Kenny King retained the ROH TV title on December 13, defeating Caprice Coleman. Punishment Martinez and Shane Taylor attacked King in the post-match. On the same show, The Addiction attacked Hanson, one half of the War Machine tag team, and trimmed part of his beard.

Matt Taven beat Jay Lethal in the show's main event, when Lethal was distracted by Marty Scurll, who wanted Lethal to use his umbrella as a weapon, in an acknowledgment of Scurll's claim that Lethal had that sort of nastiness in him. When Lethal refused, he was quickly defeated.

The Motor City Machine Guns remained ROH World Tag Team champions, defeating Vinny Marseglia and TK O'Ryan on December 6.

Bullet Club members were also in action over the past month. On December 6, Marty Scurll went over The Beer City Bruiser, while

Flip Gordon upset Adam "Hangman" Page, only to be superkicked by The Young Bucks thereafter. On December 20, Kenny Omega and The Young Bucks beat Rocky Romero, Chuckie T, and Trent Barreta. The next week, Rhett Titus and Will Ferrara defeated Simon Grimm (formerly Simon Gotch in WWE) and Flip Gordon.

In the show's main event, a random drawing "Christmas Surprise" 10-man tag team match, Dalton Castle, Silas Young, Hanson, Jonathan Gresham, and Marty Scurll had their hands raised over Cody Rhodes, Scorpio Sky, Josh Woods, Chris Sabin, and Punishment Martinez, when Castle pinned Sky to take the victory.

Shows covered from December 4 to December 27, 2017



© ANDREA KELLAWAY

Hanson had part of his beard cut by The Addiction on ROH On Sinclair

RATINGS REVIEW

The U.S. television ratings for *Raw* have been a relatively consistent this month. The December 4 *Raw* drew a 1.95 rating (2.784m viewers); December 11 scored 1.89 rating (2.678m viewers); and December 18 garnered a 1.94 rating (2.776m viewers). The Christmas Day broadcast was watched by 2.694m viewers.

Smackdown's ratings have also been consistent over this past month. The December 5 programme drew a 1.76 rating (2.493m viewers); December 12 was watched by 2.481m viewers; December 19 scored a 1.77 rating (2.578m viewers); and December 26 was watched by 2.656m viewers.

The numbers for *Impact Wrestling* have been very inconsistent. The December 7 show attracted 226,000 viewers; December 14 was watched by 161,000 viewers (a new all-time low rating for the show, beating the previous record set the previous month on Thanksgiving night); December 21 rebounded to 269,000 viewers; and December 28 was watched by 285,000 viewers.

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NJPW WRESTLE KINGDOM XII

Where previous *Wrestle Kingdom* events have felt like statements by New Japan Pro Wrestling, this year's edition of the Tokyo Dome spectacular was more reminiscent of a celebration. This was the year that New Japan's stars had everyone's attention; the eyes of the wrestling world were on them. There was no doubt what the biggest event in the business was in

the first week of 2018; it just felt at another level in terms of interest.

In the past, such January 4 events felt like statements in that those that ignored them would be left behind. This year didn't need to be like that. Steadily over the past six years, New Japan has increased the level of interest in its product, and the result was what felt like a new pinnacle of global

popularity. The new fans that were on board had no reservations, and the show had excellent advance ticket sales – the best in years, and a huge walk-up crowd for a paid attendance of 34,995, with potentially thousands more in the building through sponsorships, guests, media et cetera.

At that point, *Wrestle Kingdom XII* was already a success.

But this is New Japan Pro Wrestling, and booker Gedo's group was never going to rest on its laurels. Even though it didn't need a slam dunk show, that's what was delivered.

This was yet another stunner.

AN OCCASION FOR OKADA

This year's card offered a lot in the way of variety, and with some interesting matchmaking and the move to bring in Chris Jericho, there was great curiosity from fans old and new. The match at the head of the card, however, had no doubt surrounding it, as Kazuchika Okada versus Tetsuya Naito was a lock in terms of being a classic title match main event; the company's two biggest native stars at the peak of their powers, meeting one-on-one for the first time in 18 months, was always going to be great.

There also didn't seem to be a lot of doubt about the finish, with Naito seemingly destined to have his crowning evening that would elevate him to the top spot in the promotion for 2018. However, just like Okada had to endure a humiliating loss at the Dome to gatekeeper Hiroshi Tanahashi in 2015, Naito ended up tasting bitter defeat.

The entrances were spine-tingling. It felt like an epic encounter before it even began, with calls of "Naito!" resounding around the Dome. This was Inoki or Hashimoto-esque in terms of crowd response. Okada stood tall on the opposite side of the ring, so cool, so calm, so composed.

He was the picture of a champion.

Such a scene was set that the atmosphere carried the match in the first 10-15 minutes. The wrestlers built a solid if unspectacular base for the contest, and then gradually kicked things up a gear. Okada and Naito have had enough big matches against each other to be able to tell stories around their signature moves and counters, and they did plenty of that before it broke down into a slugfest. Neither man backed down an inch from the hard chops and forearms that were dished out, and Naito was the one who emerged in prime position heading into the closing sequence of the bout, and looked to be just one *Destino* away from a pinfall

Kazuchika Okada drops Tetsuya Naito with the concluding Rainmaker in the main event



victory at the 34-minute mark. However, he was over-zealous, and got blasted mid-move with a crazy spinning Tombstone from the man who'd held the belt for the previous 564 days.

One dramatic Rainmaker lariat later, and the three-count was heard.

ALPHA VS. OMEGA

The main event followed one of the most highly-anticipated matches in the last couple of years: "Alpha versus Omega", Chris Jericho versus Kenny Omega. When the book is closed on the career of "Y2J", this match, and the angle from start to finish, will go down as one of his finest performances. He was absolutely incredible from the moment he walked out until the moment he walked back to the locker-room. Jericho was the ultimate loner heel; he had no seconds, no group behind him. He was just a veteran, spiteful ass-kicker out in the middle of the Tokyo Dome, intent on creating chaos.

In this No Disqualification affair, Jericho was jaw-jacking at everyone in sight, throwing around referee "Red Shoes" Unno, beating up young lions (including putting Unno's son, Shota Umينو, in the Walls Of Jericho), and even got in the face of Masahiro Chono, who was minding his own business at the Japanese commentary table.

Then there was everything Jericho did with his opponent. Omega was brought down many roads that he had never previously travelled in his classic matches; dark, ugly alleys in a wild, rollercoaster 35 minutes that featured brawling, spectacular highspots, and great storytelling. In one instance, Omega dove from the top but crashed through the announce table, then did hit a double foot-stomp off a steel tower).

Both men had bled and sweat buckets by the time they got to their crescendo. Omega survived a dramatic Walls Of Jericho-turned-Lion Tamer that he sold brilliantly, and rose up to catch Y2J mid-Lionsault with a chair to the back. Following that, a well-placed One-Winged Angel onto said chair put the crazed WWE star down for the count of three, in a contest that was a marriage of the best things about old-school wrestling and state of the art, high-end pro wrestling.

A LITTLE BIT OF EVERYTHING

The top two matches followed what was maybe the most well-balanced, satisfying undercard ever in the building. The opener saw The Young Bucks and Roppongi 3K meet in a highly enjoyable junior-heavyweight Tag Team championship bout built around one member of each team having an injured back. Kota Ibushi

Kenny Omega soars during his heated semi-final bout with Chris Jericho



defeated Cody Rhodes in what was one of Rhodes' best ever outings, although he was still outshone by an Ibushi who is just an incredible performer. The IWGP Tag Team titles were up for grabs as Killer Elite Squad defended against EVIL and SANADA in a contest in which the LIJ duo got dominated by the two KES monsters until they made a comeback and won with a beautiful moonsault from SANADA.

In arguably the most dramatic match on the show, Minoru Suzuki lost his NEVER

championship, and his hair, to Hirooki Goto. This was a war that gave fans everything they've wanted from Suzuki's reign, which was lacking for most of the previous year. Goto, who also had a disappointing 2017, was reborn in this match, and ought to carry this momentum forward.

Will Ospreay is another who will be riding the crest of a wave after finally obtaining his long sought-after victory over arch rival Marty Scurll to win the junior-heavyweight title. Their match, which also included KUSHIDA and Hiromu Takahashi, was a crazy spectacle from start to finish.

The only bout that somewhat disappointed was Hiroshi Tanahashi versus Jay White, but for this stage of White's career, he carried himself with fine poise, and they had a very good wrestling match. In actuality, it was a victim of expectations.

It's a sign of just how incredible a show this was that a match this good was considered the low point of the event.

RESULTS Twenty-one man New Japan Rumble won by Masahito Kakihara (32:06) ■ The Young Bucks def. Roppongi 3K (Submission / 18:49 / IWGP junior-heavyweight Tag Team titles) ■ CHAOS def. Taguchi Japan, Suzuki-gun, Michael Elgin & War Machine and Bullet Club (Pinfall / 17:03 / Gauntlet match for the NEVER openweight Six Man Tag Team titles) ■ Kota Ibushi def. Cody (Pinfall / 15:08) ■ EVIL & SANADA def. Killer Elite Squad (Pinfall / 14:14 / IWGP Tag Team titles) ■ Hirooki Goto def. Minoru Suzuki (Pinfall / 18:04 / Hair vs. Hair match for the NEVER openweight title) ■ Will Ospreay def. Marty Scurll, KUSHIDA and Hiromu Takahashi (Pinfall / 20:18 / IWGP junior-heavyweight title) ■ Hiroshi Tanahashi def. Jay White (Pinfall / 19:43 / IWGP Intercontinental title) ■ Kenny Omega def. Chris Jericho (Pinfall / 34:36 / No Disqualification match for the IWGP U.S. title) ■ Kazuchika Okada vs. Tetsuya Naito (Pinfall / 34:26 / IWGP heavyweight championship)

Minoru Suzuki arguably had the most dramatic match of the night, losing his hair to Hirooki Goto



@toshanshuinLA The Fukuoka crowd for final gate this year in DG made more noise than like six months of WWE crowds

WRESTLING ROUND-UP



DRAGON GATE FINAL GATE 2017

After a long, hard year, one could forgive a promotion for winding down somewhat in December. WWE does it to an extent, and New Japan, too. Dragon Gate, on the other hand, seemingly goes into full panic mode to squeeze the most out of the year. December is the only month in which Dragon Gate runs two Korakuen Hall events, there's a triple shot of special shows in the Sapporo area, and then after all its usual tour stops is the big *Final Gate* event in Fukuoka. The opportunities for great matches are vast, and Dragon Gate certainly delivered this year, especially when it came to *Final Gate*.

After the Sapporo shows on which the reunited T-Hawk and Eita were established as a dominant duo in winning the special three-day tag team tournament, the stops at Korakuen on December 5 and December 20 were highlighted by the annual Doi Darts festivities that **FSM** has detailed in the past. In short, think the 1995 *Survivor Series* wildcard match, but replace President Monsoon with tiny children throwing darts at a casino prize wheel. The bout generated this year actually ended up featuring many of the promotion's top workers, and the result was a very good bout that capped off the show on December 20.

SERIOUS BUSINESS

December 23's *Final Gate* was less light-hearted, but in its seriousness produced two of the promotion's best matches of 2017.

The Open The Triangle Gate bout in many ways sums up the more general perception of the "Dragon Gate style". It was Triangle Gate matches featuring Blood Generation and Do Fixer that caught the attention of many fans in the West in 2005, and a lot of the best of Dragon Gate and its predecessor Toryumon have been for those belts or the old UWA World Trios titles. At times these days, it feels like the belts don't hold value to the company, and just get passed around to wrestlers who are cycled out of the Dream, Twin, and Brave Gate scenes, but *Final Gate*

felt like a rebirth for the Triangle Gate, and it felt oh so good.

Tribe Vanguard's YAMATO, Kzy, and BxB Hulk dropped the titles to MaxiMuM's Naruki Doi, Masato Yoshino and Jason Lee in an absolute scorcher that had the often cold Fukuoka building going wild at the end. It was a special victory, as MaxiMuM really portrayed the match and titles as something they wanted and needed to win. It gave Yoshino a happy end to a year that started with a career-threatening broken back, and it cemented newcomer Jason Lee as an immediate player and someone who can deliver in a high-end Dragon Gate title match. In winning, they felt like a really tight unit, and one that could hold the titles for many months, and make the belts a big attraction again.

The closing stretch of the match was on another level, with one particular sequence being as well-executed a minute of wrestling as this reviewer has ever witnessed. After escaping the Muscular Bomb, Kzy trapped Doi in a Skyde Special cradle for a heart-stopping near-fall; Jason Lee nailed a beautiful Osaka German suplex (Super Delfin's old move); BxB Hulk destroyed Lee with a crazy swan dive missile dropkick; and then it all culminated with Yoshino hitting a desperation lariat that took the roof off the building. This led into a dramatic finish in which Hulk valiantly struggled in Yoshino's Sol Naciente submission hold, before being forced to give up.

The main event wasn't far off in terms of drama, as plucky career underdog Ryo Saito took on the legendary Masaaki Mochizuki, who is in the midst of a fantastic reign as Dream Gate champ. This was a battle that showcased Saito's never-say-die attitude, as he absorbed punishment and kept fighting. Mochizuki was great, as usual; not only was he able to deliver the offence needed to make the story work, but he was also tremendous in conveying shock and frustration at his inability to put the challenger away.

A third excellent Dream Gate contest in a row for the man who turns 48 next month!

1. In taking the Triangle Gate titles, MaxiMuM had an incredible bout with Tribe Vanguard **2.** Masaaki Mochizuki continues to have phenomenal matches in Dream Gate main events

RESULTS K-ness & "Hollywood" Stalker Ichikawa, Yosuke Santa Maria & U-T def. Gamma, Mondai Ryu, Kaito Ishida & Kotoka (Pinfall / 8:14) ■ Don Fujii & Genki Horiguchi def. El Lindaman & Punch Tominaga (Pinfall / 9:02) ■ Yasushi Kanda def. Kagetora (Pinfall / 11:20 / Open the Brave Gate title) ■ Shingo Takagi & Takashi Yoshida def. Big R Shimizu & Ben-K (Pinfall 13:06) ■ MaxiMuM def. Tribe Vanguard (Submission / 17:50 / Open the Triangle Gate titles) ■ T-Hawk & Eita def. CIMA & Susumu Yokosuka (Pinfall / 22:52 / Open the Twin Gate Unified Tag Team titles) ■ Masaaki Mochizuki def. Ryo Saito (Pinfall / 21:31 / Open the Dream Gate championship)



WWE CLASH OF CHAMPIONS 2017

WWE wrapped up a mediocre in-ring year with a *Smackdown*-branded *Clash Of Champions* pay-per-view that could only generously be described as average.

In the main event of a December 17 show that had less buzz than any in recent memory, AJ Styles successfully defended the WWE championship against Jinder Mahal, the man Styles had beaten for the belt five weeks earlier. Mahal's five-month title run was mired by below average bouts, and even the brilliant Styles was unable to get anything better than mediocre out of him here. The bout was dragged down by an interminably long and boring Mahal beatdown of Styles, focusing on his ribs. Styles was excellent in selling the attacks, but Mahal struggled to keep it compelling, as the bout lost the interest of the crowd for long stretches. Styles was able to fight back, landing a springboard 450° on the challenger before the Singh brothers pulled Mahal out of the ring to save him from defeat. Styles took out Sunil with a Phenomenal Forearm on the floor, and knocked out Samir with a Styles Clash. This assured him of no more interference from Mahal's henchmen, but it also gave Mahal time to recover. The challenger hit the Khallas, but mercifully could only score a two-count. Styles eventually locked in a Calf Crusher, and with no Singh brothers to save him, Mahal was forced to tap out.

The best match was a hot three-way battle for the United States title, as Baron Corbin faced Bobby Roode and Dolph Ziggler, in what was a high energy, crowd-pleasing opener. As Corbin set up Roode to crush him with the End of Days, Ziggler grabbed hold of "The Lone Wolf" and nailed him with the Zig Zag. With both Corbin and Roode dazed, Ziggler had his pick of victims, and pinned Corbin to win his second U.S. title.

A JOB FOR LIFE

Poor matches dominated the rest of the card, with most of them bogged down by overbooking. With their careers on the line (!) Sami Zayn and

Kevin Owens faced Randy Orton and Shinsuke Nakamura, with both Shane McMahon and Daniel Bryan as guest referees. This match was a mess, with McMahon's bias against Owens and Zayn and his bickering with Bryan overshadowing it, although that was no doubt the plan going in. Eventually the referees agreed to each handle one half of the ring, which was completely absurd. Owens put Nakamura through the announcers' table with a frog splash, leaving Orton to fight on his own. Zayn had Orton beat with a schoolboy in McMahon's half of the ring, but McMahon deliberately stopped his count at two. Zayn then avoided an RKO and rolled Orton up again, this time on Bryan's side of the ring, where Bryan fast-counted as a means of redressing the balance, giving Owens and Zayn the victory.

Another shambles was the four-way for the *Smackdown* Tag Team titles, with The Usos going over The New Day (Big E and Kofi Kingston), Shelton Benjamin and Chad Gable, and Rusev and Aiden English. Unlike most four-ways, this was contested with one man from each team legal at the same time, which sounds exciting and chaotic, but the result was a sloppy, out-of-sync bout in which the wrestlers themselves had trouble holding things together. In the end, Gable ate a Jey Uso superkick and a Jimmy Uso flying splash to lose the fall.

Charlotte Flair defeated Natalya to retain the *Smackdown* Women's title in a Lumberjack match. With The Riott Squad, Tamina, Lana, Naomi, and Carmella serving as lumberjills, it was a matter of time before the match broke down into a wild brawl, culminating in Charlotte moonsaulting off the top turnbuckle onto everyone on the floor. During the madness, Carmella's attempted Money in the Bank cash-in was thwarted by Ruby Riott, before Charlotte tapped out Natalya with a Figure Eight.

Also on the card, The Bludgeon Brothers crushed Breezango in under two minutes, after destroying Fandango with a double powerbomb.

1. There was rancour on almost all sides in the tag match refereed by Shane McMahon and Daniel Bryan
2. In a confusing result, Dolph Ziggler captured the U.S. title in a three-way at Clash of Champions

RESULTS Dolph Ziggler def. Baron Corbin, Bobby Roode (Pinfall / 12:45 / United States title) ■ The Usos def. New Day, Shelton Benjamin & Chad Gable, Rusev & Aiden English (Pinfall / 12:54 / *Smackdown* Tag Team titles) ■ Charlotte Flair def. Natalya (Submission / 10:32 / *Smackdown* Women's title) ■ The Bludgeon Brothers def. Breezango (Pinfall / 1:58) ■ Kevin Owens & Sami Zayn def. Randy Orton & Shinsuke Nakamura (Pinfall / 21:37) ■ AJ Styles def. Jinder Mahal (Submission / 23:04 / WWE championship)

ROH FINAL BATTLE 2017

In the age of the internet and social media, it's rare to see moments or results in pro wrestling that are truly shocking. On a cold and snowy December 15 in New York City, the sell-out crowd in attendance at the Hammerstein Ballroom, and fans watching around the world on iPPV, were treated to one of those moments, as Dalton Castle defeated Cody Rhodes to capture the ROH World title.

The main event was a fine back and forth contest that featured a fair amount of brawling outside the ring. Despite getting busted open into his new bleached blond hair, Rhodes seemed to have the upper hand on a number of occasions, but Castle never gave up, kicking out of the Cross Rhodes and eventually hitting the Bang-A-Rang to secure the victory. The crowd's reaction was a mix of shock and jubilation, but when the moment finally sank in, everyone cheered as streamers and confetti filled the ring, and Castle celebrated with his Boys as the 24th ROH World champion.

That wasn't the only title change on this card, as earlier in the night, Silas Young captured the ROH Television title in a four-way Elimination match that also featured Punishment Martinez, Kenny King, and Shane Taylor. The first half of the bout was rather lethargic, and the crowd didn't seem to be into it. Through no fault of his own, things picked up a bit when Shane Taylor was eliminated, and then King (who was the title-holder coming into the show) went next after Young smashed a beer bottle over the back of his head. That meant that fans were guaranteed a new champion, and from there, Young and Martinez battled, with Young managing to hit his opponent with Misery to win his first belt in ROH.

SIX OF THE BEST

The other two titles on the line did not change hands. In one of those, The Young Bucks and Adam Page retained their ROH Six-Man Tag Team titles over Dragon Lee, Flip Gordon, and Titan in - as many would've guessed - a thrilling affair in which bodies flew all over the place. There was insane action from start to finish, and while the challengers put forth an incredible effort, the Bullet Club team known as The Hung Bucks got the win after hitting a crazy IndyTaker/Rite of Passage combo on Gordon and Lee. Afterwards, The Addiction attacked Bullet Club, while Scorpio Sky beat down former friend Gordon. That trio is now calling itself SoCal Uncensored (SCU), and it appears that they will be the next challengers for those Six-Man belts.

The fourth title match of the pay-per-view saw The Motor City Machine Guns retain the ROH Tag Team titles over Best Friends. While this was a relatively good contest, it was ultimately a disappointment given that this was somewhat



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2

of an indie dream match. The second half of the bout just wasn't very interesting, and it ended in a strange manner, as Chris Sabin completely no-sold a piledriver from Chuckie T and rolled up Trent Barreta for the win.

Jay Lethal picked up a victory over Marty Scurll in what was the biggest match on the card that didn't involve a title. The audience was heavily invested in this one, which featured some great action throughout. Part of the story was that Scurll wanted to bring out the villainous side of Lethal, so there were a couple of points where both men were essentially trying to "out-cheat" the other. In the end, Lethal would end up getting the better of Scurll, as he kicked him low when the referee was distracted, hitting the Lethal Injection for the win.

Finally, Ring of Honor announced that it would be introducing a Women of Honor title this year. Several competitors from that division were shown on stage at *Final Battle*, including the exciting Mayu Iwatani from STARDOM.

The tournament will take place during the first few months of 2018.

1. Dalton Castle shocked ROH by taking the World championship from Cody Rhodes **2.** The likes of Deonna Purrazzo and Karen Q may contend for ROH's new women's title

RESULTS The Dawgs (Rhett Titus & Will Ferrara) def. Cheeseburger & Delirious (Dark match) ■ Jonathan Gresham def. Josh Woods (Dark match) ■ Matt Taven def. Will Ospreay (Pinfall / 10:58) ■ War Machine def. The Addiction (Pinfall / 9:35) ■ Jay Lethal def. "The Villain" Marty Scurll (Pinfall / 15:55) ■ The Motor City Machine Guns def. Best Friends (Pinfall / 10:20 / ROH World Tag Team titles) ■ Silas Young def. Punishment Martinez, Kenny King, & Shane Taylor (17:25 / Four Corners Elimination match for the ROH World TV title) ■ The Briscoes def. Bully Ray & Tommy Dreamer (16:30 / New York City Streetfight) ■ The Young Bucks & "Hangman" Adam Page def. Dragon Lee, Flip Gordon, & Titan (15:11 / ROH World Six-Man Tag Team titles) ■ Dalton Castle def. Cody with Brandi Rhodes (12:55 / ROH World championship)

SHINE WRESTLING SHINE 47: SURVIVAL

With SHINE champion LuFisto out of action due to injury, the final SHINE event of 2017 helped to determine her next challenger. *SHINE 47: Survival* on December 16 saw the inaugural title-holder, Rain, return for the first time in three years following a horrific car accident that almost killed her. "The Radiant One" entered the Survival Rumble at number one, and lasted the entire field to claim the title shot against LuFisto at *SHINE 48* on January 26, but only after Jessicka Havok voluntarily eliminated herself, having achieved her main objective of eliminating Brandi Lauren on the orders of the absent Allysin Kay.

Stormie Lee threw a spanner in Rain's accomplishment, however, as after the match she beat down her mentor, and in the main event, Lee kept attacking Rain to the point that the referee had to step in and end the match, casting doubt over Rain's chances of defeating LuFisto for the title in January. Given that Rain overcame a tragic moment in her life, undergoing years of rehabilitation to return to the ring, this could be another wonderful demonstration of overcoming adversity.

Many problems beset The Cutie Pie Club throughout the night, as while Aria Blake lasted a long time in the Survival Rumble, Candy Cartwright and Kiera Hogan did not fare so well. Following on from there, Blake and Cartwright got into an argument at ringside that led to Hogan losing to

Shotzi Blackheart, and in The Cutie Pie Club's shot at the SHINE Tag Team titles, Cartwright threw Blake to the wolves, and she was finished off by champions Ivelisse and Mercedes Martinez. After the match, Cartwright dismissed Blake as a loser, and replaced her in The Cutie Pie Club with Dementia D'Rose, who attacked Blake. Hogan was visibly unhappy with the decision, as she had not been consulted, leading Cartwright to inform her that she ran The Cutie Pie Club and her decisions are final.

In other action, Priscilla Kelly retained the Nova championship in a good bout with Aja Perera; Jessicka Havok finished off Allysin Kay's mission to destroy Brandi Lauren; Leva Bates won via disqualification over D'Rose; Dynamite DiDi won a four-way over Tessa Price, Kikyo, and Robyn Reid; and Natalia Markova defeated Aerial Monroe.

Following the January 26 show, SHINE will debut outside Florida on March 10 with an event at La Boom in Queens, New York.

RESULTS Rain def. Aria Blake, Kikyo, Natalia Markova, Tessa Price, Ivelisse, Dynamite DiDi, Robyn Reid, Mercedes Martinez, Dementia D'Rose, Shotzi Blackheart, Brandi Lauren, Leva Bates, Priscilla Kelly, Kiera Hogan, Aerial Monroe, Stormie Lee, Aja Perera, Candy Cartwright and Jessicka Havok (28:28 / SHINE Top Contenders Survival Rumble match) ■ Natalia Markova def. Aerial Monroe (Pinfall / 9:40) ■ Dynamite DiDi def. Kikyo, Robyn Reid and Tessa Price (Pinfall / 9:24) ■ Leva Bates def. Dementia D'Rose (Disqualification / 9:02) ■ Priscilla Kelly def. Aja Perera (Submission / 12:08 / SHINE Nova championship) ■ Shotzi Blackheart def. Kiera Hogan (Pinfall / 7:37) ■ Jessicka Havok def. Brandi Lauren (Pinfall / 6:34) ■ Las Sicarias (Ivelisse & Mercedes Martinez) def. The Cutie Pie Club (Aria Blake & Candy Cartwright) (Pinfall / 13:16 / SHINE Tag Team titles) ■ Stormie Lee def. Rain (7:31 / Referee Stoppage)



1. Mercedes Martinez and Ivelisse retained the SHINE Tag Team titles at Survival

NJPW WORLD TAG LEAGUE 2017

The best thing that can be said about the 2017 New Japan World Tag League was that it featured some fresh faces. Other than that, not many roses could be thrown at what is traditionally the least noteworthy tour of the year for the promotion.

This year's edition saw those with matches set for the Tokyo Dome removed from the equation, so without Okada, Naito, Tanahashi, and Omega, it left a field that was padded by wrestlers who wouldn't normally get a shot at glory. David Finlay and promising young lions Henare and Katsuya Kitamura were drafted in, along with debuting gajin Sami Callihan, Jeff Cobb, and Chuck Taylor. Cobb and Taylor were on opposite sides of the best match of the tour, a blistering battle at Korakuen Hall that saw Cobb and his partner Michael Elgin drop a bout to Best Friends (Taylor and Barreta).

There really weren't too many other must-see bouts from the tournament, sadly. Rarely were things ever bad, but it was all fairly pedestrian and by the numbers - everything for which New Japan is usually the antithesis.

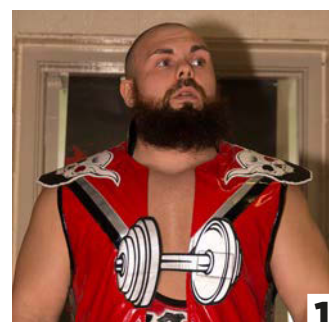
Finals night on December 11 came down to the two block winners: The Guerrillas of Destiny and EVIL and SANADA. Unlike last year's final

in which the Guerrillas tore the house down with Togi Makabe and Tomoaki Honma, they did not exhibit much chemistry with the Los Ingobernables de Japon duo. The match was a microcosm of the tournament itself - plodding and uninspired. There were some sparks between Tama Tonga and SANADA, but they were fleeting.

The rest of the card was focused on building up the ongoing programmes for *Wrestle Kingdom XII*. Match of the Night honours went to Kazuchika Okada and Will Ospreay versus Tetsuya Naito and Hiromu Takahashi, thanks in large part to some great exchanges between the two juniors. The Okada versus Naito build continued to simmer without giving too much away ahead of their January 4 showdown.

The headline-making occurrence on the show was actually a post-match angle in which Chris Jericho stepped into a New Japan ring for the first time in 20 years. Jericho blind-sided Kenny Omega following his trios encounter, and laid him out in a very old-school attack. Jericho bloodied Omega, and even took out English colour commentator Don Callis with a Codebreaker.

In reality, Callis helped produce the programme between his fellow Winnipeg natives.



1. With the championship players not included, the likes of Michael Elgin dominated World Tag League

RESULTS Yuji Nagata, Hirooyoshi Tenzan, Satoshi Kojima, Manabu Nakanishi & Jushin Thunder Liger def. Togi Makabe, David Finlay, Henare, Hirai Kawato & Katsuya Kitamura (Pinfall / 6:58) ■ Michael Elgin, Jeff Cobb, Raymond Rowe & Hanson def. Bullet Club (Pinfall / 8:28) ■ Bad Luck Fale def. BUSHI (Disqualification / 3:55) ■ Best Friends def. Juice Robinson & Sami Callihan (Pinfall / 11:56) ■ CHAOS def. Suzuki-gun (Pinfall / 11:54) ■ Cody & Marty Scurll def. Kota Ibushi & KUSHIDA (Pinfall / 12:12) ■ The Elite def. Rocky Romero, SHO & YOH (Pinfall / 11:11) ■ Tetsuya Naito & Hiromu Takahashi def. Kazuchika Okada & Will Ospreay (Pinfall / 11:23) ■ EVIL & SANADA def. Guerrillas Of Destiny (Pinfall / 21:57)

WRESTLING ROUND-UP

EVOLVE WRESTLING EVOLVE 96-97

After taking the month of November off, EVOLVE Wrestling returned to Queens, New York and Melrose, Massachusetts for its final two shows of 2017. The main events of both cards featured major title defences from EVOLVE champion Zack Sabre Jr. as well as WWN title-holder Keith Lee.

On *EVOLVE 96* on December 9, Lee successfully defended his belt against WALTER in a heavyweight slugfest. These two behemoths went to war, utilising a methodical pace to beat the hell out of each other for almost 20 minutes. Ultimately, after both men had exchanged brutal strikes, Lee retained after hitting Ground Zero.

In the main event of *EVOLVE 97* the following day, Sabre put his own strap on the line against Catch Point's Jaka. These two had split bouts earlier in the year (Sabre retained at *EVOLVE 87*, but Jaka won a non-title re-match at *EVOLVE 94*), making this the rubber bout. Their previous encounters were both excellent, but this was the best of the three - an awesome title match that featured some really strong action and a tremendous story, as Jaka had to fight through a leg injury. After getting some encouragement from his long-time tag team partner Chris Dickinson, Jaka kept on going, giving it everything he had until Sabre tied him up in a near-inexplicable knot and got the submission victory.

THIS IS THE END

After making a huge impact during the previous set of EVOLVE shows, The End (Drennen, Parrow, and Odinson) made its presence felt once again. First, the group interrupted the Tag Team Title bout on *EVOLVE 96*, in which Jaka and Tracy Williams (the latter subbing for Chris Dickinson, who had been suspended for the weekend after his actions during a match at *EVOLVE 95*) defended against Anthony Henry and James Drake. When The End attacked both teams, Dickinson came through the crowd and actually managed to take out The End all by himself, but when a larger brawl reignited with all three sides, The End came out on top. At *EVOLVE 97*, The End attacked Catch Point following the aforementioned main event. Dickinson (who was already at ringside after defying his suspension) once again took out The End singlehandedly, but the trio managed to regain the advantage. Parrow and Odinson then forced Dickinson to watch as Drennen went after Jaka's already injured knee with a chair. The End seems primed for much bigger storylines in 2018.

Another notable tale on this weekend was the introduction of a new format for the shows. From this point onward, all cards are going to have a number of preliminary matches before the main card, all with 10-minute time limits, which will serve multiple purposes. It's an opportunity for talent to



not only showcase itself to a new audience, but to potentially earn spots on the main card, like Kyle The Beast and Shane Mercer did here. However, it also establishes a hierarchy in EVOLVE, as if you don't consistently earn victories, you can be bumped from the main card to the preliminaries, as was the case with Jason Kincaid. It'll be fascinating to see this quasi-competition play out.

The rest of the weekend was filled with a number of really good matches and interesting results. Matt Riddle went 2-0 over both days as he defeated Fred Yehi at *EVOLVE 96* and WALTER at *EVOLVE 97*, in matches that featured a no rope breaks stipulation. Darby Allin also went 2-0, as he not only scored a win over Austin Theory, but won a special three-way encounter against Keith Lee and Tracy Williams that will allow him to book himself in any kind of match he wants in 2018. Despite coming up short against Allin the night before, Austin Theory bounced back in a big way on *EVOLVE 97*, defeating Fred Yehi to win the FIP heavyweight championship, after Yehi had held it for 562 days.

Finally, AR Fox made his return to the promotion, making an instant impact by earning two victories over Jason Kincaid and DJ Z. At the end of *EVOLVE 96*, he confronted Keith Lee, and made it clear that he wanted a shot at the big man's gold.



1. Keith Lee came through a battle of the big men with WALTER at *EVOLVE 96* 2. Darby Allin won both of his matches across the weekend

RESULTS EVOLVE 96 - December 9, 2017

Dominic Garrini def. Joey Lynch (Submission / 3:58) ■ Kyle The Beast & Shane Mercer def. Matt Knicks & Stevie Fierce (4:30) ■ Jarek 1:20 def. Stephen Wolf (7:16) ■ Zack Sabre Jr. def. DJ Z (Submission / 15:10) ■ AR Fox def. Jason Kincaid (Pinfall / 9:42) ■ Darby Allin def. Austin Theory (12:18) ■ Catch Point (Jaka & Tracy Williams) vs. Anthony Henry & James Drake (No Contest / 10:37 / EVOLVE Tag Team titles) ■ Matt Riddle def. Fred Yehi (Submission / 13:59 / No rope break match) ■ Keith Lee def. WALTER (Pinfall / 19:05 / WWN championship)

EVOLVE 97 - December 10, 2017

Dominic Garrini def. Craig Mitchell (Submission / 1:14) ■ Matt Knicks & Stevie Fierce def. Brandon Watts & Stephen Wolf (Pinfall / 8:06) ■ Jarek 1:20 vs. Jason Kincaid (Time-limit draw / 10:00) ■ Anthony Henry & James Drake def. Kyle The Beast & Shane Mercer (Pinfall / 10:00) ■ AR Fox def. DJ Z (Pinfall / 11:00) ■ Darby Allin def. Keith Lee and Tracy Williams (10:07 / Triple Threat match) ■ Austin Theory def. Fred Yehi (Pinfall / 16:09 / FIP heavyweight title) ■ Matt Riddle def. WALTER (Referee Stoppage / 9:52 / No rope break match) ■ Zack Sabre Jr. def. Jaka (Submission / 18:11 / EVOLVE championship)

UFC 218 HOLLOWAY VS. ALDO II

Two thousand and seventeen may not have been a banner year for the Ultimate Fighting Championship, but it put together a strong finish with yet another quality show on December 2.

UFC 218 was headlined by Max Holloway and Jose Aldo once again fighting for the featherweight title, after the originally scheduled challenger Frankie Edgar was injured. While the long-time 145lb kingpin is still a quality fighter, there clearly has been a decline in Aldo's performances, with his striking seeming to have lost some of its power. Perhaps more importantly, his questionable stamina has become worse, as for the second fight in succession, Holloway was able to capitalise on Aldo tiring in the third round. It was an impressive performance from Holloway, who showed both excellent footwork to stay away from Aldo early on, and a rare killer instinct to finish him with punches in the third.

Despite the obligatory mention of Conor McGregor, Holloway will almost certainly move on to fight Frankie Edgar. For Aldo, the situation is less clear; he has participated in 15 consecutive UFC/WEC title fights, but his next step must be back into the ranks of the challengers. A move to lightweight may be wise, both to freshen up the opponents he can face, and to spare his body the challenge of cutting weight.

In the co-main event, Francis Ngannou cemented his status as the baddest man on the planet, quickly knocking out Alistair Overeem with a left uppercut. This may have been the scariest knockout ever seen in the Octagon, because of the unusual power Ngannou generated. Not only did the punch come from his weaker hand, but he was clearly off balance after ducking a punch from Overeem, and yet he was still able to leave the Dutchman flat on his back, with his body as rigid as a board. This was his sixth victory inside the Octagon, and the fourth straight to occur within two minutes.

Understandably, there was immediate talk of Ngannou of challenging Stipe Miocic for the heavyweight championship – a match that will now happen on January 20 in Boston. That could, however, be a mistake, as while Ngannou's performances have made him a cult hero with the media and the hardcore fans, he is not yet the star his performances deserve. That's a testament to the UFC's continued struggles with attracting viewers to its minor shows. One more fight, as the co-main event of Miocic's next defence, would have introduced him to a wider audience. Miocic versus Ngannou is a money fight, but to borrow a phrase from Bob Arum, it needs time to breathe.

Of course, the UFC's room for manoeuvre as regards booking money matches in its heavyweight division has been limited by the numerous successful raids made by its staggeringly unsuccessful rival, Bellator.



Eddie Alvarez journeyed in the opposite direction, with the former Bellator lightweight champion having become the first person to hold both that promotion's title and that of the UFC. His performance against Justin Gaethje at *UFC 218* was a showcase of his strengths and weaknesses. Alvarez is one of the most exciting fighters to watch, as he's always looking to come forward, and push the action. However, an emphasis on boxing and some slightly leaden footwork means that he's very much somebody who takes a punch to give one back. That hurt him against Conor McGregor, and it hurt him against Gaethje, with the former World Series of Fighting lightweight champion able to pepper Alvarez' lead leg with kicks to such an extent that Alvarez admitted he would have struggled to continue had the fight went much longer. Luckily for him, he was able to finish Gaethje early in the third, so coming out on top in an entertaining brawl. They would share Fight of the Night honours with Yancy Medeiros and Alex Oliveira, who had a tremendous back and forth contest in the prelims.

NEW BELTS HANG HEAVY

The night before *UFC 218* saw the first Women's flyweight champion crowned, as Nicco Montano beat Roxanne Modafferi. The ridiculousness of the new division was seen by the fact that not only was Modafferi a late replacement for Sijara Eubanks, who was hospitalised trying to cut weight, but that another fighter on the undercard also couldn't make 125lbs. The much deeper men's roster cannot justify three weight-classes below 155lbs, so why the UFC believes there is demand or supply for four such women's divisions is beyond comprehension.



1. Max Holloway did the double over Jose Aldo in the *UFC 218* main event
2. Francis Ngannou booked himself a match for the *UFC* heavyweight title by knocking off Alistair Overeem

RESULTS Justin Wills def. Allen Crowder (Knockout [punch] / R1 / 2:33) ■ Dominick Reyes def. Jeremy Kimball (Submission [rear-naked choke] / R1 / 3:30) ■ Abdul Razak def. Sabah Homasi (TKO [punches] / R1 / 4:21) ■ Amanda Cooper def. Angela Magana (TKO [punches] / R2 / 4:34) ■ Felice Herrig def. Cortney Casey (Decision [split] / R3 / 5:00) ■ David Teymur def. Drakkar Klose (Decision [unanimous] / R3 / 5:00) ■ Yancy Medeiros def. Alex Oliveira (TKO [punches] / R2 / 2:02) ■ Paul Felder def. Charles Oliveira (TKO [elbows] / R2 / 4:06) ■ Tecia Torres def. Michelle Waterson (Decision [unanimous] / R3 / 5:00) ■ Eddie Alvarez def. Justin Gaethje (Knockout [knee] / R3 / 3:59) ■ Henry Cejudo def. Sergio Pettis (Decision [unanimous] / R3 / 5:00) ■ Francis Ngannou def. Alistair Overeem (Knockout [punch] / R1 / 1:42) ■ Max Holloway def. Jose Aldo (TKO [punches] / R3 / 4:51)

SAY WHAT?!

One of the great things about pro wrestling is that there are so many different styles, and so many different opinions. Voice your thoughts on the sport we love via e-mail, Facebook, and Twitter.



To little surprise, the McMahaons are still in the thick of everything in WWE

FACE TO FACEBOOK

DANIEL BRYAN'S IN-RING RETURN?

Andrew Cassidy: Should Daniel Bryan return to in-ring competition if he is medically cleared to do so?

Jon Hulse: Absolutely. He has claimed he's been fit to do so for a long time, so if he was medically cleared then I can't see any reason for him not to.

Mark Pancott: He'd need to change his style if he does, so New Japan may not be a good fit for him (for example). I actually fancy seeing him leave WWE and going back on the independent circuit. There, he can work a lighter schedule and earn more.

Andrew Cassidy: If he has to change his style to a less physically demanding one then he shouldn't return to the ring. He'd need to decide if he's capable of wrestling to the standard that defined his career.

Simon Wight: Yes, but ease in gently with a limited schedule and tag matches. Check everything is fine physically and build to the big singles match.

Mark Pancott: Steve Austin changed his in-ring style due to physical limitations and ended up with the biggest run of his career.



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BEST WRESTLING BOOKS

Michael Shimaoka: What are the best (or worst) wrestling autobiographies you've ever read?

Mark Pancott: *Pure Dynamite* is by far the best. Would put Bret Hart's and Mick Foley's first as joint second. Both were truly honest.

Simon Baillie: I've enjoyed the majority of wrestling autobiographies, with the exception of Rey Mysterio's and Hulk Hogan's: *My Life Outside The Ring*. Rey's was boring and Hogan's was a cringefest which portrayed him as a whiny victim with a superiority complex.

Paul Murphy: If it hasn't been mentioned, The Rock's was utter cack. Chyna's was bad too, and both Ric Flair and Kurt Angle had disappointing books also. The best ones are Foley's first, Bret's, Dynamite's and Jericho's first.

Simon Wight: Gary Hart's book is really rare. Court Bauer (who runs the MLW podcasting network) has actually said he has tried to buy the rights to the book in the past so it can be reprinted, but Hart's co-writer isn't interested.



TWITTER TALK

WWE: CLASH OF CHAMPIONS 2017

@LanceStorm Getting ready for the pre show #ClashOfChampions @MojoRawleyWWE sold me on his match with that great promo.

@theanswerchaos Why are the Lumberjacks getting entrances? And why is Lana a Lumberjack? And once again, why does WWE have to add an extra T to Riot & Riot Squad? Burning questions. #ClashOfChampions

@dadsnerd Someone please please tell @NatbyNature you're allowed to use more than one taunt per match.

@NotJimRoss I think it's great WWE is finally utilizing their Network to bring us extra goodies like this house show tonight. #ClashOfChampions

@BeAYoungLion Let's hope no one dives on their head like @WWEcesaro did last year at #ClashofChampions

@RegHalstrom The best part of #ClashofChampions was that it happened on #RusevDay!!!!

@RusevBUL and **@WVEDramaKing** should have won the titles, it's rude to use holiday for fans but not win title!

@starbxrner Seriously though... what's the point in having 6 months' worth of #FashionFiles build up to #ClashOfChampions only to have my boys job to trailer park Joe and his pet sheep #PushBreezango

@eightball19 That four-way tag match was awkward, should stick to

the old 4 way tag format in future #ClashOfChampions #WWEClash

@talkbalks Shoutout to long hair front row guy for always repping The Ascension #ClashofChampions #WWEClash #WWE

@bryanalvarez I know I'm behind the eight-ball here, but did Corey Graves really say that Dolph Ziggler may be the greatest in-ring performer of all time? #ClashofChampions

@babybriggs21 Best part of @HEELZiggler winning the #USTitle at #ClashofChampions is at least now his American flag pants make sense

@FookMaywedda Why is the referee refereeing the referee? #ClashOfChampions

@ScotianOaks 2 refs in the ring, the match was not about Sami & Kevin vs. RKO & Nakamura, shame. I'm sick of the McMahon family on @WWE programming, #ClashofChampions #WWE

@SonnyGarner 2 refs = complete mess #ClashOfChampions

@WWEcreative_ish Of all the PPVs we have had all year, Clash of Champions is one of them #WWEClash

@joenegron DID YOU KNOW? Ten champions clashed last month at Survivor Series, but ZERO champions clashed at Clash Of Champions. The more you know. #WWE

TOUCH BASE...

YOU CAN GET IN TOUCH WITH FSM IN ANY OF THE FOLLOWING WAYS

E-MAIL: Send us an e-mail about any pro wrestling or MMA subject to fightingspiritmagazine@gmail.com

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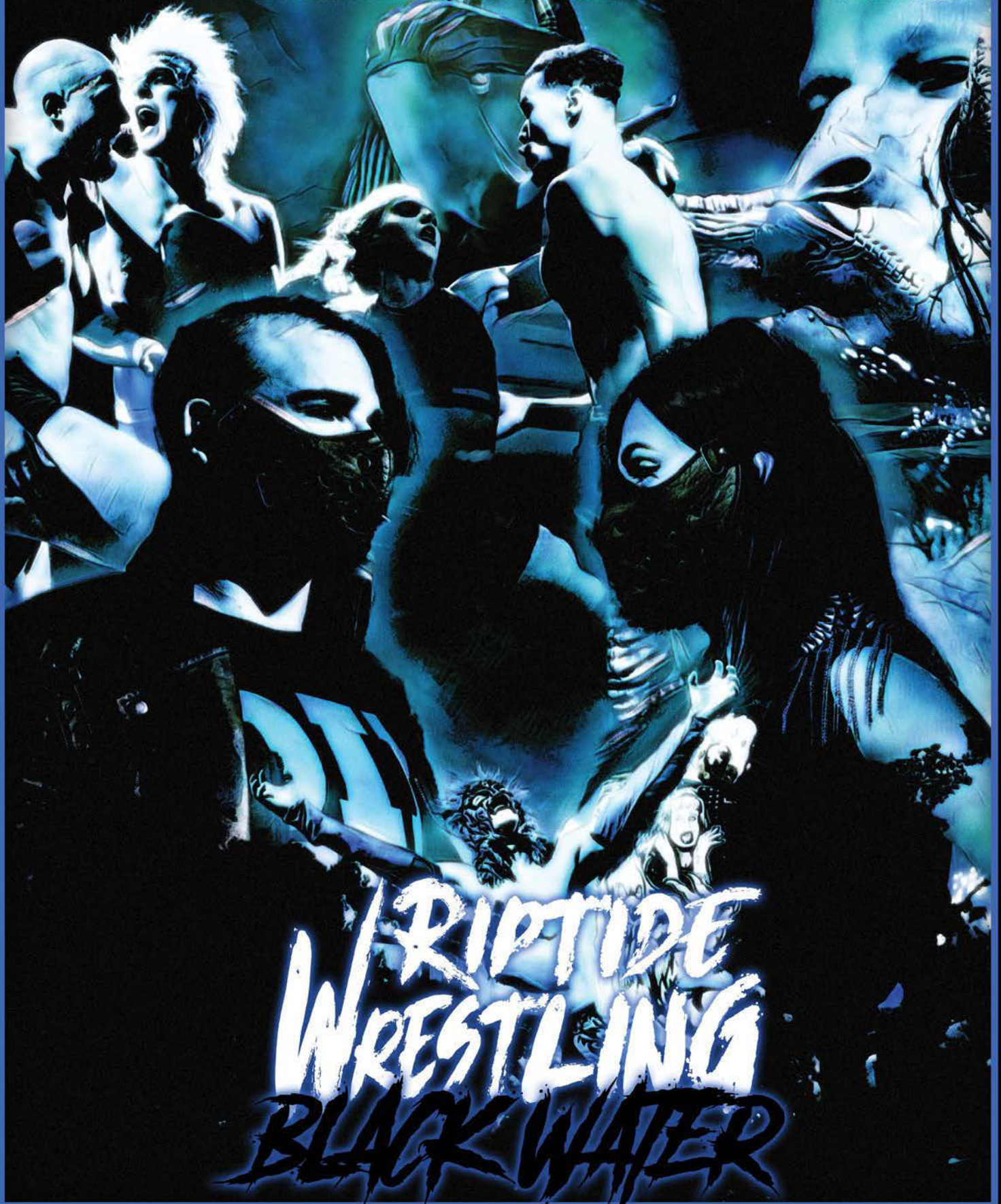
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KAGGY VS CANDYFLOSS VS CHARLI EVANS VS LAURA DI MATTEO VS RHIA O'REILLY

OMARI VS MILLIE MCKENZIE

MATT CROSS VS MORGAN WEBSTER

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Don't miss your chance to win two tickets to World Pro Wrestling's *Superclash* event on February 18 at Cheltenham Town Hall! The tickets also include access to the meet-and-greet event.

The card will be headlined by former WCW, ECW, and WWF star Scorpio, who will take on armbar expert Kendo Ka Shin, formerly of New Japan Pro Wrestling. Also on the card, the son of the legendary British Bulldog, Davey Boy Smith Jr, takes on Josh Shooter, while there is a first appearance in the UK for Marshall and Ross Von Erich, the sons of World Class Championship Wrestling's Kevin Von Erich.

To be in with a chance of winning, please email the correct answer to the following question to customerservice@uncookedmedia.com.

WHAT WAS THE FAMOUS WRESTLING NAME OF KEVIN VON ERICH'S FATHER?

- A) DAVID VON ERICH
- B) MIKE VON ERICH
- C) FRITZ VON ERICH



Scorpio is the advertised headliner of Superclash on February 18 in Cheltenham

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The Boss Gets Emotional After Making WWE History

Sasha Banks and Alexa Bliss made WWE history during the promotion's show in Abu Dhabi on December 1. After working the first female WWE match to take place in the United Arab Emirates (TNA's Knockouts wrestled in the country in 2010), the cameras caught up with an emotional Banks. Clearly, her usual comments about pushing women's wrestling to the forefront in media interviews are heartfelt. Check those tears.

<https://tinyurl.com/WWEAbuDhabi>



Triple-H Talks Ronda Rousey & Conor McGregor

We live in a world where Paul "Triple-H" Levesque can appear on *Good Morning Britain* and find himself grilled by an eager Ben Shepherd about whether or not Ronda Rousey, Floyd Mayweather Jr, or Conor McGregor will appear in WWE. Take a moment, because there's a lot going on in that sentence. Or just watch "The Game" do his thing and show how media savvy he is when pulling on the corporate suit.

<https://tinyurl.com/TripleHBritain>



WWE Visits Manchester City

If you can stop yourself laughing at how disinterested Kurt Angle looks by the whole affair, you'll find some enjoyment in watching Sheamus, Cesaro, and the *Raw* GM visit Manchester City's training centre and Etihad Stadium. Cesaro even scores a few penalties on the turf to win a special shoot-out. Maybe City's rivals should sign him as backup in the January transfer window?

<https://tinyurl.com/WWEManCity>

The Crazy Career of Atsushi

Technically, this compilation of Atsushi Onita's biggest moments doesn't take into account his entire wrestling career, but it does a fine job of covering some of his most notable achievements and matches. Be forewarned, though, there is a *lot* of blood. There's also plenty of barbed wire, a few steel cages, copious amounts of explosions, and more pained expressions than you could care to count. How this man cheated death is anyone's guess.



<https://tinyurl.com/OnitaComplete>



Captain Lou Takes Over Letterman

If you want to see a master at work, watch this clip of Lou Albano keeping David Letterman quiet on *Late Night* in July 1984. Like any self-respecting heel manager should, Lou just keeps yapping, and has something to say about everything Letterman offers up. He even takes credit for writing some of Cyndi Lauper's biggest hits. Everybody knows that girls just wanna have fun, but so did "The Captain" back in the day.

<https://tinyurl.com/LouAlbano>



Kevin Von Erich vs. Abdullah The Butcher

As his sons Ross and Marshall prepare to travel to the UK for Superclash Wrestling at Cheltenham Town Hall on February 18 (tickets: www.cheltenhamtownhall.org.uk), here's a timely reminder of how ferocious their father, Kevin Von Erich, could really be. Speaking of ferocious, his opponent in this World Class bout is Abdullah The Butcher, whose apparent savagery is audibly pronounced by the masterful Gary Hart at ringside.



<https://tinyurl.com/KevinButcher>

Native of Vancouver, British Columbia, the high-flying, graceful El Phantasma has spent the last six months wrestling for a who's who of British promotions, including IPW:UK, Southside, RevPro, and ATTACK! Pro Wrestling. Before that, he gained his greatest notoriety as the ECCW heavyweight champion for an entire year, before new NXT recruit Kyle O'Reilly put an end to his reign in a fabulous match that you can watch at www.tinyurl.com/Phantasma. El Phantasma will be on UK cards for several months yet, so follow him on Twitter at @elpwrestling to find out where he'll be next!



FSM'S ALTERNATIVE REVIEW OF 2017

JANUARY

Two thousand and seventeen begins with Impact Wrestling facing turmoil. The promotion's roster, after much fat-trimming and belt-tightening, has been whittled down to approximately 19 wrestlers, only 13 of whom are under a binding contract. The remaining six are only sticking with the promotion until their community service is over.

The Wrestling Observer's Dave Meltzer notably awards a six-star rating to the *Wrestle Kingdom XI* match pitting Kazuchika Okada against Kenny Omega. While stickler fans spend hours, days, and weeks arguing the pros and cons of breaking from the agreed "five-star" maximum, while debating whether or not the match even merited such a grade, Meltzer uses the distraction to rob their houses.

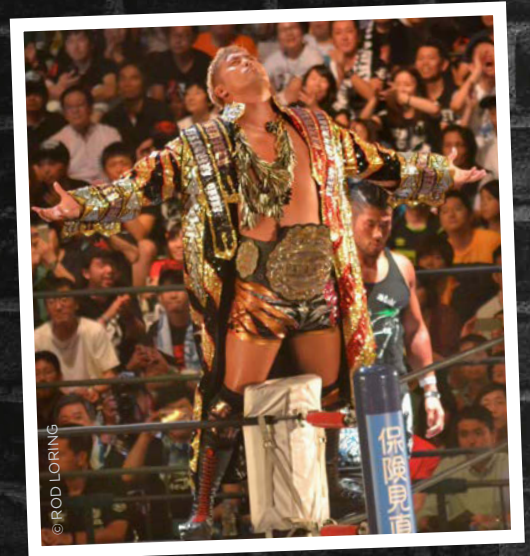
The WWE United Kingdom championship tournament takes place, which is eventually won by the ghost of "Lord" Alfred Hayes, who triumphs over the red phone box that used to be part of WWE's UK entrance scenery. Conspicuous by his absence is European legend D-Lo Brown, who is ruefully denied a chance to compete. When reached for comment, a WWE spokesman admitted that Brown had been considered for entry, but since bringing Brown in wouldn't in any way screw over *World Of Sport* or the UK indie scene, the promotion decided against his inclusion.

"Superfly" Jimmy Snuka exits this mortal coil, and is controversially given a glowing retrospective video package on *Raw*, despite his being held liable for

the brutal 1983 death of mistress Nancy Argentino. Plans to hand out a "Superfly Award for Gender Civility" during *WrestleMania* weekend are shelved until awards can first be created for fellow Hall of Famers Mike Tyson and Donald Trump.

Goldberg, Brock Lesnar, and The Undertaker have epic showdowns in the 2017 Royal Rumble match, made even more epic by the promotion's top full-time stars lying around like boot-clad driftwood

IN A YEAR BOOKENDED BY "BROKEN" HARDY SHENANIGANS, IT SEEMS APT THAT FSM HERE TAKES A SIDEWAYS GLANCE AT THE YEAR THAT WAS 2017. ALAN SMITHEE IS THE MAN WITH THE UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE...



during the "important parts". Randy Orton is the match's eventual winner, thereby earning the right to wrestle in both a haunted house and a bamboo cage when the weather gets warmer.

FEBRUARY

Sworn villain Kevin Owens (who may as well have "scheming, treacherous douchenozzle" tattooed over his face) double-crosses whimsical, irony-adept Chris Jericho during the infamous "Festival of Friendship" segment. This opens the floodgates for more tag team splits that break the hearts of fragile-spirited viewers, including Johnny Gargano and Tommaso Ciampa, Enzo and Big Cass, and FloSlam and profitability.

Bray Wyatt becomes the third third-generation wrestler (following The Rock and Randy Orton) to win the WWE championship. He also becomes the first third-generation wrestler to have his woodland shanty burned down by another third-generation wrestler, all to spite a deceased first-generation nun. There is no sarcasm or exaggeration in this paragraph.

The Hardy Boyz leave Impact Wrestling after a new deal cannot be hammered out. Subsequently, fans internet-wide

begin buzzing about the possibility of a "Broken Universe" transplant onto WWE programming. In their excitement, such viewers cite the track record WWE has had with integrating entities like the New World Order, ECW, and subtlety onto its shows.

Drew Galloway/McIntyre also leaves Impact behind, continuing a disturbing exodus that shrinks the once proud promotion. As of Galloway's exit, the company roster consists of approximately 14 wrestlers, 9 of which are just Caleb Konley in different luchador masks.



MARCH

In good news for the beleaguered promotion, Impact scores a rare victory over WWE by having the best live pay-per-view of the month for March 2017. Their no-PPV-whatsoever handily defeats *Fastlane* in terms of fan enjoyment and quality.

Mauro Ranallo no-shows several tapings of *Smackdown*, reportedly stemming from harassment by on-air colleague John Layfield. This leads to a laundry list of historical accusations against Layfield by past co-workers, with most citing hazing, bullying, and even physical

assault. Through a spokesperson, JBL downplays these accusations, claiming the only thing he ever hurt was *Smackdown*'s ratings when he was the lowest-drawing champion in WWE history.

Rumours swirl that WWE has interest in buying the influential Ring of Honor promotion, perhaps solely to acquire its impressive video library. Nothing comes of the rumblings, which greatly disappoints Paul "Triple-H" Levesque, who was understandably looking forward to taking a "thumbs up" photo with each videotape procured in the sale.



APRIL

WrestleMania XXXIII (tagline: "You're a wrestling fan; you can't possibly have anything better to do for seven hours on a Sunday") comes and goes. Memorable moments include alleged necromancer Bray Wyatt summoning film strips from his father's fifth grade science class, and Roman Reigns beating The Undertaker into assured retirement. Although the event is markedly better than the previous year's disaster, *WrestleMania XXXIII* is still chided for its tiring length. Underscoring just how long the event was, when Triple-H made his entrance for his match with Seth Rollins, he was still known as Terra Ryzing.

Additionally, Brock Lesnar and Goldberg accomplished everything they needed to in an exciting, hard-hitting, five-minute match. Some have suggested that Lesnar watches the current product of guys breaking their backs in 25-minute, bump-heavy main events for less money, while he laughs all the way to the bank, but this is simply not true: Brock Lesnar does not watch the current product.

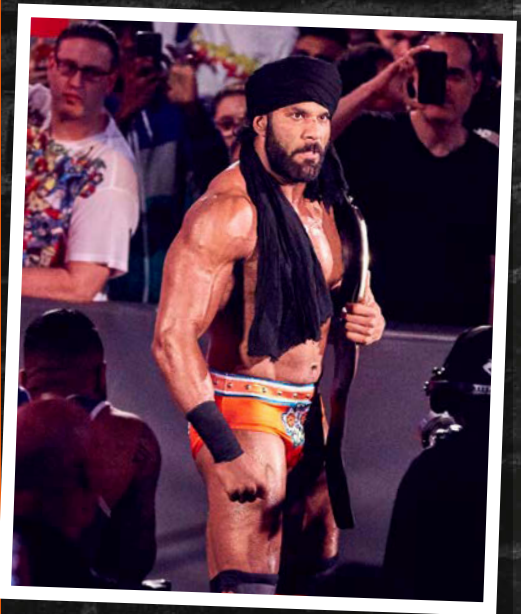
Shinsuke Nakamura finally reaches the promised land, debuting on *Smackdown* days after finishing up his run in NXT. He is immediately labelled "The Artist", after the Oscar-winning French silent film, since his only chance of getting a push is if Kevin Dunn never hears him speak.

Seeing that the victory over The Undertaker didn't exactly make Roman Reigns into the revered mega star that it was hoping, WWE decides to create some sympathy for "The Big Dog" by having Braun Strowman murder him on live television. The grisly scene, which is storyboarded by "three or four fellows with copious amounts of experience working on snuff films", includes tipping over an ambulance with Reigns inside, sticking several coyotes on him, and finally pushing his remains through a wood chipper. Instead of being saddened, fans 'net-wide proclaim the segment to be the greatest thing they've ever seen, though Dave Meltzer is more critical, noting that the wood chipper was manufactured in the U.S. and not Japan.

MAY

The once-beloved, revered, and inspirational Bayley is booked to look increasingly incompetent and helpless throughout her *Raw* brand feud with Alexa Bliss. Amidst the widespread astonishment at how WWE could screw up such a popular, can't-miss star in utterly tone-deaf fashion, fans across social media continue to express unfettered enthusiasm about the eventual call-up of Asuka.

Jinder Mahal is, at long last, rewarded for his innate ability to convincingly portray a character that hails from a country where WWE desires deeper market penetration, defeating Randy Orton at *Backlash* to capture the WWE championship.



JUNE

Monday Night Raw scores its lowest rating of the year on June 12, an abysmal 1.75, equating to roughly 2.5 million viewers. To combat this trend of dwindling viewership, WWE dispatches JBL to the homes of lapsed fans, where he places bags of flaming dog faeces on their front steps.

There is plenty of outrage at the conclusion of the first ever women's Money in the Bank Ladder match, as James Ellsworth secures the winning briefcase for on-camera flame Carmella. To mollify the angry fans who feel that having a man help a woman win a match that was designed to be a milestone for all females, WWE writes a *Raw* segment that is sure to get Stephanie McMahon over.

One year after requesting his WWE release, Cody Rhodes wins the Ring of Honor World championship from Christopher Daniels. Rhodes' emboldened personal decision stands as proof that if one follows his gut feeling, and chooses to pursue dreams that don't come equipped with a safety net, you can still be ridiculed for never having a match better than "three-and-a-half stars, tops."

JULY

Impact Wrestling commemorates 15 years inside an iron lung by holding its annual *Slammiversary* card. The pay-per-view is notable for the company's two remaining wrestlers, James Storm and Eli Drake, acting out all the matches with old WWF LJN action figures purchased at a flea market that morning. The newly-crowned World champion is an Outback Jack with most of the paint sanded off, and teeth marks in one leg that are believed to have come from a dachshund.

Returning the favour from the whole Tarantino-esque killing sequence back in April, Roman Reigns tries to end Braun Strowman by firing a surface-to-air missile directly at his face, before force feeding a bleeding, convulsing Strowman some soda and Pop Rocks. The fans, however,

© ANDREA KELLAWAY / IMPACT WRESTLING



AUGUST

Thirteen matches highlight WWE's 30th annual *SummerSlam* pay-per-view, with none more thrilling than the four-way match for the Universal championship. Brock Lesnar, Roman Reigns, Samoa Joe, and Braun Strowman proceed to tear the house down with madcap mayhem and sheer brutality, climaxing with Lesnar picking up the Empire State Building and rifling it at Reigns' head. However, the match is somewhat marred when Michael Cole, trying too hard to sound life-like, robotically screams so loud that his internal battery rapidly drains. Corey Graves is forced to carry on with the call, while Booker T fumbles with the portable charger in the dark.

Days after losing the NXT title, Bobby Roode debuts on the *Smackdown*

brand as a babyface. This choice of alignment upsets many among the WWE faithful, who can't figure out why the promotion's brain trust would take a wrestler whose catchy, frequently-downloaded theme music is sung to by sold-out crowds, and position him as a good guy. In any event, Dave Meltzer grades Roode's debut match against Aiden English "incomplete", since his satellite crapped out due to a passing storm. Fans spend three days refreshing Meltzer's Twitter to see if he finally offers a star rating, to no avail.

Numerous wrestlers and fans take to social media to call for the blacklisting of AAA performer Sexy Star when, in an utterly cruel and disgusting moment at the annual *TripleMania* pay-per-view, Star forces TNA talent Rosemary to watch *Battleground* from start to finish.

do not take so kindly to attempted murder this go-around, as Reigns is lambasted for his unheroic actions. "Reigns is supposed to be a good guy, and good guys don't commit sins," said one fan, who watched the match via an illegal download.

Battleground is derided as one of the worst pay-per-views in recent memory, thanks to an uninspired undercard, confusing finishes, and a Punjabi Prison match that was paced slower than an arthritic turtle. Fans are so excited by the prospect of watching the Cage match through a structure that is the visual equivalent of watching snails screw behind a plume of smoke that they (and this is in no way fiction or satire) leave their seats in order to buy advance *Royal Rumble* tickets at the box office during that match.

SEPTEMBER

John Layfield steps away from the WWE commentary desk, during a year in which previous bullying and hazing allegations against him were spotlighted, all of which were either vehemently downplayed or denied by him and his closest friends. For his severance package, Layfield is given Justin Roberts' passport.

The Mae Young Classic concludes its well-received run, as Kairi Sane wins the final match over a prosthetic hand covered in placental fluid. The finals are viewed by over 100,000 dedicated fans on WWE Network, and a staggering 1.2 million "true fans" through GIFs on Twitter.

The wrestling fraternity loses two incredible voices weeks apart, as legendary manager/broadcaster Bobby "The Brain" Heenan and renowned Memphis Wrestling voice Lance Russell depart this earth. The day-to-day wrestling world is weaker without their contributions, and the greater outside world is poorer minus their respective graces.



OCTOBER

Dean Ambrose, Seth Rollins, and Roman Reigns come together once more after three years, reforming The Shield. There is a small bit of controversy, as WWE's online store already had the reunion shirts available hours before the official "surprise" reformation of the group on TV. WWE officials minimized that as a "strange coincidence", before deftly pulling the "Roman Kicked Brock's Ass at *WrestleMania XXXIV* and I Was There" commemorative shirts from the store.

Indie stalwart turned WWE writer Jimmy Jacobs is fired by the company weeks after posing for a selfie with Bullet Club belligerents outside of a WWE TV taping. This frees Jacobs up to resume his wrestling career, with many vocal online fans hoping that he signs with WWE



© ANDREA KELLAWAY / IMPACT WRESTLING

NOVEMBER

WWE releases Emma, Summer Rae, Darren Young, and James Ellsworth in a matter of weeks. The only ones ecstatic about the situation are officials in Impact Wrestling, who know full well that releasing four talents in such a narrow time frame is practically a death sentence.

Speaking of death, shambling like a zombie with the trots toward the end of 2017, Impact holds its centerpiece show, *Bound For Glory*, in Ottawa, Canada. To the unassuming eye, the roster appears to have grown since *Slammiversary*, though in actuality it is just Johnny Nitro/Morrison/Hennigan/Mundo/Impact bringing in friends from his Los Angeles improv group for one night to play the roles of all the wrestlers. A new champion is needed

after the Outback Jack LNJ figure gets stuck at customs, and thus the belt is won by an unknown prop comic who Dave Meltzer raves "does an even better Matt Sydal than Matt Sydal". Fans who didn't bother to watch the show agree wholeheartedly with Meltzer's assessment.

WWE opts to put its main championship back on AJ Styles after early *Survivor Series* ticket sales hover somewhere between "dismal" and "I hope we're lucky enough to win backstage passes at this TNA house show." This ends the Jinder Mahal experiment after six long months. Fortunately for WWE, its fanbase in India, thanks in large part to Mahal's sudden push, increased exponentially, as wrestling fans across the nation learn how Streamable works.

so that they'll have the best access to his matches.

Asuka wrestles her first match of note on WWE's main roster, defeating Emma at the *Tables, Ladders, & Chairs* pay-per-view. The match structure, in which established undercarder Emma took lots of offence against an ostensibly dominant figure in the unbeaten Asuka, drew much criticism from devoted fans. Those same fans later tweet their excitement about Adam Cole's eventual call-up, since WWE has always done right by their NXT stars.

Kurt Angle returns to action inside a WWE ring for the first time in more than 11 years, and on the 17-year anniversary of his first WWE World championship victory. Angle is soon after booked for the forthcoming *Attitude One Night Stand* pay-per-view, where he will share the stage with elder contemporaries in Shane McMahon, Stephanie McMahon, and Triple-H. In some foreign markets, the event is promoted as *Survivor Series*.

DECEMBER

As Christmas approaches, fans are delighted to learn that Anthem Sports will allow Matt Hardy to appropriate his "Broken" gimmick within WWE programming without any legal reprisal. This gesture of good faith seems to be a happy way to end what was a befuddling, demented, harrowing year in the annals of professional wrestling, with Hardy genuinely touched by Anthem's generosity. That is, until JBL pops up from out of nowhere to give a distracted, unsuspecting Hardy a wedgie, before pouring battery acid into his ears as a "harmless rib".

May all of our 2018s be just as harmless and good-natured. We certainly deserve it.

A photograph of Vince McMahon, the CEO of WWE, standing in a wrestling ring. He is wearing a light-colored, patterned suit jacket over a light blue shirt and a gold patterned tie. He is holding a black microphone with the WWE logo on it in his left hand and has his right arm raised in a gesture. The background is a blurred crowd of spectators in a arena setting.

THE BOLD PLAY

As Vince McMahon puts the finishing touches on reviving the XFL, Will Cooling examines his latest foray beyond pro wrestling, and whether it's time for the McMahon family to sell WWE.

The world of entertainment and media was rocked on December 14 when Disney announced the purchase of the majority of Rupert Murdoch's 21st Century Fox, including the company's stake in Sky. It stood to reason that Disney once again persuading an aging titan of the industry to sell it his life's work might cause renewed speculation about Vince McMahon selling WWE. And then, just a few days later, a bombshell dropped in the pro wrestling world that should make everyone realise that such a sale is a real possibility: on December 16, WWE confirmed that McMahon had sold around three percent of his ownership stake to fund a new company called Alpha Entertainment. This company would be his vehicle to run projects away from WWE, and the accountability to other shareholders that comes from being publicly listed. It would also be the platform for McMahon to continue being a major figure in the world of sports and entertainment should he ever choose to sell WWE.

And, it was clear, McMahon was going to revisit the scene of one of his greatest failures.

For reasons only he knows, Vince McMahon is bringing back the XFL in some form

X-RATED

It's hard to overstate just how hot Vince McMahon was at the turn of the century. He had rescued his wrestling promotion by embracing an "attitude" that was raunchy and irreverent, turning the World Wrestling Federation into one of the coolest brands in entertainment.

So at the peak of his powers he decided to set up... an American football league! It wasn't the worst idea.

McMahon thought that with the NFL having such a short season, there was scope for a spring league that would sate viewers looking for their fix. A combination of being rebuffed by the Canadian Football League and being embraced by an NBC that had just lost the rights to the NFL meant this insight led him to found the XFL. Typically, McMahon rushed the launch, with nobody ready for the first game on February 3, 2001. With genuine curiosity, the inaugural game was watched by 14 million viewers, but the product was poor, and audiences rapidly shrank. Despite McMahon wanting to continue, NBC pulled the plug at the end of the first season, and combined the XFL lost \$140 million.

That seemed to be the end of the story, until last year when Charlie Ebersol, the son of McMahon's XFL partner, Dick Ebersol, produced an ESPN documentary on the league. McMahon's willingness to talk about one of his greatest failures was an unusual move for a man often unwilling to confront his mistakes. But it made sense as the documentary progressed, with McMahon seemingly still convinced that the XFL was a good idea. He even admitted that he often thought about bringing back the league.

Now, no longer are these idle thoughts. WWE's press release confirmed that the new company would allow him to "explore investment opportunities across the sports and entertainment landscapes, including professional football". While there is speculation that McMahon may seek to buy the Carolina Panthers, it seems more likely that the XFL will return in some form; as discovered by pro wrestling analyst Chris Harrington, Alpha Entertainment has taken out several trademarks on the XFL and other possible names for a football league. The remaining XFL trademarks WWE possesses will expire shortly, allowing Alpha Entertainment to claim them.

It is hard to see the rationale for reviving the XFL. By all accounts, McMahon is not a gridiron fan, and so has no unique insight into how to promote the sport. In theory, the growth in rights fees means that he could this time avoid losing money, but that ignores that he won't be able to pay his players as little as he did in 2001. It is hardly a great leap to speculate that McMahon is looking to capitalise on the problems the NFL experienced last year in bridging the divide between conservative sports fans and its African-American players with regard to the protests over police brutality, especially since his friend, President Donald Trump, has castigated the NFL on numerous occasions. However, that would be a significant change in approach from a company that has long sought to hide its ruling family's hard right politics for fear of offending liberal customers.

Whatever McMahon is planning, he will be hoping for more success than in his previous forays outside of pro wrestling.



When McMahon first started the XFL, it was with NBC Sports, including best friend Dick Ebersol, as a partner

© NBC SPORTS

HALF MEASURES

The received wisdom is that McMahon is obsessed with achieving success outside pro wrestling, but that's not quite represented by his record. When you consider that his greatest strength in wrestling has been his tenacity, the speed with which he gives up on his outside enterprises is not properly recognised. He quickly abandoned a move into boxing, after losing money on distributing the November 7, 1988 "Sugar" Ray Leonard versus Donny Lalonde fight. His attempt to wrest control of professional bodybuilding from the Weider brothers lasted less than two years, after his World Bodybuilding Federation events drew poorly on pay-per-view. The first version of the XFL did not reach its second season, with McMahon turning down UPN's offer to continue broadcasting games in return for *Smackdown* being reduced by

"Despite McMahon wanting to continue, NBC pulled the plug at the end of the first season, and combined the XFL lost \$140m"



With Rupert Murdoch selling his life's work to Disney, McMahon may be tempted to do the same

© HUDSON INSTITUTE



30 minutes. He has stayed the course when it comes to making movies, but even WWE Studios had its budget cut after failing to achieve swift success.

What's interesting is that all these moves leaned into the WWE machine, both in turns of performers, promotion, and presentation. The WBF focused heavily on Lex Luger, whilst pro wrestlers have tended to be used as the stars of WWE's films. John Cena even made a rap album during an ill-fated attempt to create a record label. All McMahon's outside ventures have relied on the unique promotional opportunity that is WWE's programming, with the promotion giving its siblings extensive free publicity. Most strikingly, the presentation of both the WBF and XFL leaned heavily on the concepts that defined McMahon's then approach to pro wrestling: the WBF was built around cartoonish gimmicks, while leering over the XFL's cheerleaders was a major feature of its advertising and programming. McMahon also used pro wrestling commentators extensively, with Bobby Heenan and himself on WBF events, and Jesse Ventura, Jim Ross, and Jerry Lawler on the XFL.

That approach will not be possible this time, with the establishment of Alpha Entertainment meaning that WWE employees cannot be conscripted to work on outside projects. That's a positive, as it's widely accepted that the XFL did not only lose WWE money, but made the wrestling company less successful by stretching everybody too thinly. Not only was McMahon trying to divide his time between wrestling and American football, but he was making many of the people who worked for him do the same.

But there is still the issue of McMahon himself. While he has delegated an increasing amount to his executives, he is still very much the man in charge of WWE. All indications are that he will continue to lead WWE whilst trying to achieve success with this venture. He would be wiser to follow the example of his wife, Linda, who has successfully forged a career in politics. She didn't just resign her position as the WWE's Chief Executive Officer to ensure that she had the time to effectively campaign to be Senator for Connecticut, but consciously separated herself from

WWE so that she would be seen as credible. She never gave up on her ambitions, showing tremendous resilience to bounce back from her defeat in 2010 to once again secure the Republican party nomination in 2012. Even after her second failure, she still didn't retreat into the warm embrace of WWE. Instead, she carved out a niche for herself as a prominent fundraiser within the New England GOP, a platform that allowed her to capitalise on her husband's lengthy friendship with Donald Trump to join his Cabinet as Small Business Administrator.

The lesson for Vince should be that if he's willing to step away from his company, and withstand the initial setbacks, he may be able to achieve things that few could imagine.

CHANGING TIMES

WWE's current market capitalisation is approximately \$2.5 billion. Given that its structure doesn't permit a hostile takeover, one must presume that a company buying WWE outright would have to pay a premium, taking the sale price way north of \$3 billion. It's worth explaining why the McMahons may never get another chance to sell at such a high price.

The obvious point is that we are in the middle of a bull market, with stocks all over the world growing in value. This has led to many companies being massively overvalued compared to their annual earnings, something that is true of WWE. The general rule is that a company should be valued at no more than 20 times its annual earnings, but at the moment, WWE is trading at more than 50 times the forecast for its earnings in 2017. Should the bulls give way to bears, WWE will likely be caught in the stampede.

The promotion's expensive achievement of securing 1.5 million subscribers makes it an attractive proposition to any streaming service looking to boost its subscription numbers. However, the window in which such companies will pay a premium will likely close soon. With subscriber growth slowing without any sign of profitability, Netflix will surely soon have to start cutting costs to appease investors. Amazon, Google, and Facebook are all likely to face enhanced regulations the next time the Democrats are in power in America, due to growing concerns about their hegemonic position in key sections of the economy. Meanwhile, Disney is looking to secure content for its embryonic streaming services, one of which will be dedicated to sports. In short, there are five very wealthy companies fighting to dominant online streaming, who are all aware that the battle will likely either be won or cancelled within the next 10 years. Either way will reduce WWE's value, and so the time to sell is now.

A further concern is that much of the increase in WWE's value has been driven by expectations of a significant growth in television rights fees. This seems optimistic considering the comparatively poor deal it got previously, a result that caused McMahon to lose to \$350 million on paper in one day in May 2014. Looking to the long-term, an independent WWE seems out of time and place. In economic terms, WWE is an increasingly rare example of an independent studio asking American television channels to broadcast its programmes based on advertising revenue alone. That's problematic because today's stations are

looking to commission programmes from production studios owned by the same company. In doing so, they mitigate declining advertising revenues by ensuring that the money earned through revenue streams such as in-programme adverts, international distribution, merchandise, syndication, and streaming rights all flow to the shared parent company's bottom line.

Because of this, WWE is vulnerable to USA Network deciding that it would rather not carry independent studio programming in prime time. Whilst that would hit the station's viewing figures, robbing it of the bragging rights that come from being the most highly-rated cable station in America, it could still prove more profitable. This is even truer because unlike other sports, WWE does not attract premium advertising rates given companies' reluctance to appeal to American wrestling fans due to concerns about their wealth and intelligence. Nor is WWE a proven lead-in for other programming.

The McMahons simply selling up to NBC Comcast would ensure its future on USA Network, and may even lead to greater promotion through the NBC network and sports channel. But much like Turner Broadcasting, a bare-bones media company is unlikely to prove an effective owner of a wrestling promotion. Unlike any other independent studios, WWE can boast lucrative live event and merchandise income; that's why Amazon and Disney would make most sense as potential buyers, as both could not only carry WWE programming, but profit from selling WWE tickets and merchandise, and use the promotion as bait to persuade wrestling fans to sample their broader product range.

One final, slightly banal point is that the recently passed Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 means that the proceeds of a sale will be taxed at an abnormally low rate. Given the left-ward direction of the Democrats, it's likely that if the McMahons delay a sale past the end of the Trump presidency, they would risk a significantly higher tax bill.

YOU CAN GET WHAT YOU WANT

If McMahon is really committed to pursuing one last shot at non-wrestling glory, it's worth highlighting just how detached the rest of his family has become from the company that made their fortune.

As discussed, Linda is the most extreme example. Despite retaining a considerable ownership stake in the promotion, she's not held a position with the company, nor has she been involved in its storylines for almost a decade. Likewise, despite having returned as a performer in 2016, Shane has not exercised any authority off-screen since he left in 2009. Since, then he's pursued various business opportunities, including trying to introduce pay-per-view into China and promoting golf events. Both Linda's political aspirations and Shane's business interests would be enhanced by replacing their remaining WWE stock with liquid capital that they could invest in their current enterprises.

Unlike her mother or brother, Stephanie still works in the family business, but the days when she was integral to the running of WWE as Head of Creative are a distant memory. Today, her focus is on the WWE's philanthropic efforts, and general corporate social responsibility through the promotion

of WWE's commitment to equality and diversity through advocating for measures like the Women's Evolution. In theory, this work is about her preparing to be the future face of the promotion, but in reality it seems more about getting her over as a woman of influence. She recently participated in the Eisenhower Fellowship for outstanding female professionals, and has openly talked about a move into politics. If WWE was sold, it would provide her with a bigger platform to pursue these ambitions, either through securing a similar but higher profile role in the promotion's new parent company, or the cash windfall allowing her to control her own charitable foundation.

Ironically, the only McMahon who aspires to be integral to the WWE's everyday operations is the honorary member. Paul Levesque has long been groomed to replace his father-in-law as the leading creative force. Ironically, a sale would ease his path to controlling WWE. Most obviously, Vince cashing out would expedite the transfer of power, and remove the possibility that he would insist on being a back seat driver. More broadly, a WWE that was a division of a bigger company would make Levesque's lack of corporate experience less problematic due to the parent company assuming back-office functions, and the McMahon Family no longer being vulnerable to losing wealth due to a shareholder backlash.

It's easy to revert to the knee-jerk assumption that Vince McMahon would never sell his life's work, but much the same could easily have been said about George Lucas and Rupert Murdoch. The reality is that, for the longest time, the only person who stood to lose from a sale was Vince McMahon. However, if he wants one final shot at non-wrestling glory, and to secure the best possible inheritance for his children, then he should sell WWE.

As McMahon has always known, everyone has their price.

“It's easy to revert to the knee-jerk assumption that Vince McMahon would never sell his life's work, but much the same could easily have been said about George Lucas and Rupert Murdoch”



NAYLOR'S NOTEPAD

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AFTER HIS DEATH AT THE AGE OF 46, ANDRE THE GIANT IS STILL LEGENDARY TO WRESTLING FANS. **ROB NAYLOR** RECALLS WATCHING HIM BOTH LIVE AND ON TELEVISION, AND MAKES THE CASE FOR THE FRENCHMAN'S FIVE GREATEST MATCHES.

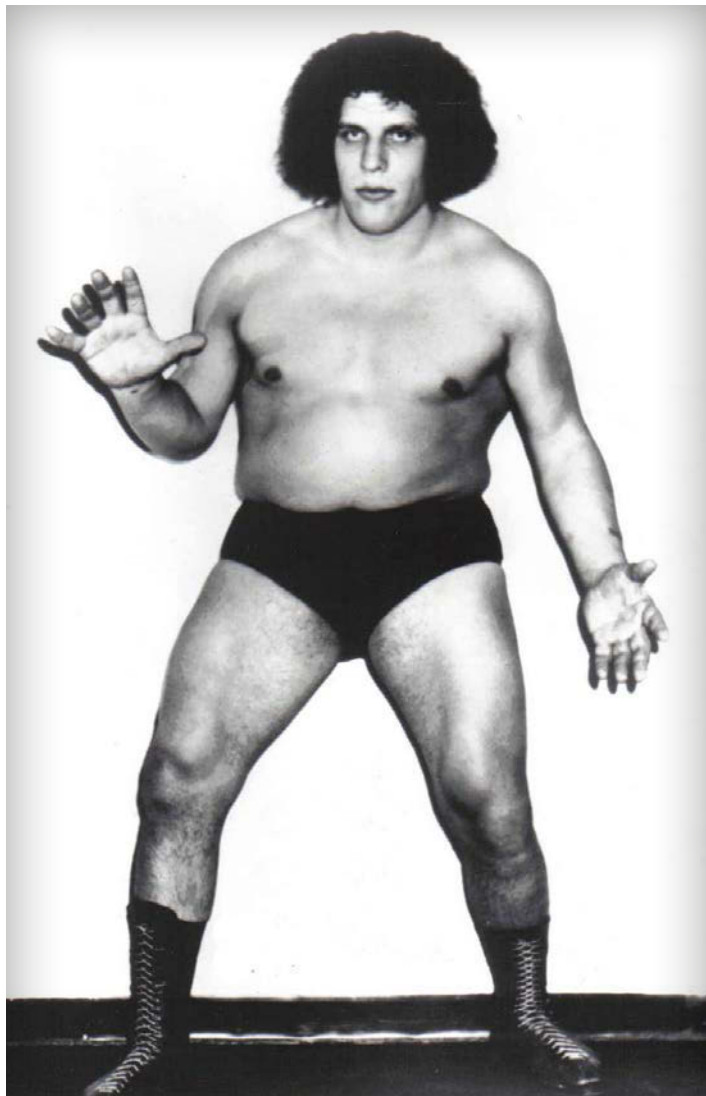
I've attended well over 500 live wrestling events in the last 30 years, probably more if I took time to count, but there are about 20 memories in particular that I'll never forget for the rest of my life. These were thrilling moments when good guys fought back, important figures made surprise returns, titles changed hands, and epic bouts completely captivated audiences. I got to see Austin Aries shockingly end the Ring of Honor title reign of Samoa Joe in December

2004. I was present for the classic in New York City between Joe and Kenta Kobashi in ROH in October 2005. I drove to Chicago from Pennsylvania to see the jaw-dropping Dragon Gate six-man, also for ROH, that *WrestleMania XXII* weekend in 2006. I was even fortunate enough to feel the energy as I walked behind The Shield, holding the boom mic on their way to the ring at *WrestleMania XXIX*.

But the *first* great memory I ever had of going to live wrestling was seeing "The Eight Wonder of the World" Andre the Giant.

It was late-1985 and – in one of my first TV wrestling memories – Big John Studd, King Kong Bundy, and Bobby Heenan broke Andre's sternum (in storyline, of course) at the Toronto Maple Leaf Gardens. Studd, Bundy, and Heenan had wreaked havoc on not just Andre, but Hillbilly Jim, "Captain" Lou Albano and others. They were the top monster heels in the World Wrestling Federation, and tags opposite Andre and Hulk Hogan were happening all over the country, selling out buildings.

Andre versus Studd was a big money WWF match during this time, and I remember them coming to my small town of Shamokin, Pennsylvania and selling out the local high school gym with ease for a big singles match. (As an aside, I really loved when the WWF was still doing big business in the 1980s, and would come



When you saw Andre The Giant in the flesh, it was not an experience you quickly forgot

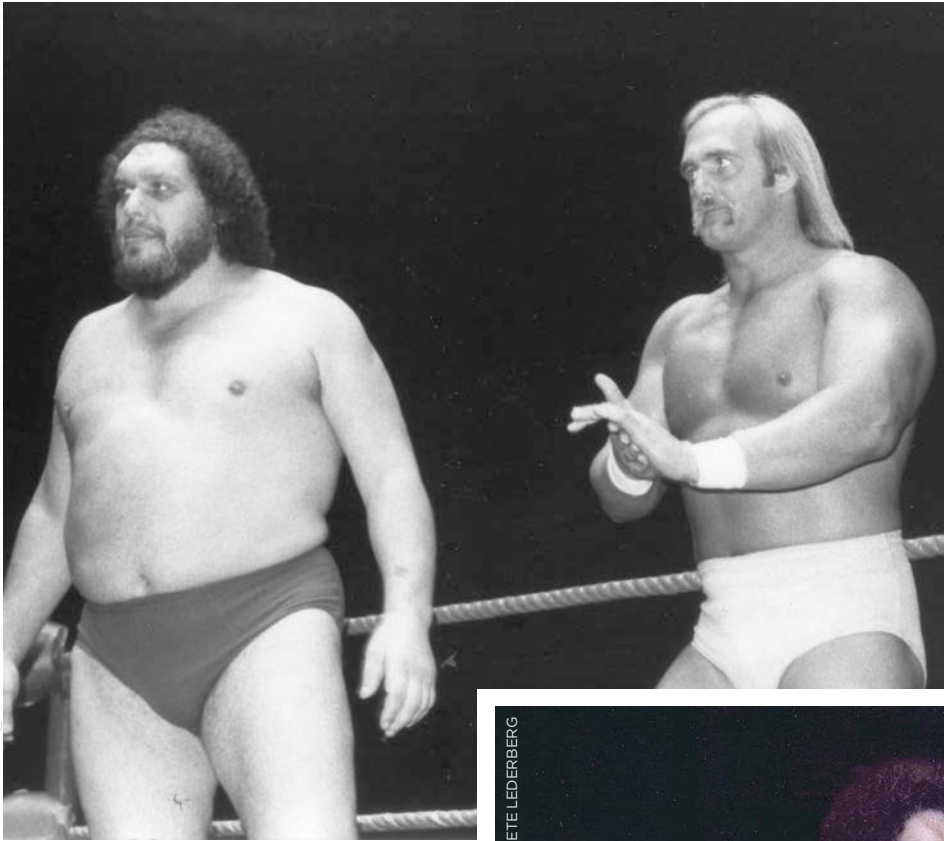


“Over the years, there have been wrestlers taller than Andre, but nobody ever truly replicated his aura and success at being a legitimate box office draw”

Rob Naylor is a former WWE Creative Assistant at developmental territory NXT, and is a colour commentator at EVOLVE and SHINE Wrestling. He is a lifelong student of pro wrestling who counts "Raging Bull" Manny Fernandez as his favourite wrestler.

@defcee My pops has a lot of celebrity sighting stories, but my favorite is about seeing Andre The Giant at an airport bar sitting on two barstools drinking a pitcher of beer like it was a pint glass

Andre and Hulk Hogan teamed in both the AWA and the WWF



© WREAL.AND@AOL.COM

style booking on current TV wrestling would be Brock Lesnar: a physically impressive athlete with superstar charisma who is utilized only on special occasions to reinforce just what a major deal he is.

I only ever saw Andre in the WWF as a kid. I wish I was a few years older so that I could have seen him in the AWA or World Class or Mid-South when he'd venture into those territories and increase business. While growing up watching Andre versus Bundy and Studd was cool, I had to revisit his matches against Kamala or Blackjack Mulligan or Killer Khan via videotape long after they occurred. I recall seeing Kamala bodyslam Andre in a magazine photo and being completely in awe of it. When Andre's feuds against the other monsters concluded in a cage, it was always a real thrill, too.

Still, the Andre The Giant live experience was always the most special. The only other time I saw Andre was as part of a "triple main event"

to small towns and gyms with sold-out shows, as entertainment in smaller cities like the one I grew up in was few and far between. But it's an era that's gone, for sure.)

I don't even recall the specifics of whether I'd planned to go to the live event, or if my parents took me on a whim. I just remember that first time walking into the Hershey Park Arena and seeing all the people, smelling the popcorn, and hearing how loud the mat was when the wrestlers landed on it.

The show was headlined by Andre teaming with Barry Windham and Mike Rotunda against the heel triumvirate of Studd, Bundy and "The Brain". I'd love to find the match one day, but I'm almost certain that it wasn't taped by anyone. I so vividly recall Heenan being sent from pillar to post by Andre as the building lost its collective mind. I'd meet Bobby Heenan later in my life and he was no small man, but he looked like a child in the ring against Andre, who was easily the largest human being I'd ever seen at my six years of age.

PROTECTED SPECIES

Over the years, there have been wrestlers taller than Andre, but nobody ever truly replicated his aura and success at being as a legitimate box office draw. A large part of that is of course based on him working as a special attraction in the 1970s and '80s. Now, with weekly live TV, the athletes can't be protected as much as they used to be. The best example of Andre-

© PETE LEDERBERG



Andre prepares for action alongside territory star and WWE "stooge" Gerald Brisco

at Hershey Arena in early-1989, as he faced Jake "The Snake" Roberts, Hulk Hogan took on Bad News Brown, and Randy "Macho Man" Savage faced off with The Ultimate Warrior. This was a *WWF Superstars* and *Saturday Night's Main Event* taping, and I recall it being standing room only, because my dad and I were among those doing exactly that.

While the match with Roberts wasn't anything thrilling in comparison to when I saw Andre live four years earlier, I just loved that feud, as it gave Andre something I'd not really seen out of him his entire career: vulnerability. Andre bellowing, "Don't say snake!" anytime Gene Okerlund or anyone else even brought up the idea of a reptile was great television, as was Andre passing out after Jake threw Damian on top of him.

A similar feud in those days saw "Hacksaw" Duggan attempt to slay the giant. In 1988,

Duggan had recently returned to the WWF, and was immediately poised to be a main player just by wrestling Andre around the circuit, but to have the angle where he bravely stood up to Andre only to be bloodied and choked until he clocked Andre with his trusty 2x4 elevated Duggan's WWF stock even higher. The timing on the wallop was just perfect, and the rare blood in a TV confrontation (which was accidental, according to Duggan) made the entire incident even more memorable.

The Giant would move on to matches against The Ultimate Warrior, many of which were 30-second losses, due to Andre's health deteriorating. I always thought it was sad to see such a dominant force like Andre take so many pinfalls all over the country to the Warrior after going so long without losing, but it's admirable that he did everything the office asked of him, in an effort to get the Warrior over as

"the next Hogan". That, unfortunately, never truly materialized.

Andre's WWF career would come to an end about a year later in unspectacular fashion, and he'd close out his days in the sport in All Japan Pro Wrestling, usually alongside Giant Baba in special tag team bouts. Some of the matches were a bit rough around the edges, but the fans in Japan were very appreciative of the legend, who'd been one of the greatest stars in the history of Japanese wrestling, with incredible showdowns opposite Antonio Inoki, Stan Hansen, Dusty Rhodes, and many others.

Make no mistake about it, if you were lucky enough to be born in the 1960s, '70s or '80s and got to witness Andre The Giant live, you were blessed. He truly was one of the most special attractions in pro wrestling's rich history, and provided fans with thrills and memories that will last a lifetime.

THE TOP FIVE MATCHES OF ANDRE THE GIANT

Rob Naylor lists a quintet of his favourite matches that feature Andre The Giant

i) vs. Stan Hansen (New Japan Pro Wrestling – September 23, 1981)

One of the better matches on the New Japan World streaming service; imagine that statement given the classics all over that platform. To me, even more than Hogan, Stan Hansen was Andre's greatest opposition, particularly in Japan, where Hansen is arguably the greatest foreign wrestler ever. It's "The Giant" versus "The Texas Cowboy", and it's completely fascinating from the minute the introductions hit. Hansen was so physically dominant in nearly every match, but this was an exception, and it was also cool to see "The Lariat" fighting from underneath for once. This match also has the most emphatic bodyslam of Andre I've ever seen.

ii) vs. Hulk Hogan (World Wrestling Federation – March 29, 1987)

This is the match of Andre's career. It's been panned for the actual in-ring content, but it is one of the biggest drawing matches of all-time, and the feel and epic nature of this clash of supermen makes it an easy top five

choice for me. It's another match that I'll never forget watching live at a closed circuit TV location.

iii) vs. Adrian Adonis (New Japan Pro Wrestling – June 8, 1984)

This match is on YouTube, and it's a beauty. I'd seen an Adonis, Jesse Ventura, and Jerry Blackwell versus Andre and Hulk Hogan Handicap match before, and it was so much fun given how mobile Andre was and how fantastic both Adonis and Blackwell were at eating offense. This match has a couple of "Oh my god!" moments, one of which is Adonis hitting a beautiful sunset flip on Andre, who is actually taken down by it. The finish sees Adonis fly off the top and catch a big boot to the face from Andre, bouncing halfway across the ring for his troubles. A must-see match.

iv) vs. King Kong Bundy (World Wrestling Federation – September 23, 1985)

This match was dubbed "The Colossal Jostle" and lived up to its billing. Bundy had just arrived in the WWF from a stint in Memphis and had annihilated all competition, asking for a "five count"

in each of his victories. But when he finally went head-to-head with Andre, it was a dream match of sorts for that time. I specifically remember a WWF Magazine with a split centrefold of each man listing their respective height/weight et cetera, and it seemed like the ultimate irresistible force versus immovable object battle. In this match, Bundy takes a spill to the outside that is completely nuts for a man who weighs 446lbs.

v) vs. Kamala (World Wrestling Federation – October 21, 1984)

This Cage match was epic. Kamala was one of few wrestlers who was almost as big as Andre. His vicious style and the back story that he was a jungle savage and cannibal made him seem a real threat to "The Eighth Wonder of the World". Kamala hits a few big splashes on Andre as his handler Kim Chee/Friday waits outside the cage on the famous ramp that was a part of all the shows at Toronto's Maple Leaf Gardens in those days. This one concludes with Andre picking up his 400lb foe, before bodyslamming him and hitting a top-rope Earthquake splash for an emphatic conclusion to the match.

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**BANDAI
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THE CORNETTE CONCLUSION

WITH ANOTHER NEW YEAR BEGINNING, **JIM CORNETTE** LOOKS BACK ON THE MONTH OF JANUARY IN YEARS GONE BY, TO SHOW HOW IT HAS OFTEN COINCIDED WITH MAJOR CHANGES IN HIS ILLUSTRIOUS CAREER.

It's the beginning of a new year, and as such, it's always a time for reflection on where you've been and where you're going in life. If the Insane Clown President the United States has elected as sort of a rib on the rest of the world doesn't do anything stupid – scratch that, something *dangerously* stupid – 2018 could be great for a lot of us. Since pro wrestling has always been not only my *profession*, but indeed my *obsession*, all of my New Years have centered around my place in it. With 2017 having marked my 35th anniversary as a pro, and also my official retirement as a manager and from appearing on live events, I decided to look back at some random Januarys and the highs, lows, and transitions I experienced.

Recent issues of **FSM** have detailed some of my rookie years, but my first major New Year in wrestling came on December 31, 1983 in Oklahoma City,

Oklahoma. The Midnight Express (Bobby Eaton, Dennis Condrey, and I) had just started in Bill Watts' Mid-South Wrestling. While we had been flown in for a few TV tapings in advance of our start date, we officially began the full-time schedule on Christmas Day 1983 in New Orleans at the historic downtown Municipal Auditorium, and spent the following week winning undercard matches in our debuts in those cities. I had never worked a territory other than Memphis – even my brief stint in Georgia in the summer was really like working Tennessee spot shows – so it was an eye-opener to show up in a strange place and see how differently things were done.

Mid-South was in a business lull, but to the Express and I, it was the opportunity of a lifetime. I had been the lowest-paid, most unimportant member of the Memphis roster, and since the office there knew we were leaving for Louisiana, I hadn't even been booked on many of the Memphis shows through the first three weeks of December, earning an average of a whopping \$115 per week during that time. Now we were about to be pushed as the top heel tag team and manager in a much bigger territory, and even if business there was on its ass and our first week consisted of prelim matches, that was the highest-paid seven days I'd had so far, with Watts honoring the deal he had made with us that we wouldn't make less than \$1,000 per week each (about \$2,500 today).

December 30 had been our debut in Houston, Texas, before a dismal – for Houston – 4,000 or so fans paying \$29,000, but it looked great to me. Little did I know that less than four months later we would main event the all-time gate record for the city, with a sell-out 12,000 fans paying over \$100,000 to see the Last Stampede match against Bill Watts and The Junkyard Dog. But New Year's Eve in Oklahoma City stands out in my mind for several reasons: we arrived, as was customary, one hour before bell-time, got dressed, and booker Bill Dundee informed us we would be going over Lanny Poffo and Rick Rood (before he was Rude) in the second match. Dennis – who was our team captain as he was the one with main event experience – gave Dundee the finish we



Dennis Condrey, Jim Cornette, and Bobby Eaton began their Mid-South Wrestling run on Christmas Day 1983



© TONY KNOX

“They had seen our TV matches and promos for the previous month, and now the response from the crowd told us what we needed to know: they were buying us as main-eventers”

Having worked as a manager, booker, and promoter during his wrestling career, Jim Cornette would be an invaluable columnist even if it were not for his encyclopedic knowledge of the history of the business. You can read more from “The Louisville Lip” at www.JimCornette.com, where he also sells his personal merchandise, including his new book *Tuesday Night At The Gardens – Pro Wrestling In Louisville*.

Bill Watts' Louisiana promotion got a big lift with the arrival of Jim et al

would use so he could tell our opponents, and then the three of us decided to go out and check out the house.

The Myriad Convention Center was the nicest, newest, most beautiful in the territory, but since we knew business was down, we didn't expect much, especially on New Year's Eve. But when we looked through the curtain, we saw at least a half-full house of about 6,500 fans that paid \$65,000, and since the ticket prices were higher than in the Memphis area, this was the biggest gate I had ever appeared on in my 16-month career. The other heels, including former booker Ernie Ladd, informed us that this house was "pretty good", but nothing record-breaking, and we started to salivate. Yes, this did turn out to be my biggest one-night pay-off to date: \$475 for a prelim match.

But the lesson I learned that night was priceless.

Dennis had told both Bobby and I that if you wanted to be a top guy, you never wanted to go into a territory when business was on fire; you went in when business was down, then if it popped, you got the credit. The question was, could we pop it? Hiding behind the curtain while our opponents were introduced, we got the answer. Our music began playing, and at the first notes, the crowd absolutely roared. I still get goose flesh at the memory. They had seen our TV matches and promos for the previous month, and now the response from the crowd told us what we needed to know: they were buying us as main-eventers already.

We went to the ring with smiles a mile wide.

Business did *pop*, too: Mid-South Wrestling had its biggest year ever, and so did we. Our first program with The Rock 'n' Roll Express started in April and continued, on and off, for the rest of the year, setting more records. In one year, I went from the low man on the Memphis totem pole to making more money than anyone in that territory except Jerry Lawler, and The Midnight Express and I were in demand with any promoter we cared to work for.

New Year's Eve 1984, looking back, may have been the most important New Year of my life.

January 1986 may have been a close second.

DREAM TEAM

Dusty Rhodes had been named the booker for Jim Crockett Promotions in 1984, and had spent most of the next year-and-a-half assembling his "Dream" crew of the best in-ring talent in the sport. The Express and I had started in Charlotte in July 1985 after a six-month run in World Class, where we got our first national TV exposure, but Crockett's TBS slot had magnified that exposure 10 times over. Dusty had also enticed The Rock 'n' Roll Express to Charlotte, and kept us apart for six months, getting each team over against other opponents, until it was time to pull the trigger. Once again, Crockett's business had been down in 1984, and began showing life in 1985 around the time we all got there, so Dennis' rule of thumb was about to apply again. We were already making money: Crockett had promised us a \$1,000 per week minimum when we first got there. By the end of the year, we were doing well above that: our *Starrcade '85* Streetfight against Jimmy Valiant and Ronnie Garvin in his "Miss Atlanta Lively" guise had resulted in \$5,000 pay-offs for each of us (almost \$12,000 today), but we knew that 1986 would mean the reprise of our Express feud for a national audience.



On New Year's Day 1986 at the Atlanta Omni, we beat World champions Ricky and Robert in a non-title match before 12,000 fans, and followed it up less than a week later with our first angle on NWA TV, when we made Morton bleed from the throat with a racket shot, getting us our first death threats in the territory. Ten days after that, the double main event of Flair versus Dusty and the Express showdown in Richmond, Virginia drew a record gate of \$88,000, in a town that had drawn \$13,000 the previous September. From then on, everything took off, and the battle of the Expresses became known as the state of the art tag match of the era, and the most successful tag team feud in NWA box office history.

The most surreal day may have been February 2, 1986 when, on an afternoon event at the Charlotte Coliseum with no Flair or Dusty, the Express showdown drew the first sell-out there since 1978: 12,000 fans paying \$101,000. We then drove 250 miles to Atlanta, where we beat the Rock 'n' Roll for the World Tag Team titles on an 8pm Omni event that served as the taping for the first prime time wrestling special on Superstation TBS, drawing another 7,000 fans paying \$60,000, and a TV audience of several million when it aired on tape delay the following Friday night. From there, everything popped, and we went on to have a record year facing not only the former champions, but teams like Dusty Rhodes and Magnum T.A. and The Road Warriors, with whom we headlined many of the 1986 *Great American Bash* events, as well as *Starrcade 86's* Scaffold match, the first million-dollar grossing event in NWA history.

Having said that, the record I am most proud of, possibly to this day, was our run in Charlotte with the Rock 'n' Roll.

After the February 2 match, we came back to Charlotte against them three more times in the following 10 weeks, these times with all the stars on the cards, and the final totals for those four events were three sell-outs and a close one, with almost 46,000 fans paying \$384,000 in the biggest-money run in Charlotte history. In 1986, the Express and I earned almost \$175,000 each (nearly \$400,000 today) and Crockett Promotions, one of over a dozen full-time territories still operating in the United States at the time, grossed over \$20m (\$45m today) in one calendar year.

Business was still going strong in January 1987, but I had experienced my first major setback and my first deep

"I had accomplished some things with SMW that I had only dreamed of, and over a four-year period had worked myself pretty much to the point where I would have been clinically diagnosed as insane"

depression in wrestling when I famously blew out my knee in the *Starrcade* Scaffold match. I had torn the ACL in my right knee, as well as obliterating half the cartilage. I didn't have it fixed; back then, the recovery time was measured in months for even a non-athlete to regain full mobility, and besides the financial issue of not getting paid when you didn't work, if I had taken that much time off, the Midnight's run as a top team would have been derailed, perhaps for good. So I had the knee scoped to clean out the mess, was back on the road on crutches two weeks later, then benefited from an eight-day break before the hectic Christmas week.

When January arrived, the knee was still sore and swollen, but more importantly, my mental state was a mess. I didn't tell anyone, even Bobby and Dennis, but I was mortified that my knee injury would prevent me from working the ringside style I had gotten over with: running from the faces like a chicken shit, getting heat on them violently when they were down, and finally bumping around like a rag doll when the time was right. I'd had stitches, black eyes, a tooth knocked out, and plenty of bruises and sprains, but never an "athletic" injury like a torn ACL. I was depressed most nights, afraid my ringside performance would never be good again, until the knee's flexibility returned and I got used to the bionic-like knee brace that looks like an antique today. I went back to my old style, just favoring the right knee, which combined with a bad spot in the ring led to me tearing my *left* ACL in June, just before the *Great American Bash* tour.

Going through the same procedure and getting *another* brace, I went through the same mental agony until I learned to work around that, too. Over the years, both knees "went

in 1987, Dennis Condrey went into virtual hiding, and was replaced by Stan Lane



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out" a number of times, tearing more cartilage each time, until finally in 2006 I damaged the left one badly enough at an ROH event that I had the ACL replaced.

I've never had the right one repaired, and it feels the best of the two.

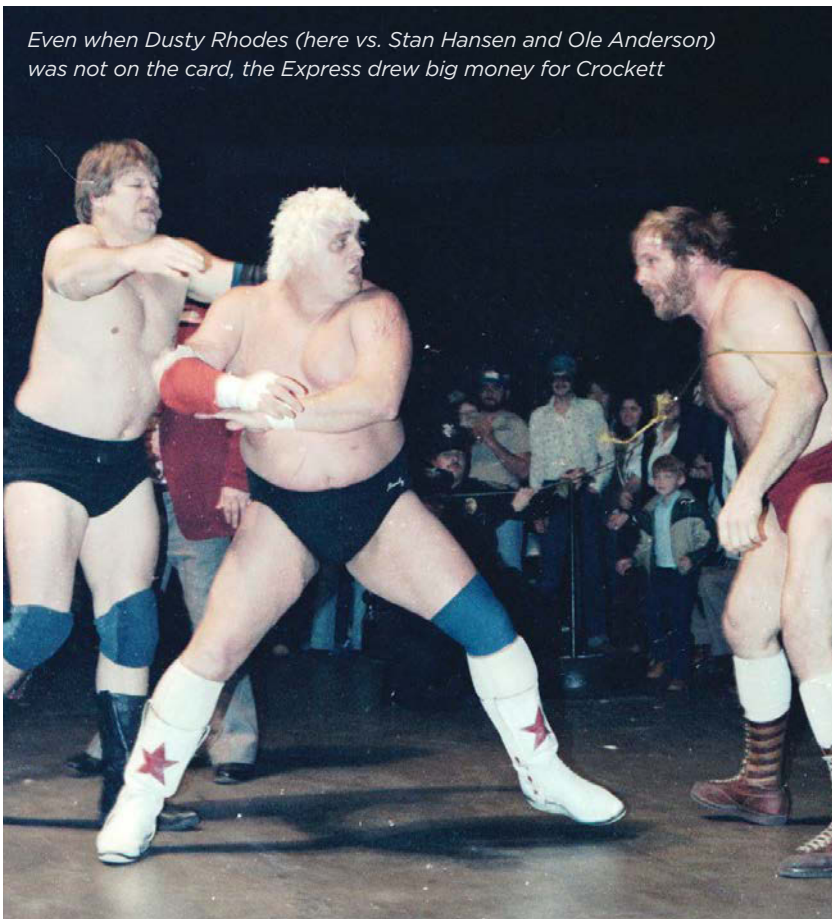
I have a small percentage of the cartilage remaining in each knee, and if you watch a video of me doing anything physical after July 1987, it was while wearing braces on each knee that were often cinched up so tightly that my feet were numb by the time I got back from the ring.

TURNER TIME

January 1989 was another month that I'd just as soon forget. Even though Turner Broadcasting had officially purchased Crockett Promotions on November 1, 1988, we were all convinced that was going to be a good thing until we saw the changes being made in January. Dusty had begun letting me have input in the Midnight's big show finishes, and eventually our programs as well. It was my idea to bring The Fantastics into the NWA in 1988, and the finishes we did to get them over and put the U.S. Tag Team titles on them were mine. In 1989, "The Dream" had agreed to my pitch to bring in Dennis, Randy Rose, and Paul E. Dangerously (Heyman) to do the Midnight versus "Original" Midnight Express feud, and the TBS angle where Paul clobbered me with his phone in a surprise attack was mine. It was one of the more shocking and realistic angles we had ever done.

But now, Dusty had been fired as booker, and the angle was being sabotaged. I had always dreamed of working under Dusty in the booking office one day, and I loved working with Crockett Promotions. Now, under TBS ownership, Crockett's private plane was gone, so we were spending even more nights in hotels, houses were down across the board, stupid decisions were starting to be made in every area from event routing to talent decisions, and the Midnight and I

Even when Dusty Rhodes (here vs. Stan Hansen and Ole Anderson) was not on the card, the Express drew big money for Crockett



© PETE LEDERBERG

had bullseyes on our backs because of our contracts. Before Crockett had realized that the WWF was sabotaging his efforts to get on pay-per-view, and the commercial revenue from the syndicated TV network he had assembled was not going to be what he'd thought, he had signed us (now Bobby and Stan Lane, who had replaced Dennis in 1987 when he decided to leave wrestling for a while) to new contracts worth \$225,000 each (\$470,000 today) in April 1988.

While Crockett's bankruptcy and sale six months into those new deals left him owing us each about \$40,000, TBS was paying us the full amount, so along with The Road Warriors, Flair, Sting, and Lex Luger, we were the highest paid talent in the company. That's when we had our first dealings with the incomparable Jim Herd. We began a two-year run where we, along with Ric Flair, had the best matches on almost every event, made guaranteed six-figure salaries, and hated almost everything else about our jobs.

As a result of the TBS era, January 1991 began with me being the happiest I had been in ages. Stan and I had walked out of WCW at the end of October 1990, and by January I was making the initial plans to open up Smoky Mountain Wrestling. I also got a chance to main event in what I still felt was home, the Memphis territory, when I managed Stan and Steve Keirn, The Fabulous Ones, in a heel turn against Jerry Lawler and various partners. The angle was also mine, and I could have pissed myself, even after all I'd accomplished, that Jerry Jarrett was actually letting *me* book a main event program in Memphis. Of course, my timing was typically suspect: the first Gulf War coincided with our angle, and TV across the territory was often pre-empted for war coverage, but we still managed to nearly triple the houses in Memphis and Louisville during January and February. However, that was faint praise at that point, as besides the WWF and WCW, Memphis was the last territory standing, and its business was at historic lows. Still, I started 1991 as happy as a clam to be away from WCW, working Memphis a few days per week, and spending every other moment prepping for SMW. After Memphis, I took the rest of the year off from shows, except for a few spot shows run by Bobby Fulton, and went from being one of the highest-paid managers in the business to earning a whopping \$12,000 that year.

The thing is, I didn't care. I got a year's rest after being mentally burnt out by WCW, and was over the moon about the start of SMW, which took place in October of that year.

FULL-TIME IN THE FRONT OFFICE

Ten years after things had begun to change in Atlanta, in January 1999 I put the full-court sales pitch on Jim Ross, who was the WWF's head of Talent Relations, that Ohio Valley Wrestling was the place to host the company's new "developmental" program.

Three years earlier, I'd been given my full-time start date with the WWF: February 1, 1996. I would count January 1996 as the absolute lowest point of my life emotionally, as I laid awake some nights thinking about ways to go somewhere and hide from the world for the rest of my life. I had accomplished some things with SMW that I had only dreamed of, had the highest of highs and the lowest of lows, and over a four-year period had worked myself to the point where I would have been clinically diagnosed as insane.

SMW had been a critical success throughout its entire run, but the financial successes were sporadic and not numerous enough. Our TV ratings were great, and in the first half of the decade we were the only U.S.-based promotion besides the "big two" to draw crowds of over 4,000 fans on a few occasions, and upwards of 2,000 on several more. But we couldn't land any other big TV markets like we had in Knoxville and Johnson City, Tennessee to open up and be able to draw crowds in the thousands, and without new markets, we just couldn't get over the hump.

I had begun working for the WWF in 1993 when they needed an "American spokesperson" for WWF champion Yokozuna. I took the spot because they offered my top team, The Heavenly Bodies, extra work as well as the opportunity for more of our talent to go there, and conversely, access to their talent for our big shows. Also, quite honestly, I took the offer for the money since I was putting in as much or more as I was taking out of SMW just to keep it going; besides the investments of my backer, Rick Rubin, by the end I had a little over a \$100,000 of my money in SMW. But I had funneled a lot of talent *to* the WWF and *away* from WCW, so at a WWF TV taping in early-November I had a meeting with Vince McMahon.

I thought that if I mentioned to Vince that without a new "sponsor" or some other income, I "may" have to close SMW down at the end of the year, he might realize that he had effectively shuttered all the places he was getting new talent from, and offer to help us. With the economics of wrestling in those days, a couple of grand a week would have made all the difference. However, Vince was still several years away from realizing he had to grow his own stars, and made me a counter offer I wasn't expecting: instead of offering me help with SMW, he told me that if I *did* close down, he'd be happy to have me there on the creative team full-time.

That was not what I was wanting to hear!



“The WWF could send us prospective talent, and we would train them in all facets of the game and send them back ready to go”

Along with the likes of Ric Flair and Sting, the Midnights were earning the big money when Jim Herd took charge

When Jim started SMW, his new tag team was The Heavenly Bodies of Tom Prichard and Stan Lane



© JIM CORNETTE ARCHIVE

Despite some excellent crowds and critically acclaimed TV, SMW ultimately closed its doors in 1995



© JIM CORNETTE ARCHIVE

Our Thanksgiving weekend shows in SMW were down from the previous year, and instead of making the debt worse by waiting 'til after Christmas, I closed down the territory at the end of November. Now, I had to take the WWF job, as I still had to pay some of the talent, and a fairly large TV production bill in order to keep possession of the tapes. I'm not going to trash the WWF here, because Vince in particular did some very nice things for me, but working in the WWF was never my goal, as I was never a fan of the style. I took the part-time spot to help keep SMW afloat, but now I was in a position where I not only had to work there full-time, but I had to move to Connecticut to do it.

And thus began three years of misery.

I liked working with everyone in the office and TV production crew, except Kevin Dunn, who was an asshole to me pretty much from the start because we were oil and water – the whole, “We’re *not* wrestling!” thing. I even got along with Vince Russo at first, figuring he was just new, and once he learned something about the business, he wouldn't say all those stupid things. I liked the entire talent roster except for the immature, bullshit antics of the Kliq.

I had to move from a nice little house in beautiful East Tennessee with thousands of acres of a state park literally in my backyard, to the most crowded, polluted, traffic-ridden, expensive, part of Connecticut just 50 miles from New York City, and within weeks I was going out of my mind. While I had many enjoyable times working in the WWF office from 1996-1999, most of my memories are of arguing with Dunn or Russo, spending up to four hours a day in my car just to drive 30 miles each way to the office (I couldn't afford to live any closer), and paying three times as much as I would've anywhere else for everything from rent to a turkey sandwich.

I began trying to figure out an escape plan almost immediately, which centered around getting an international

TV deal for SMW from Howard Brody – which I finally did – to pay off those bills, and making third-party shots on indies in the Northeast to add to the FCIA (Fuck Connecticut In the Ass) fund, but it wasn't until – once again! – the holiday period of 1998 that I found my escape hatch.

PEAKS AND VALLEYS

On a visit home to Louisville for the holidays at the end of 1998, I ran into my old friend Danny Davis, who showed me his new school and promotion, OVW. I was hooked instantly. Danny had local TV on a low-power station, but he had a great group of talent that he had trained – Nick Dinsmore, Rob Conway, Doug Basham, The Damaja, and several others – that was loaded with potential. I still knew that the WWF needed a place to get talent trained and ready, and while they were sending a few guys to the new Memphis promotion headed by Randy Hales, I thought a one-stop facility where guys could learn to wrestle and do house shows and TV tapings would be perfect for the company *and* me.

When, as aforementioned, I put the idea to Jim Ross, he liked it. The WWF could send us prospective talent, and we would train them and send them back ready to go, while at the same time running our own full-time school and promotion. I had already made a deal with Danny that if I could bring the program to Louisville, I would be a partner in OVW, and I knew what a potential moneymaker it could be, so I told JR to let Vince know I would do it for *half* what he was paying me to be miserable in Connecticut.

JR sold it to Vince, and by summertime I was back in Louisville, feeling better than I had in years.

The OVW run from 1999-2005 was probably my favorite career period except for the run with The Midnight Express, as I was finally able to achieve what had eluded me in SMW: a promotion that was both a critical *and* financial success.

Danny Davis was the key there, as he remains the best businessman I've ever worked with. I liked to say that Danny owned the restaurant, and I was the chef: he ran the business, I cooked the food, and we were the perfect team. Over those six years we expanded OVW into the only profitable, full-time territory with broadcast TV in the United States, except for WWE. We got a TV time slot on a local network affiliate with full cable coverage, and became the highest-rated program on its Saturday schedule, sometimes even producing two-hour prime time specials. Partnering with Clear Channel Radio, we ran three events in the Louisville Gardens in a 12-month period from 2000-2001 that grossed over \$150,000 and drew over 12,000 fans, then when the Gardens closed we moved to outdoor summer shows at the local amusement park that became their most popular attraction for years. We were running over 150 live events per year within a 150-mile radius of Louisville, and had numerous TV and live event sponsors lined up. We trained John Cena, Randy Orton, Batista, Brock Lesnar, and over 100 other names that went on to national TV with WWE or other promotions.

The problem was, it was the mindset of WWE under new Talent Relations VP John Laurinaitis that OVW was there to do exactly as WWE instructed, regardless of how it affected our local product. It wasn't a personal, money issue: I told Laurinaitis once that if he expected me to make all these changes and do all these things they wanted, he would have to pay me *more* money, but if they would leave me alone since we were obviously doing well, they could pay me *less* money, but he declined to do *either*.

Eventually, WWE and I parted ways, but I remained an owner of OVW until – surprise! – January of 2007, when I sold my piece back to Danny, as the “changes” Laurinaitis had made after I left resulted in a business downturn and my “profit” checks started getting smaller and smaller.

MY WAY OR THE HIGHWAY

So, as January 2018 arrives, I come to another change in direction in my life. Since leaving ROH I've done fewer and fewer wrestling shows, and over the past year or two I've limited myself to working for old friends or with people I wanted to work with one more time, like The Rock 'n' Roll Express, Austin Idol, or Bobby Fulton. I did a favor for Jeff Jarrett last August as thanks for everything his family has done for me, and to visit some old friends, and even that promotion soon fell apart. I chose *Wrestlecade* on Thanksgiving weekend to be my final match as a manager because I'd had my 35th anniversary, and it was an opportunity to walk to the ring with not only a friend but one of the most decorated pro athletes in U.S. history before over 2,000 fans in my adopted home state of North Carolina one more time.

You may have detected that it's never been *just* about money with me, it's been about doing what I enjoyed and was proud of, and excelling at it. I always figured if I did that, the money would follow, and it usually did.

But wrestling has come to a point where it's as polarized as our U.S. political scene; people are either old-time fans aghast at what it's become or, mostly the younger fans, they think it's *supposed* to be “silly and fun” and can't fathom why people of my generation are disgusted with it. I've said on a number of occasions that now that everyone knows

everything is a work and a performance, there's no point in doing this anymore. That may be harsh, and I know that many fans love wrestling enough that they'll even watch when it's all acknowledged to be a show, but at the same time, I'm too old and hate traveling too much to do wrestling events just as a “hobby”.

Over the past few years, I've established a bond with a lot of old-time fans who listen to my podcasts, read my books and columns, enjoy hearing about wrestling history, and come to see me at comic cons or legends events. I enjoy all that, and intend to concentrate more on those things going forward.

So my New Year's Resolution for 2018 is much the same as it's been before: to do my thing and do it as well as I can. It's just that now “my thing” is being myself, telling the truth as I see it, and keeping the history of professional wrestling alive. At this stage of my life, it's not really bothering me that my year, and especially my holiday season, consisted of running my website business, recording my podcasts from my home office, and staying in with my wife and puppy instead of falling off a scaffold, having surgery, cutting my head open with a razor blade, moving to another state, or beginning a job that I would invariably obsess over and work myself to the point of mental instability.

And wouldn't you know who won the pony? The year 2017 was one of the best I've had financially since The Midnight Express days. The only difference is, back then I was working but not admitting it. Now, when everyone else is working and publicly admitting it, I'm shooting, and it makes me different from everyone else.

If I'm not your cup of tea, I encourage you to move along. But if I am, and you like to hear or read my takes on wrestling history, politics, or anything else I get wound up about with no filter and no bullshit, then as Dick Murdoch used to say, “Lace your boots up tight, and get ready for a helluva ride!”

Happy New Year!



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UNSEEN IMAGES FROM THE FSM ARCHIVE



Johnny Moss throws Paul Robinson into the air at WCPW on January 5, 2017



Bully Ray's face changes colour as he's choked by Drew Galloway at WCPW on January 6, 2017



Kay Lee Ray gets cocky with Lana Austin at ICW in Sheffield on February 18



Jimmy Havoc has T-Bone in a compromising position at PCW vs. IPW:UK on June 17



Saraya Knight stretches Christi Jaynes at PCW vs. IPW:UK on June 17 in Preston



Pete Dunne hits a sit-out powerbomb on Will Ospreay at TNT Wrestling on September 28



Joey Hayes tries to pull Damon Leigh apart at Futureshock on November 19



The crowd goes wild as Big Joe enters at RISE's Spookyslam event on October 28



Big Joe covers up as Michael Caden prepares to strike

The colourful "Session Moth"
Martina poses with Fight
Club:PRO co-owner Martin Zaki

FIGHT CLUB RULES

The re-emergence of Fight Club:PRO was one of the most exciting parts of British wrestling last year. Will Cooling talks to those involved as they explain what makes the promotion tick.

When talking about British wrestling, it's easy to focus on the national promotions, such as ICW, PROGRESS, and Revolution Pro Wrestling. They are the ones with relationships with major overseas companies, but even in an era defined by the aggressive expansion of the bigger groups, the scene is still a patchwork of local promotions, including one of the best in the country: Fight Club:PRO of Wolverhampton.

Around since 2009, Fight Club:PRO has succeeded in mixing together a lot of disparate elements into a coherent package. The group's output covers a range of styles, with high-flyers and hardcore brawlers working alongside

the likes of Pete Dunne and Tyler Bate, who are heavily influenced by Japanese strong style. And while the wrestling is usually intense, there's also a lot of humour, with "Session Moth" Martina and Chief Deputy Dunne earning laughs from the audience. While the promotion doesn't place too strong an emphasis on the heel/face dynamic, its regular performers have clearly defined characters that are over to the audience. Indeed, far from being a smart crowd looking to get itself over, at Fight Club:PRO fans seem genuinely happy to engage with the stories being told in the ring.

A key part of that identity is the role played by co-owner Trent Seven (real name: Benjamin Webb).

@lukester911 Most in-laws would buy you Lynx Africa – mine buy me my first @FightClubPro event and the first time I saw the best boys live @OBEYBrookes @KidLykos Boss family.

Millie McKenzie is one of the bright young stars working a progressive style of wrestling at Fight Club:PRO



© OLLI SANDLER

At the start of every event, he comes to the ring to welcome the fans to the show. He's a natural as an emcee, engaging in good-natured banter with the audience, whilst firing them up about the matches and championing the growth of the promotion. So impressive are his performances that organisers of Wolverhampton LGBT Pride (this author included) approached him to host a world record attempt that was taking place that day. Afterwards, non-fans talked about how impressed they were by him.

As this suggests, there is more to Fight Club:PRO than what goes on in the ring. As is common with independent wrestling, there's the opportunity to catch-up with performers at the merchandise stalls, but what is unique is the laid back atmosphere after the show has finished, with the wrestlers happy to hang back and catch up with fans rather than desperately trying to sell a t-shirt or an 8x10.

This is an accessibility that the promotion's co-owner, Martin Zaki, says comes from the top.

"Both Trent and I are both very socially friendly people. We have always encouraged everyone participating on our shows to be available to meet with fans, and in that way have created an open environment for everyone."

That open environment is one that also extends to those who are not hardcore wrestling fans, as if nothing else, Fight Club:PRO is a brilliant night out. The DJ plays great music during the (lengthy) intermissions, the food and drinks are cheap and easily accessible, and there's the infamous after-parties, which have seen some of British wrestling's best and brightest engage in dance-offs.

Fight Club:PRO is that rare thing in professional wrestling: something effectively designed to cater to young adults.

DREAM A DREAM (MATCHES)

Two thousand and seventeen was a year of growth, with the promotion's regular audience expanding throughout the year. To a certain extent, the seeds for its blockbuster 2017 were planted in December 2016 with Paul Levesque and William Regal announcing

a tournament to find the first WWE UK champion, and the signing of some of the country's leading performers to non-exclusive contracts. Two of Fight Club:PRO's regulars, Tyler Bate and Pete Dunne, would contest the tournament final, while Trent Seven was impressive until losing in the quarter-finals.

Fight Club:PRO would capitalise on this additional exposure, building its promotional efforts around the three men, with British Strong Style facing a host of superstar rivals. In many ways it became something of a neutral zone in wrestling's latest promotional wars – a place where the best of WWE UK could square off with the best from New Japan, Ring of Honor, Dragon Gate, and Impact Wrestling. Furthermore, the company hosted CHIKARA's King of Trios, a tournament that featured the surreal sight of WWE-contracted wrestlers engaging in a hard-hitting Intergender affair against the representatives of Sendai Girls. The most famous of these interpromotional matches was when British Strong Style faced Kenny Omega and The Young Bucks in the main event of the opening night of the Dream Tag Team Invitational tournament on March 20, 2017. This was a bout for which demand was so big that the promotion moved the event to a larger venue, but sold it out anyway. A crowd of over 1,000 got its money's worth, with high-flying action interspersed with comedic jabs at the strangeness of the promotional politics involved in the bout.

The emphasis of international dream matches has been hardwired into the DNA of Fight Club:PRO. Speaking in 2016, Trent Seven offered his vision for it.

"When we started, at the time there wasn't a lot of genuine hard-hitting [wrestling]. There was a lot of comedy stuff, camp-style stuff, and I've always been a massive fan of the Japanese style and the U.S. independent style, so I thought we'd mix it a little with the British scene, and that was the birth of British strong style."

Crucially, Fight Club:PRO looks to push its own acts ahead of the visiting superstars, with Keith Lee, Will Ospreay, and Jeff Cobb all tasting defeat here. The outfit looks to use overseas superstars or visiting British veterans to increase the profile and proficiency of future superstars. The emphasis on developing

"That open environment is one that also extends to those who are not hardcore pro wrestling fans, as if nothing else, Fight Club:PRO is a brilliant night out"



Travis Banks, who works at the promotion's school, hits an English dropkick on Low Ki

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Promoter Martin Zaki no longer has concerns about moving to the bigger Starworks venue



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The action can get wild and woolly at Fight Club:PRO, such as in this instance with Chris Brookes and Low Ki



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young talent is a crucial element, too; local wrestlers such as Omari and Millie McKenzie have a bond with the audience that has seen them grow as performers from their debut onwards.

Much of this talent comes from the promotion's own training school. Former champion Travis Banks works there, and spoke about its ethos.

"When I first came in, it was very apparent early on that we shared a lot of the same ideals, and also we had the same work ethic. When it comes to the promotion itself, there is always a feeling of going above and beyond for the show and for the fans, so I try to take that same mentality in training. We do everything we can to prepare these young guys and girls to do more than expected. We try and provide a great, friendly environment whilst also producing the best talent we possibly can. So many people are so passionate about wanting to learn that it makes me even more passionate to teach, and I hope that translates when it comes to the wrestling."

Banks' influence can also be seen in the likes of Kyle Fletcher and Mark Davis following his path from Australasia to gain more experience. Not for nothing has Pete Dunne celebrated the promotion's impact.

"I think Fight Club:PRO deserves more credit than it gets for the way British wrestling has grown," Dunne explained. "They were one of the first companies offering 'strong style' wrestling and utilising top foreign independent talent instead of ex-WWE guys."

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

It's easy to overlook the importance of location to the success of a local promotion. Finding the right venue is always a challenge, particularly due to the enhanced checks that premises have to pass to secure a licence to host boxing or wrestling events. A further challenge for promotions that are thriving is striking the balance between being able to sell the most tickets and retaining an atmosphere. It is something that concerned Martin Zaki when Fight Club:PRO moved to Starworks Warehouse this year.

"At The Planet and then at Fixxion, the crowd found themselves almost on top of the ring. This created a very intimate feeling, and helped to pull each person into every match. The biggest fear when we moved to Starworks is that in such a significantly bigger venue,

this would be lost. However, from pretty much every single reaction, it definitely has not."

Fight Club:PRO fan Emma Millward also wrote about such concerns.

"It's a dilemma we see in music. Arena gigs allow many more people to participate, but can lead to a much more sanitised product. Some bands can do the arena thing well – Springsteen, U2, Muse, et cetera – but many acts are simply overwhelmed by their surroundings. As a fan, there is something exciting about being swept away along with thousands of other people at a big show, but you lose the intimacy of the smaller venues."

What's striking is that Millward wrote about this not regarding Fight Club:PRO's most recent move, but the previous one to Fixxion, a venue that in a year became synonymous with the promotion for fans who had never known The Planet.

"If I am being totally honest, we have been very lucky," added Zaki. "In every instance where we have changed venues, it has been due to us having to rather than us wanting to. It has been very pleasing that on each occasion the change has worked for us. The fundamentals of the event are always the same, but the only real concern is the feel of the venue."

The strengths of Fixxion were clear. The small, square room meant that the hundreds of fans in attendance were on top of the ring. That made for great sight lines, and no missed action, even during a wild brawl between Nixon Newell and Chris Brookes. This became an issue with the new venue, as for the first few shows the long, rectangular room made it challenging to follow the wrestlers when they left the ring. The promotion eventually resolved this by tweaking the position of the ring, something that speaks to both effort and ingenuity.

"Moving into Starworks has been the most we have worked with a venue," said Zaki. "They have offered considerable support in converting what is essentially an empty warehouse into a venue for pro wrestling. Two thousand and seventeen has been a learning curve for both them and us as we try to combine their extensive events knowledge with our vision."

The extra space has given the promotion the opportunity to innovate with its production; for example, it actually curtained off a proportion of the

venue to allow for the stunning reveal of Jimmy Havoc and Clint Margera standing in a specially prepared ring for a deathmatch against Rickey Shane Page and Drew Parker at *Project Mayhem VI*. Never has the drop of a curtain led to such a pop, nor the spectacle of hundreds of fans rushing in that direction, while Trent Seven moved barrels for fans to stand on. The extra space has allowed for an advanced lighting rig, and improved sets for entrances.

Furthermore, the extra space avoids what was a common problem in Fixxion as the events became more popular: the venue being packed to the point that it could be uncomfortable. Zaki believes that the change in venues has contributed to accessibility.

"It is definitely noticeable the increase in female and disabled fans who now attend our events. In part it is due to the venue no longer being on the second floor of a building, as well as the option for seats (events at The Planet were standing only)."

THE PATH AHEAD

For a promotion that is synonymous with Wolverhampton, 2017 saw Fight Club:PRO look to stretch its legs. Having worked with CHIKARA on that group's UK tours, last year it ran events in Manchester and London. The shows were positively received by fans, and those confronting the logistical issues of operating away from their base.

"We try our best to analyse what we will need and ensure we have tackled most of the potential complications ahead of time," noted Zaki. "Knowing that the people you are working with are invested in what we are trying to achieve, and share a similar passion for what we do, makes the whole process of operating away from our home in Wolverhampton significantly easier."

It's an experiment that it will be repeating, with a number of national events confirmed for 2018. The increased footprint should not only lead to greater exposure for the product, but by moving away from doing Friday-Saturday double-shots in Wolverhampton, it should help avoid burning out the home market whilst retaining the necessary dates required to book superstars from overseas, who won't come for just one date. Already, the Chosen Bros team of Jeff Cobb and Matt Riddle has been confirmed for the second Dream Tag Team Invitational tournament. The promotion will also make its American debut during *WrestleMania* weekend.

Attending Fight Club:PRO events throughout 2017 was to see a promotion grow before your eyes. However, with the recent implosion of Lucha Forever and the continuing problems facing Defiant Wrestling, the potential dangers of overly aggressive expansion are obvious. Zaki is alive to them.

"There is only so much we can do in the time we are given. It is when you overload yourself by taking on too much that things start to fall apart. We have always adopted the approach that we will never pursue anything unless we 100% have the means to do it. It's very important to not over-commit yourself, so we ensure that the funding and support structure is in place prior to making any significant advances. We have been adamant that we will never be in a position where a fan, fighter, venue, or anyone else is out of pocket through the running of Fight Club:PRO."

There is a cloud on the horizon, though: the odd status of British Strong Style. All three members missed *Infinity 2017* on December 1 due to it clashing with NXT tapings in America. Zaki acknowledges that there is the potential for future clashes.

"We are exceptionally proud of what they have achieved in a short space of time, and their continued desire to be included in Fight Club:PRO events is greatly appreciated. The only challenge that we face is one of uncertainty. Whilst we are grateful that all three are still available to perform for Fight Club:PRO, there is a lingering air of not knowing as to when this availability may end. This in turn prohibits, or casts a shadow, on any long-term planning for these three."

Of course, every cloud has a silver lining, as the WWE affiliation makes them bigger drawing cards.

"Their growing popularity provides a huge platform for further promoting Fight Club:PRO," concluded Zaki. "It potentially provides a link from the world of WWE to that of the independent scene for fans who may not be aware of where they came from."

The role that British Strong Style and other WWE UK performers have played in encouraging fans to sample local pro wrestling should not be overlooked. Compared to the 1990s or even most of the 2000s, attending live events has never been such an important part of wrestling fandom. For many, attending Fight Club:PRO has been a revelation, as television can't compete with feeling the impact of the blows and the charisma of the characters.

Indeed, Fight Club:PRO is a promotion everyone should visit, as it can be the best night out of your month. As WWE UK champion Pete Dunne said in 2016, "I feel like it is one of the most fun wrestling experiences you can have in Britain."



With any luck, Pete Dunne will still be a big part of Fight Club:PRO in 2018

"Attending Fight Club:PRO events throughout 2017 was to see a promotion grow before your eyes"

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- FSM talks to Jimmy Jacobs about WWE and his rebirth on the indie scene
- FSM focuses on the life of Mal "King Kong" Kirk that ended so tragically
- British wrestler Bubblegum tells FSM what it takes to be a bad guy



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- FSM asks whether the Shield reformation is only for Roman Reigns
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- FSM shows how the brilliant Gabe Sapolsky has hurt his own career
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- Jody Fleisch tells FSM how he has adapted to being a wrestling veteran



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- Things are not quite as they seem in FSM's Alternative Review of the Year
- FSM recalls Royal Rumble '97 and how it started the WWF's resurgence
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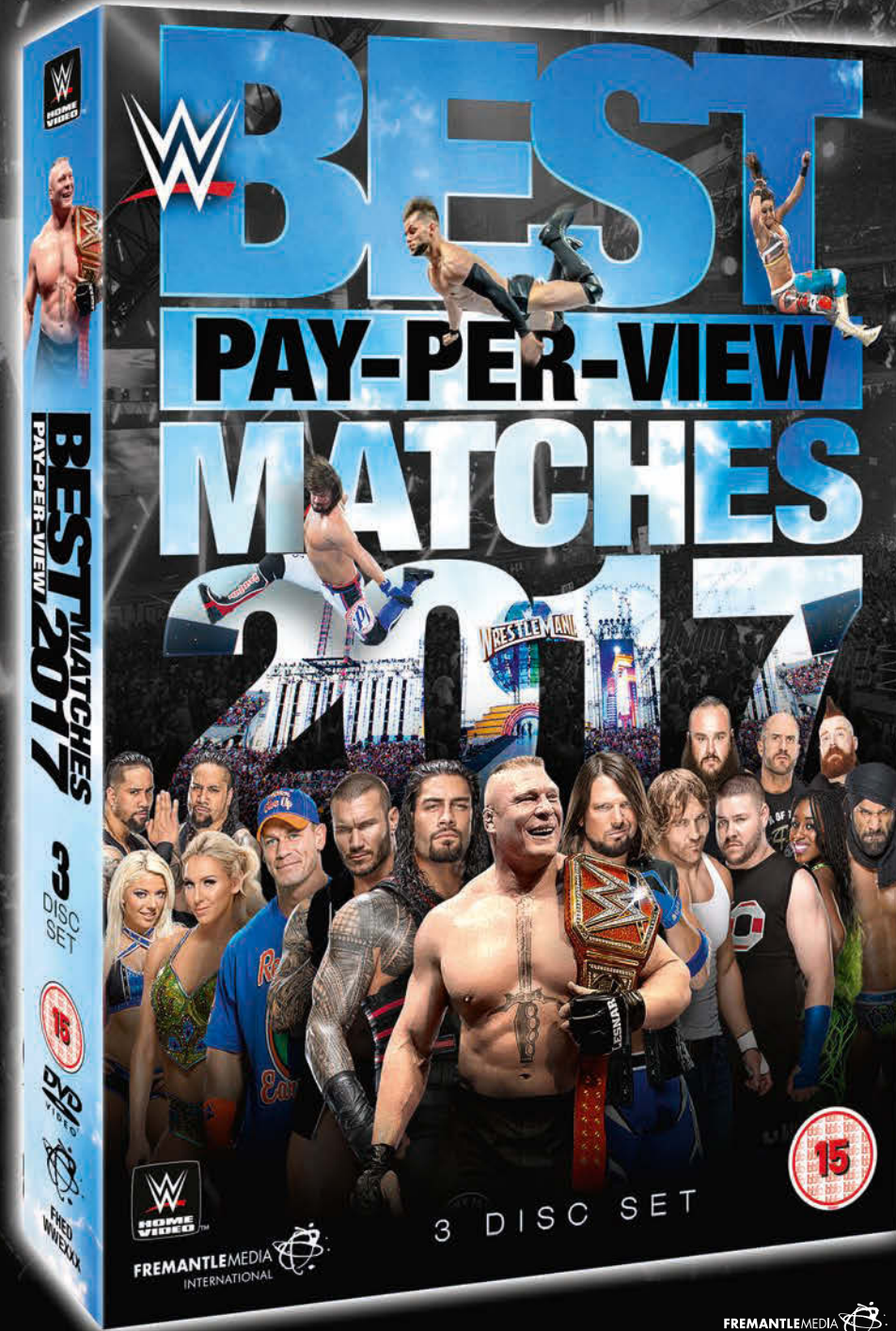
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Two thousand and seventeen was an indifferent year for WWE, with some big matches hitting the spot and others falling short of expectation. In the annual attempt to highlight the quality that did exist during the year, WWE's first DVD release of 2018 is a recap of the best pay-per-view matches that took place between the *Royal Rumble* in January and *TLC* in October.

Disc one begins with AJ Styles' memorable clash with John Cena at the *Royal Rumble*, which was arguably the WWE Match of the Year. It's not surprising that the former TNA lynchpin is the joint most featured wrestler here, appearing four times across this three-disc collection. A somewhat hidden gem between Luke Harper and Randy Orton follows, before Styles takes centre stage again, firstly in the redesigned Elimination Chamber and then through his stirring clash with Shane McMahon at *WrestleMania*.

Roman Reigns is also featured four times, with his first appearance a hard-hitting clash with nemesis Braun Strowman at *Payback*. The latter's rise through the ranks of WWE during 2017 was one of the year's highlights, and he appears again on disc three, again alongside Reigns, in the fabulous four-way main event of *SummerSlam*. Reigns also does battle with four other stars at *Extreme Rules* for the right to challenge Brock Lesnar for the Universal championship, and later on in the compilation, there is a clash for the ages between he and John Cena at *No Mercy*.

Cena and Lesnar, who were both very much part-time competitors in 2017, are both featured three times, proving that they remain the benchmark when they do take to the squared circle. Cena makes his third appearance on disc one in a mixed tag match alongside Nikki Bella against The Miz and Maryse, a bout that could only be included for events after the match, as little occurred during it.

The women of WWE had another stellar year in 2017, continuing to challenge boundaries and often upstaging their male counterparts. Disc two in particular highlights them, beginning with a *Raw* Women's championship match from *Payback* between Bayley and Alexa Bliss. The disc also features the first women's Money in the Bank encounter from the eponymous pay-per-view in June, controversial finish and all.

Undoubtedly included for its historical significance, there is another milestone encounter from *Backlash* that makes the cut, as Jinder Mahal does battle with Randy Orton, in the process becoming the first wrestler of Indian descent to challenge for the WWE championship. Think what



1

you wish of Mahal and WWE's dollars-and-cents decision to push him, but this match highlights how far he had come from the days of being comedic filler in 3MB.

TAGGED OUT

There are two particular criticisms that can be made of this collection, the first being the limited attention given to the respective tag divisions. While the set features most of the big encounters that drew plaudits during the year, The Usos, The New Day, and The Bar were regularly the highlight of every show they were on, but only feature in two matches in total here. Those that are included are The Usos versus The New Day from *Battleground*, and Dean Ambrose and Seth Rollins reuniting to take on The Bar at *SummerSlam*. Omitting the instant classic pitting The New Day against The Usos inside Hell in a Cell is a misstep, and one that diminishes the collection's claim to being the recap of the best action of the year.

The other point of note is the complete exclusion of the cruiserweights. Although Neville's current status with WWE is up in the air, his run as the champion of the division was superb, and his clashes with Jack Gallagher and Akira Tozawa undoubtedly merit inclusion.

Still, what that exception, this collection does have something of everything. There are the historic match-ups, big moments, and epic confrontations, such as a first meeting between former Bullet Club leaders Finn Balor and AJ Styles at *TLC*. Inevitably, gaps exist, but this six-hour collection is a fun and enjoyable watch from start to finish that reminds viewers that there was much to savour in a WWE year in which quality often seemed the exception rather than the rule.

ANDREW SINCLAIR



2

1. Luke Harper appears early in the compilation in a somewhat forgotten bout with Randy Orton
2. Though tag action is at a premium, viewers do get a match between The Shield and The Bar

"Disc one begins with AJ Styles' memorable clash with John Cena at the Royal Rumble, which was arguably the WWE Match of the Year"

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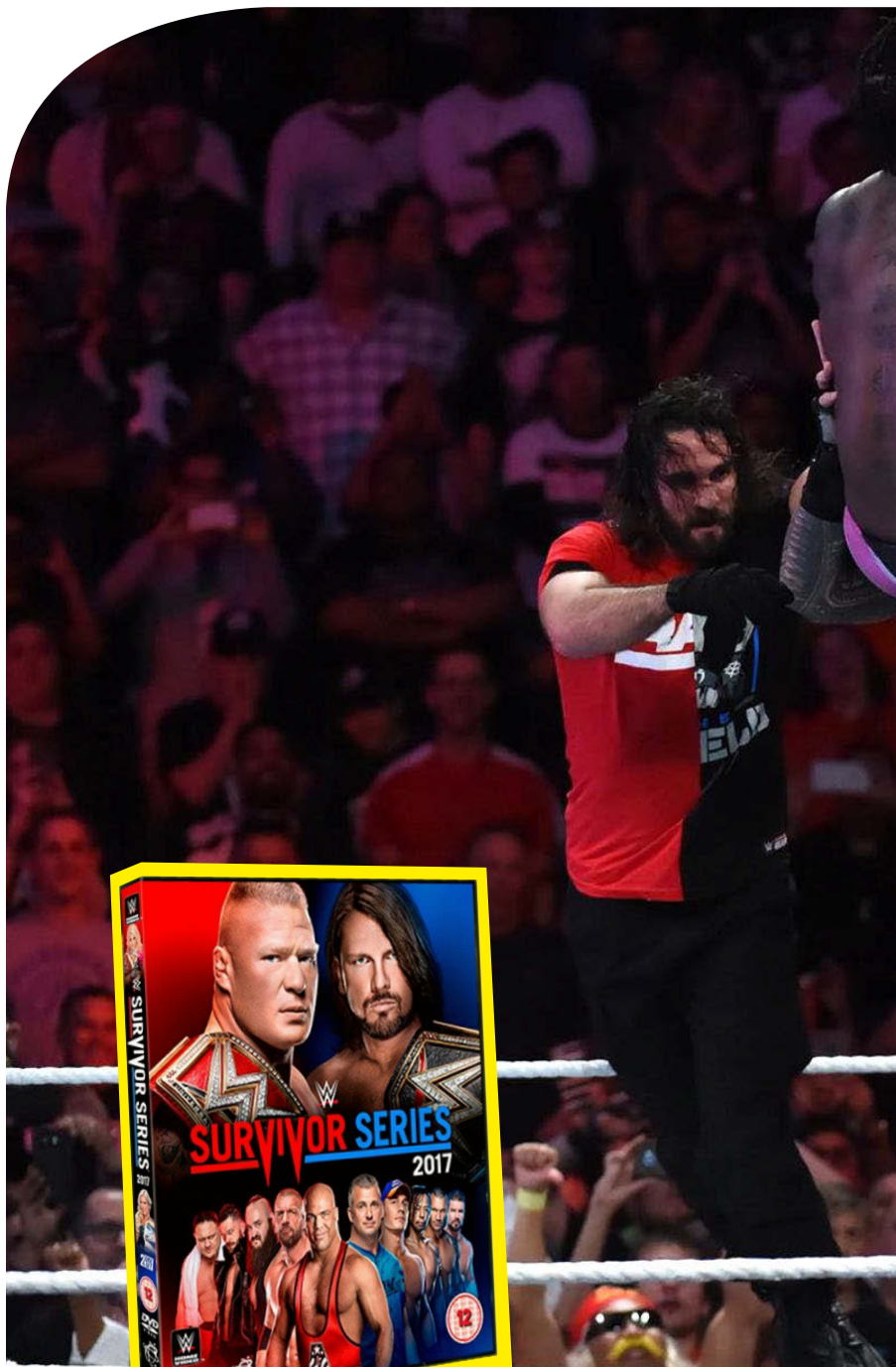
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To our readers,

We are as grateful for your support last year as Kenny Omega is for the IWGP U.S. championship.

May everyone have a prosperous 2018!

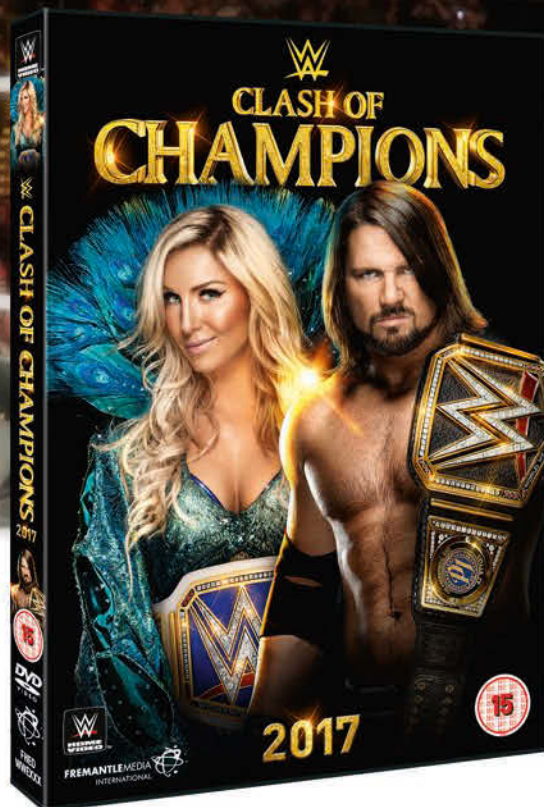
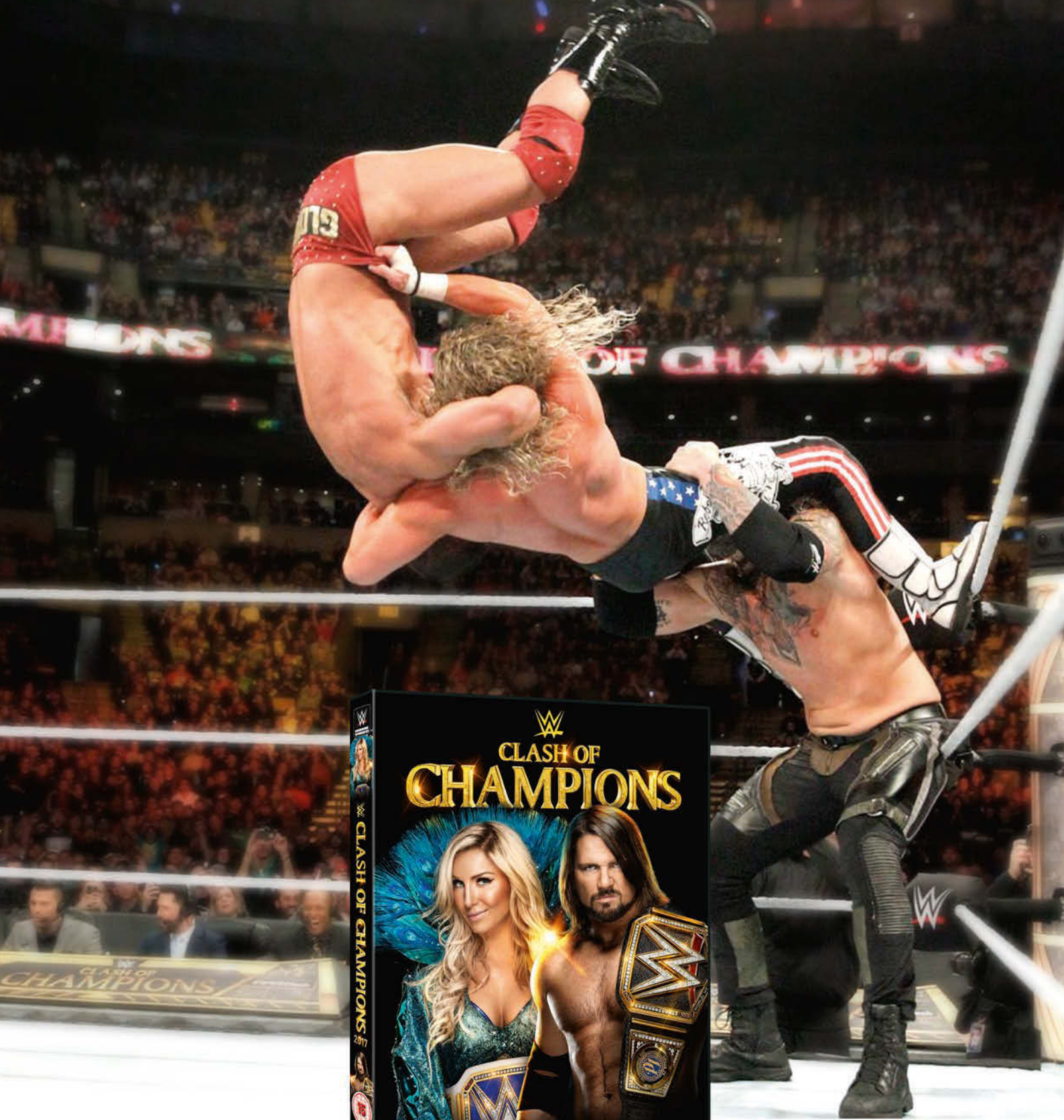
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